

Faithful Conversations

*A Sermon Preached at the First Unitarian Church
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Thanksgiving Dinner

It's Thanksgiving Dinner, the generations have gathered and there are some welcome guests. Sis's new partner is being introduced to the family. One grandchild brought his college roommate, an international student. And it's a big family, one branch of which is on a different political, religious, or lifestyle path. So far so good, but then, the subject turns to politics. Or maybe to religion. Or to current events and culture change. "Actually, I don't agree with that," someone says, and you can feel the big chill fall on the room. Someone may hastily change the subject. There will be no conversation on this topic! Too Dangerous! Mother always said: steer away from religion and politics! So...the subject is changed, and peace reigns...except that it is a shallow and unsatisfying peace. These are friends, and family, after all. Presumably, they actually do want to get to know each other, including the ways they are different. That was the point, after all, of the holiday; to stay in touch with each other, to show hospitality to guests, to...well, converse, and in particular, to converse about the subjects they really care about: their faith, their values, their politics...the things which lie closest to their hearts and make them most uniquely who they are. You didn't really go over the river and through the woods to discuss the weather, did you?

But it is true that real conversation is a difficult and dangerous business. It's easy, especially in today's polarized world, to miscommunicate, to get frustrated, to hurt people's feelings...it's also easy to feel bulldozed, invaded, or insulted by a conversation partner who turns to interruption or derision to bolster their point. Maybe the weather is pretty interesting after all!

There's gotta be a way...and there is...to have a faithful conversation with somebody who has different values, ways, or ideas. A good thing, too, because we UU's are a conversation-based faith. Faithful conversation lies at the very heart of this church and our ways of doing things. This church...our mural proclaims...stands for the richness of religious diversity...not just the grudging toleration of difference but the active belief that we are enriched by difference. We are here because we believe that it is good to grow in spirit within a diverse religious community...that when the pagans and the Christians meet the atheists and agnostics the

conversation can open minds and hearts and give us new glimpses into the Mystery which is larger than anybody can completely understand. Conversation is very important to us.

But...so is faithfulness. Faithfulness to our own values and beliefs, and faithfulness to ourselves and others as persons of worth and dignity. And a faithful conversation? A faithful conversation is one in which we have shared something that we deeply believe, feel, or care about in a way which is respectful of the other, and have been heard...if not agreed with... by that person in a respectful way...and that the tables have been turned so that the other, who believes or feels or cares differently, has had the same chance.

Simple, right?

Well...simple but difficult. So, let's unpack a bit.

Let's start with what it means to respect someone's worth and dignity, and what it means to demand that respect for oneself. This is a core UU value, and it's a core value of our society, though often trampled. It begins with those simple rules you learned in kindergarden: Don't interrupt. Take Turns. Why? Because interrupting is saying, "What I have to say is more important than what you have to say." And while that is certainly sometimes true...if the turkey has caught fire or the cat is in the pie on the counter... in a conversation...rarely. Taking all the air time in a conversation so that others are not getting a chance to speak is the same as interrupting: it's saying that what I have to say is more important than what others have to say. It is the grown up version of hoarding all the toys in the sandbox. It's not respectful.

People forget. They get excited. Or they may have been allowed to get in the habit of feeling self-important. That's why a few phrases rehearsed in front of the mirror can come in handy. "Uncle Joe, it's my turn to talk now." "Sara, I hadn't finished." "Mom, Johnnie has an opinion here. Johnnie?" The trick to these phrases is to say them before you are angry, when you can say them with overtones of fond forbearance for someone else's enthusiasm and not the icy fury which is a conversation stopper.

Speaking up about being interrupted or needing a turn at the conversation is not easy, but it is concrete. If Mom has been talking on for the past 5 minutes while Johnnie is trying to get a word in, that's an indisputable fact. If you were talking and somebody interrupted you, they'll be annoyed if you call them on it, but they can't deny that they did it. It's harder when people's conversation edges into derision (which is implying by word or tone that the other's opinion is unworthy) Still, the solution is the same, which is carefully rehearsed phrases, pleasantly stated, like. "You know Joe, you say that only an idiot would think that, but I think that, and I don't like being called an idiot." Or "Mom, when you start sounding sarcastic like

that, it just shuts down the conversation. I have a right to my opinion. I've thought hard about it. Would you like to hear why?"

I know, I know...this is hard work. And some conversations are not worth it and some people are incorrigible. You know who they are! But for you have to stick up for yourself, and patiently ask for the respect that you deserve.

(And, it goes without saying, the respect that you are offering the other. Banish the talk show host from your conversational repertoire. Pay no attention to the conversations you hear in the movies, which are not conversations at all but alternating comedians or drama queens and kings. It may be entertaining but has no place at a family table. If you have the habit of interrupting, break it. Ask for help from the people you want to converse with to bolster their willingness to stick up for themselves. Ask your partner to give you the signal when you've gotten too wrapped up in your own ideas to be polite. You know who you are, and we know you want to respect those around you!)

This might be the moment to stop and remark that faithful conversations are not always possible. There are people who will not respect your worth and dignity, who will interrupt, dominate or even be verbally abusive, and if the group allows them to, they can ruin every family holiday. This is a matter for a family meeting to strategize how to manage a beloved but difficult family member or even a reason to find a new way to celebrate holidays. It is not good for us to spend much time in the company of people who are hurtful, derisive, or abusive. It tears at our core of self.

But those are extreme cases and they can usually be managed by a concerted group effort. Helping people be appropriate is a loving thing to do.

So..that's the faithful part. This core value of ours, that everyone has worth and dignity and should be treated with respect is sometimes hard to live with. But...it's core. And there's no real conversation without faithfulness to this value. No respect means...it's just a shouting match. And your mother was right about shouting matches at the dinner table. Bad for digestion!

Conversation

Let's turn to the Conversation side of things. A good conversation is a matter of important sharing by people who are doing two things: Speaking peacefully and Listening carefully.

Peaceful speaking

Let's talk first about peaceful speaking. Communication is hampered by psychic static in the same way a phone call is hampered by atmospheric static. Static on the conversation line is caused when someone's feelings rear up and keep them from hearing what is being said to them. Have you ever gotten some really frightening news from someone who then tries to explain it to you? Your anxiety about what you are hearing is likely to cause so much static in your mental processes, perhaps even in your physical process, that you will not be able to follow the explanation. If you are truly distressed, you may not even be able to really see or hear very well. You may "see red" or feel like you are hearing through a tunnel. No matter how "well" the other person explains things, not much communication will take place. There's just too much static.

Because anger is one of the emotions which creates the most static in human communications, good conversers take care speak peacefully: to choose words that will not infuriate their listeners, and they are especially careful about this when they know they are conversing with someone who is different from them. For instance, it is good communication practice to call people the names they choose for themselves. Call a Muslim a Mohammedan, and only the most tolerant and mature will hear another thing you say. It is also important to take care in our use of words, remembering that words have different meanings in different cultures. If I am an earnest Christian who wants a Jewish person to help me out in a some human rights disaster, but I call that disaster a holocaust, I will likely cause static on the lines of our communication, because that is such a loaded word for most Jews.

The media is one of our most effective teachers, and unfortunately, "communication" in both entertainment and public affairs media gives us the worst possible lessons in peaceful speaking. Too much TV watching leaves us all thinking that unless we insult the people we speak to, we'll end up one down in the ratings of life. But real life is very different. If we want to communicate, we will choose our words carefully to minimize the static we create in the lines of communication.

One of the most disarming things we can do when faced with a difficult conversation is to ask questions of our partner about the effect of our words and what language they would like us to use. For instance:

"I'm afraid I've offended you with that term...could you tell me a better one?"

or

"What name do you use for your position?"

or

"Before we start talking, could we define our terms? "

It may be that we think that their name for their position is absurd, self-serving, or manipulative. Pro-Life and Pro-Choice folks have been sneering at each other's names for many years now, for instance, and neither side is very good at conversation, and the nation remains polarized as a result.

Of course, it works both ways. If someone is using words in a way that is causing a lot of static for us, we must say so.

"I have to tell you that I have a bad reaction when you keep calling me "sweetie". That feels belittling to me, and It's making it hard for me to hear what you are saying."

or

"The group I belong to actually calls itself "Free Thinkers". We don't like to be called "Heretics."

Peaceful speakers will avoid all varieties of *ad hominum* arguments, that is, arguments focused on a person rather than the issue. Attacks on a someone's personhood or character, rather than on the things they have done or the worthiness or their position naturally makes them angry, and attacks on the personhood or character of someone they admire also ups the anxiety in a conversation. It doesn't make for a good conversation. It's not a legitimate or rational tactic in a debate, either. Don't be like an internet commenter...that's another really bad place to learn about conversation. Peaceful speaking is a precondition of good conversation.

Listening

Then, there is listening. Ah...listening. Listening is so simple...and it's also a lifetime skill. It's simple because all you have to do is....not do anything else. Like the reading... You don't have to give advice, make judgements, compose fancy speeches, ask questions, or anything. All you have to do is listen. Showing you are listening by encouraging smiles or sounds or nods helps, but that's not the hard part for most people. For most people, the hardest part of listening is...not talking! So...bite your tongue if you have to...gently, of course. Just hard enough to remind yourself of your major task when someone else is speaking.

When your partner has made their point (or when you have to hold up your hand to say, "ok, I hear you. My turn, now.") The first thing you will do is NOT launch into explaining YOUR position. The first thing you will do is to check to see if you understood what they were saying. The result: you'll be sure you understood, and they will feel understood. Feeling understood is the magic of conversation. Give it freely!

A good conversation, you see, is not just an "I said, she said" affair. A good conversation is and "I said, and she understood, and she said, and I understood" affair.

Conversing is like an electrical circuit. You speak, I hear, and I let you know what I have heard. If I've gotten it right, the circuit is completed and we can go on. If I've gotten it wrong, you try again. Then I speak, and back and forth we go...not only talking AT each other but learning FROM each other, and if our conversation goes well, we will both have learned more about ourselves, the other, and the topic at hand.

The Catholic monk, Thomas Merton, who belonged to an order which took vows of silence, playfully entitled one of his journals, "A Vow of Conversation". This journal details his dialogue with the Zen master Suzuki and their mutual attempt to understand each other...a dialogue which shaped both traditions in the middle of the last century. Perhaps we UU's should also take vows of conversation... conversations where we hold ourselves and others to the standards of respectful engagement, peaceful speaking, and good listening.

What a challenge this is! To take part in such a conversation, we must be willing to respect our partner and ask for their respect in return...and that respect must include their right to think, feel, and believe as they do. And then, we must choose our words carefully so as not to create unnecessary communication static and we must play the role of a good listener, carefully checking back with them to make sure that we actually did understand, and they know it.

And what a reward when we do these thing well! Not only richer relationships and less conflict among family, friends, and fellow church members, but the spiritual growth that comes when we can reach out to others and come to understand their ways. When we take the vow of conversation, we open ourselves to the miracles of love and growth.

Thanksgiving Dinner, Reprise

So that Thanksgiving Table conversation that got derailed 20 minutes ago... The one where Uncle Joe was talking about how we should avoid a terrorist attack by not allowing Syrian Refugees into the country, and Mary, Sis's new partner, said flatly, "Actually, I disagree with that," and the temperature in the room went down 10°? "I disagree with that" may seem like an innocent statement but it's a conversational declaration of war....not very peaceful speaking. So, Let's start that over and see if we can get a conversation out of it.

Uncle Joe makes his point. Mary carefully removes her tongue from where she had been keeping it between her teeth and tries to state what she thinks is Uncle Joe's point of

view. "You are saying that you think it is dangerous to allow Syrian refugees into this country because they might be terrorists?"

"That's right", says Uncle Joe, pleased to have gotten his point across. "Well of course, we all want to avoid terrorism if we can," says Mary, "but I also want our nation to stand up for our values. And to refuse to help thousands of people because there might be danger....that's not the American way! I think that we should screen people carefully before we let them settle here, of course...."

Now, uncle Joe is not such a good conversationalist...most people aren't, and he interrupts. But Mary holds up her hand and asks pleasantly to finish.. We won't expect Uncle Joe to be skillful enough to try to re-state Mary's point, either, and he doesn't. But...already they've gotten a lot further than before, and this conversation is making them both think.

So Uncle Joe is saying now that there won't be an America if the terrorists get their way and Mary acknowledges that we live in fearful times. But, she says, her fear is a little different. She is afraid we will do more damage to ourselves by our own fear of terrorists than terrorists could ever do. Like how Japanese citizens were put in concentration camps at the beginning of World War II...how fundamentally un-American that was. And it happens that Uncle Joe agrees with her on this point...and because she has been a careful listener, and hasn't sneered at him, he's willing to give that one to her, and, even to remember that "There is nothing to fear but fear itself." At the end of the conversation, Uncle Joe is still worried about Syrian refugees, but he has some new things to think about. "There has to be a way to help people and still keep America safe," he says, and he and Mary can agree on that. And as for Mary, she's had a chance to really notice the fear that was motivating her new uncle's early words, to notice her own fears, and to learn from both. And now...time for the pumpkin pie. And as she and Sis drive off over the river and through the woods, Sis muses that she saw a side of Uncle Joe she had not known before, and that overall, it was a great Thanksgiving.