

Towson Unitarian Universalist Church
October 18, 2009
Rev. Clare L. Petersberger
Civility

WELCOME

Good morning! Welcome to the light and warmth of The Towson Unitarian Universalist Church on yet another rainy and cold autumn day. Our theme, today, is civility.

So in this season of flu, let us greet the best and highest in our neighbors from the best and highest in ourselves. Let us introduce ourselves, put our own hands together, bowing, and say "Namaste."

Do we have visitors to introduce or who want to introduce themselves?

Welcome! We look forward to getting to know you and to having you get to know us. To this end, everyone is invited to remain for coffee and conversation following worship.

Following today's service, you're invited to grab a cup of coffee and return to the meeting room for a congregational conversation about TUUC's future with TUUC's terrific Treasurer, Paul Konka, and other TUUC's Budget Executive Committee.

I call your attention to the announcements about upcoming programs and activities printed on the insert in your order of service. As always, your participation is welcomed and encouraged!

But first, we gather to worship. Let us settle into this time with an invocation by my colleague, The Reverend Rhys Williams.

*Spirit of life, come to us to break down barriers; to widen horizons;
to make us less judgmental.*

*Help us to see the larger picture and the kinder conclusion;
to love and let live;
to embrace and forgive;
to sustain and care.*

*Help us to reach out to our better selves, that we may love more and hate less,
care more and reject less, that bound together by understanding
we may sustain each other through
sickness and health, through joy and sorrow,
through tribulation and transformation.*

*Spirit of Life,
help us to be joined in a common purpose of hope and fulfillment.
Renew and revive us as we seek a common, holy ground
for one and all. Amen.*

PRELUDE

Sonata: Sarabande, Rondon by T.A. Vitali
Amy Koren, flute; Andree Maslen, cello; Janet Byers, piano

OPENING WORDS

Our opening words are from a commencement address George Will delivered at the University of Miami in 2005. He said:

The more we appreciate the complexity and improbability of everyday things – Including ourselves – the more we can understand the role that accidents, contingencies, and luck have played in bringing the human story to its current chapter.

And the more we understand the vast and mysterious indeterminacy of things, the more suited we will be to participate in writing the next chapter... The greatest threat to civility – and ultimately to civilization – is an excess of certitude....

It has been well said that the spirit of liberty is the spirit of not being too sure you are right. One way to immunize ourselves against misplaced certitude is to contemplate – even to savor – the unfathomable strangeness of everything, including ourselves.

CHALICE LIGHTING

In affirmation of this, please join in a responsive reading of words printed in your order of service with which to light the symbol of our free faith.

Though our knowledge is incomplete, our truth partial, and our love imperfect,

WE BELIEVE THAT NEW LIGHT
IS EVER WAITING TO BREAK INTO OUR HEARTS AND MINDS,
TO ENLIGHTEN OUR COMMON PATH,

That there is mutual strength in willing cooperation,

AND THAT THE BONDS OF LOVE KEEP OPEN
THE GATES OF FREEDOM.

We light our chalice for this new light, mutual strength, and the bonds of love which keep open the gates of freedom.

READING

At the end of the summer, the news was filled with stories of incivility in our country – from citizens shouting over politicians at town hall meetings on health care to politician Joe Wilson shouting “You lie” during President Obama’s recent address to a joint session of Congress; to parents protesting schools showing President Obama’s speech on the importance of education in their lives; from the Reverend Steven Anderson preaching that he wanted to see President Obama die of brain cancer to Glenn Beck losing corporate sponsors after labeling President Obama “a racist.”

Serena Williams displayed a lack of manners on the tennis court and Kayne West interrupted Taylor Swift's acceptance speech at the Music Video Awards. This prompted the Washington Post to invite religious leaders from Starhawk to Bishop Shelby Spong to respond to the question,

"Why are people so angry and belligerent, and so willing to express their anger publicly? Why has our civil discourse become so uncivil? What does this public anger say about our private faith? What should we do about it?"

Our first reading is the response of Robert Parham, Executive Director of the Baptist Center For Ethics. He wrote:

Unhinged politicians, wrathful preachers, belligerent protesters and hateful pundits pursue a practice as old as the Bible. They create scapegoats. The practice of the scapegoat has its genesis in the biblical book of Leviticus, where the sins of the people were placed symbolically on the head of an innocent goat. The goat was then driven into the wilderness, taking away the sin that was among the people.

Scapegoats never really freed the Hebrew people from sin any more than our naming of scapegoats really solves contemporary problems. Of course, scapegoating is not practiced solely in the house of God. ...the birthers, the global warming deniers, the anti-reformers of health care and the anti-tax protesters bark their share of blame. They readily accuse others of being liars, liberals, socialists, environmentalists and Nazis, all enemies of their America. Perhaps behind the blame game is the loss of the four cardinal virtues.

Writing in "Mere Christianity," C.S. Lewis said that the word "cardinal" came from the Latin word that meant "the hinge of the door." He identified these cardinal virtues as prudence or common sense; temperance or balance; justice or fairness; and fortitude or "guts" when things are tough. A civil society swings on these four hinges. And right now, our society appears to be becoming unhinged.

HYMN

Words That We Hold Tight (On insert in order of service)

words: based on text by Bishop Dr. Adadeji Ishola

music: "Faith of the Martyrs"

In praise of common sense, balance, fairness, and fortitude, in praise of civility, let us join in singing the hymn "Words That We Hold Tight," printed on the insert in your order of service. The melody will be familiar to many of us as "Faith of Our Fathers."

*Words that we hold tight won't let us go.
Paths we don't follow will haunt us so.
What will undo us is not our friend.
Show us, O spirit, how to befriend.*

*To speak of loving is not to love.
Lies move among us, below, above.
When we are raging, needing to mend,*

Show us, O spirit, how to befriend.

*When love is doubtful, choice is not clear,
We turn to worship to cast out fear.
Teach us forgiveness, make love our end.
Show us, O spirit, how to befriend.*

PRAYER/MEDITATION

Let us continue in the spirit of prayer with a spoken meditation by the poet, Stephen Dunn, which will be followed by moments of silence.

I keep thinking of Frost's wonderful line,

"We shall be known by the delicacy of where we stop short."

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It's the small things that irk me most, probably because they're the most likely to repeat themselves. The salesman on the phone addressing you by your first name, the sullen clerk responding with a shrug. Which is why it seems to me there are more opportunities for grace than ever before.

I love James Wright, for example, who knew that "the hearts of men are merciless" and therefore was able in a poem not to vilify or caricaturize, but in fact sympathize with President Harding, that easy target.

And I love the kindnesses of people who have no reason to be kind to you, but are. Such kindnesses happen every day amid all the other occasions for despair. Once we would have called them normal kindnesses, but when they occur in a climate in which fear and self-protectedness are daily givens, they are noteworthy.

I said earlier that we shall be known by the delicacy of where we stop short, I would like—without invalidating that sentiment—to amend it. We shall be known by our uncommon gestures, our surpassing gestures.

Perhaps here is where poetry and manners most truly converge. Both, at their highest levels, involve doing gracefully what is not expected of us.

In moments of silence, let us reflect on how we practice civility in our own lives – doing gracefully what is NOT expected of us. may the silence that we've shared, give us strength for the week to come.

HYMN #347 Gather the Spirit

Let us continue to gather the spirit and harvest the power by joining in singing hymn number 347. And if you would like to lift a significant joy, sorrow, milestone, or prayer to the healing and transforming powers of the universe which we call by many names – you are invited to come forward to light a candle.

READING

Our second reading is about gathering in hope, compassion, and strength. In her 1999 ministerial essay *Toward a Usable Concept of Civility: Creating Public Space Between Jihad and McWorld* my colleague, The Rev. Suzanne Spencer, wrote:

Civility's ultimate concern is not about table manners or refraining from profanity. It's about something more profound and more urgent: the continued existence of public life.

"Public life is...simply and centrally...our life among strangers, strangers with whom our lot is cast, with whom we are interdependent whether we like it or not." While civility is IMPORTANT to private life, among those with whom we share intimacy, it is truly INDISPENSABLE to public life, where strangers meet.

We maintain our civil habits by practicing them in the public square, among strangers. We pay a terrible price for the loss of public life. "As our public experience dwindles, we come to regard 'the public' either as an empty abstraction or as a sinister, anonymous crowd whose potential for violence fills us with fear.... We lose our sense of relatedness to those strangers with whom we must share the earth; we lose our sense of comfort and at-homeness in the world."

This brings us around to our congregations and our role in rebuilding public life. It's worth remembering that the Greek word for church, *ekklesia*, stood for the idea of the people called out into the public square. Thus the work we do this week, this month, this year, nurturing civility in our congregations could well have reverberations for the healing of the world.

OFFERTORY

Our mission, to be a beacon of free-thinking religion, where we need not think alike, to love alike, requires the practice of civility. With this in mind, our morning offering will now be given and received to sustain and deepen our common life.

Fifteen percent of undedicated gifts will be returned to the community to feed the hungry, to house the homeless, to heal the addicted, to promote a love of literacy and to make democracy work.

SERMON

Civility

Rev. Clare Petersberger

The former President of Pakistan, Pervez Musharraf, was invited to deliver the first lecture in the Stevenson University Baltimore Speakers series in late September. His visit was not without controversy. Those who felt he was responsible for the genocide in Baluchistan gathered a small, but vocal demonstration outside the Meyerhoff.

They did more than this. They gave a ticket to a heckler to attend the lecture. Evidently, the ticket was provided by an American "well-wisher" who asked the heckler to throw a shoe at Musharraf.

Fortunately, that did NOT happen. But as one who attended the lecture, I know that the heckler was successful in disrupting Musharraf's talk. The first time he began yelling in a foreign language, we all turned to look at him. When, a few minutes later, he again shouted words that meant nothing to us,

I expected to see ushers come to remove the man. That did not happen. By the third time, I felt anxious that the situation could escalate into violence, although I did not know, then, about the plan to throw the shoe. By the fourth time, I must have shouted "Stop it" or "Remove him" because Marcia Brooks turned and looked at me with a shocked expression. I, too, was disrupting the lecture!

Although I was in the balcony, President Musharraf must have heard similar murmurings from those in seats closer to him. He took matters into his own hands. He began speaking directly to the heckler and translated what he was saying. The heckler was from Baluchistan and accused President Musharraf of being a dictator. President Musharraf responded, "Yes, I was a dictator. Had you been in Pakistan, I would have fixed you in the same way I fixed the others. I would have personally fixed you."

Whoa.

"We shall be known by the delicacy of where we stop short."

After President Musharraf's statement to the heckler, the heckler left the auditorium voluntarily. I was uncomfortable with the heckler. But I was equally disturbed by President Musharraf's threatening response. Barney Frank's response to a heckler, at a health care town hall meeting this summer, "I don't know what planet you are from, but its definitely not earth" seemed a paragon of civility by comparison.

The word *civility* is derived from the same root as our words for *citizenship* and *civilization*. All three words come from the word *city* where we humans, of different tribes, ethnicities, and religions first came together, as strangers, to trade for mutual economic benefit. Through such relationships grounded in commerce, people learned to practice respect of and tolerance for the stranger – with whom their lives were inextricably bound whether they liked it or not.

This became particularly important, in this country, during the Enlightenment when people chose not an authoritarian monarch nor allegiance to a particular religion but democracy as their model of governance. Democracy entails the active participation of all citizens. It entails finding a way to persuade without pummeling, to discern the truth rather than simply shouting down those with a different view; to disagree without being disagreeable.

When he was 16 years old, George Washington copied into his notebook "110 maxims for good conduct." Some of these maxims now seem antiquated such as "Kill no...fleas, lice, and ticks in the sight of others." Another could be slightly amended for the H1N1 virus: "If you cough, sneeze, sigh, or yawn, do it not Loud but Privately; ...put Your handkerchief before your face and turn aside OR wear a mask!"

Two should have been read this summer before every health care town hall meeting: "Every action done in company ought to be with some sign of respect to those that are present" and "In disputes, be not so desirous to overcome as not to give liberty to each one to deliver his or her opinion and submit to the judgment of the major part especially if they are judges of the dispute."

Of course, we Americans have never done this perfectly. Too often, politicians have become the scapegoats of our fear, anger, and certitude. The election of 1800 was particularly uncivil. John Adams was accused, by his opponents, of having an “ungovernable temper,” “extreme egotism,” and “distempered jealousy.” They claimed he would be “the detriment of any cause of which he is the chief.”

But the Federalists were no less vitriolic about Thomas Jefferson. They claimed he was “the greatest villain in existence” and would “loosen all the bonds of society.” These must have been the precursors to the O’Reilly Factor and Keith Olbermann’s “The Ten Worst People In The World.” But there was a difference. Citizens were not bombarded with these messages 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Citizens did not publicly display guns at public meetings as a way of wielding power over those with whom they disagreed.

Citizens DID learn to think about issues through public debates which lasted for hours. Today, too many citizens settle for simply feeling emotion through seconds long sound bites. And based on these sound bites, many citizens are certain they are right. But as George Will reminded us, “It has been well said that the spirit of liberty is the spirit of not being too sure you are right.

One way to immunize ourselves against misplaced certitude is to contemplate – even to savor – the unfathomable strangeness of everything, including ourselves.”

So how DO we respond to incivility in the public square? This was the question I posed to a member of the SWAT team following the lecture at the Meyerhoff. He told me there was nothing I could or should have done; that unfortunately, organizers had not planned for enough security in advance. And I wondered if this is what our democracy has come to – planning , in advance, for a sizeable enough police presence?

But even this is not a new question. After Jefferson and Madison were elected, New England Federalists tried to dissolve the Union because they were opposed to the War of 1812. This was a raucous political time in America and it was mirrored in our Unitarian congregations.

The Reverend William Ellery Channing was a Federalist who was opposed to the War of 1812. But he was deeply troubled by the idea of dissolving the Union. So he preached the following to his Boston congregation:

Perhaps Christ when on earth won the hearts of publicans and sinners more by his gentle manners and offices of kindness, when he ate and drank with them, than by exhibiting his miracles.

This angered the more conservative members of Channing’s congregation who accused him of diminishing the foundation of their faith. Channing actually believed in the miracles of the New Testament. He simply believed, even more, in the rational kindness and goodness which Jesus taught in the Golden Rule and modeled in his ministry.

I was reminded of Channing’s sermon the evening of Congressman Ben Cardin’s summer town hall meeting on health care in Towson. Osler Drive was lined with demonstrators. In response to signs equating President Obama with Hitler, and chants of just saying no to a yet unwritten health care bill, I found myself yelling, “What would Jesus do?” This led the woman standing next to me to start shouting that WITHOUT reform, we would need miracles to make the blind see and the lame walk.

Channing would NOT have supported my jumping into the fray and chanting. He probably would have suggested I have a meal or one-on-one dialogue with those who were opposed to health care reform – complete with “gentle manners and offices of kindness.” This does not mean he advocated acquiescing or conceding one’s viewpoint to ranters and ravers. It means that as part of a spiritual discipline, Channing preached not reacting in kind.

This is a great spiritual challenge in both the public square and in our personal lives. The following reading addresses this spiritual challenge and comes from an unknown author. It has been shared in Unitarian Universalist Congregations from Salem, Massachusetts to St. Louis, Missouri because of its universality.

“One evening, I went with a friend to a store. My friend bought several items and thanked the clerk politely. The clerk didn’t even acknowledge his politeness. “Sullen, isn’t he?” I asked. “Oh, he’s that way most of the time,” said my friend. “Then why do you continue to be polite to him?” “Why not?” was the reply. “Why should I let him decide how I’m going to act?”

Thinking this over later, it occurred to me that the important word was “act.” My friend ACTS toward people, whereas most of us REACT towards them. He refuses to return rudeness for rudeness because then he would no longer be in command of his own conduct.”

I was reminded of the difference between reacting and acting listening to Professor P. M. Forni speak about “civility” with Dan Roderick this week. Jan Chapin had seen the theme of today’s service and called my attention to the dialogue.

P. M. Forni pointed out the obvious – that when we yell and shout in our personal relationships, people tune us out. Similarly, when people are allowed to behave disruptively in the public square, we can’t hear or think in the midst of anarchy. The majority of those who called in to the show did not ask about what to do about incivility in the public square. They were more concerned about incivility in their personal lives – from hurt caused by the anonymity of e-mail to responding to the fear and anger of being cut-off in traffic.

Dr. Forni cautioned against reacting with irrationality and “in kind.” He gave examples of bringing rationality and kindness to our relationships. But he did more than this. He modeled what he was teaching. When a caller angrily disagreed with him, Dr. Forni responded with calm and compassion. One caller did ask how to respond to children who see civility as a sign of weakness rather than strength. Dr. Forni acknowledged that we must work to make civility as “interesting” and “cool” as incivility currently is in our culture. How do we do this? I think we intentionally spend 10 minutes a day less listening to pundits pontificating about politics and explore our own life experience.

This week, a congregant shared that after the death of a loved one from an accident, he is taking many less risks as a driver. Now, when someone exhibits aggressive behavior on the highway – his response is to wave them on rather than to react with anger.

Ellen Goodman observed that it is “the large concentric circle of those who are touched by loss, who come to value the ability to hold our tongues, to speak civilly to opponents, to live together with differences.” When you get right down to it, all of humanity is touched by loss. So it is possible to care for loved ones AND strangers, not only with differences but in spite of differences.

Civility is about more than saying “Please” and “Thank you,” much as these good manners make life more pleasant. As I learned from both the heckler and President Musharraf at the Stevenson Lecture in September, civility is the delicacy of knowing where to stop short, consciously giving up immediate personal gratification, and, in the words of Stephen Carter, “making sacrifices for the sake of living together.”

As I learned from jumping into the uncivil fray at the town hall meeting at Towson University, William Ellery Channing was right – civility is more important than miracles or perhaps it IS a miracle when we choose to think rather than react to our emotions and when we choose to serve something larger than ourselves.

As I learned from the UU who responds to the rude clerk with kindness and from the TUUC member who now waves on aggressive drivers, civility is intentionally putting oneself in another’s shoes, asking how one would like it if someone treated you this way, and doing unto others as you would have them do unto you.

The final rule of civility that George Washington copied into his book read, “Labor to keep alive in your Breast that Little Spark of Celestial fire Called Conscience.”

May we do likewise and, through the surpassing gestures of “doing gracefully what is not expected of us,” continue to grow into the person we long to become. May we contribute our own celestial fire to this beacon of free-thinking religion that can help heal the world. And may we re-hinge our culture through the common sense; balance; fairness; and fortitude of civility.

In affirmation of this, let us join in singing our closing hymn – number #145 *As Tranquil Streams That Meet And Merge*.

CLOSING WORDS

Stephen Carter reminds us: Civility is founded upon our willingness to make the interests, joys, and sorrows of others our own. So may it be.

GO NOW IN PEACE
