

The Right of Conscience and the Democratic Process
Presented by Rev. Margie King Saphier on December 4, 2005 at
United First Parish Church, Quincy, MA

In Sheldon's sermon delivered on November 6, he stated our liberal religion not only requires that we "stand on the side of love and equality," but that as Unitarian Universalists we are called to honor and respect minority voice as we, the congregation, make democratic decisions. The fifth principle of the UUA Principles and Sources states as a Unitarian-Universalist congregation, we "affirm and promote the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process. Fulfilling the spirit and intent of this principle can be very challenging to a congregation when one person's right of conscience leads them to become another person's cause to protest. So how does a covenanted community, who also covenants to affirm the inherent dignity and worth of the individual, "actively protect minority voices" in the magnanimous spirit of "love and equality?" This morning I hope to address this question.

Theologically and spiritually this question is critical. It asks how do we actually live the Doctrine of the Spirit. In other words, how do we live the Great Commandment to "Love God with all our heart all our mind and all our strength; and to love your neighbor as yourself." I know some of you are squeamish with the word "God." I suggest for the word God, you substitute the Buddhist concept of "No Self" for God. The Ego or the self is very closely tied to way our culture trained us to think and to communicate. Our Western capitalistic society stresses the importance of the ego over all else, making many of us worshippers of the individual, especially *numero uno*. Through various mediums, we are told daily that we "deserve" a Mercedes Benz, a dinner at McDonald's, a pain free existence by taking a medicine cabinet full of uppers, downers and pain-killers. Nowhere are we asked to give of ourselves to others. Marshall Rosenberg, founder of the Center for Nonviolent Communication, states, "To give a gift of one's self is a manifestation of love. It's a gift when you

reveal yourself nakedly and honestly, at any given moment, FOR NO OTHER PURPOSE THAN TO REVEAL WHAT IS ALIVE YOU.

I love the phrase “for no other purpose than to reveal what is alive in you.” To reveal what is alive in another is to affirm their inherent worth and dignity. Rosenberg explains the “key purpose of Nonviolent Communication is to connect with people – and thus with Divine Energy – in a way that enables compassionate giving to take place. It’s giving that comes from the heart willingly, where we give service to ourselves and others, not out of obligation, or duty, not out of fear of punishment, or hope for a reward, not out of shame or guilt, but for what I consider is our nature, our nature to enjoy giving to one another.” If you think that this sounds pie in the sky, Rosenberg works with people in worn torn countries, such as Rwanda, Burundi, Nigeria, Malaysia, Indonesia, Sri Lanka, Ireland. My husband and I attended one of Rosenberg’s workshops. He is phenomenal to watch in action as he communicates non-violently. His speech creates a spacious for clarity, compassion. And wisdom to arise. He is a man of peace.

As many of you know, Barbara Bates, who is president of the Massachusetts Bay District, and I will be conducting a workshop at General Assembly in June, 2006 called “Beyond Prevention: Using UU Values to Cope with Difficult Behaviors in Our Interdependent Web.” In preparation for this workshop, one key point I have learned is “difficult behavior or a difficult person” is defined as one who causes me to experience a negative internal response. So I may experience Harry or Mary as difficult, whereas you may have a relaxed, easy going relationship with each of them. We each have had different life experiences resulting in different lenses through which we view behavior, ideas, and actions. As a result, it is very easy for us to make untested assumptions about another who may not be in agreement with our deeply held belief. A word of caution for us all to remember is: when you begin to hear that voice in your head judging and critiquing, it is time to take a deep breath and let

the breath go slowly. You may need to do this more than once, so you can gain some clarity. If the encounter feels too intense, it is OK to say, "This is important to me but I need some time alone. Can we get together later?" And make sure you do get together later!

I cannot stress enough the importance of the breath. So often we take the breath for granted, but there is a reason the breath is the focus of Buddhist meditation and Christian centering prayer. The breath is truly an anchor that can return us to the here and now. When we are truly in the here and now, the ego has shrunk allowing for more of the no self to arrive. No self is the spaciousness in which spontaneity, curiosity, compassion, wisdom and awareness arise. One way we cultivate No Self is through the awareness of the breath. The word breath comes from the Greek root *pneuma*, meaning spirit, wind, breath. In Genesis God creates a human by breathing life into the clay formed to look like a person. The Hebrew word *ruah* also means breath as well as spirit. So God breathed life and spirit into this form made from humus and created a human. When a baby is born, they are ashen or blue until they draw that first breath. Suddenly the baby is spirit-filled and full of color, movement and voice. When we die, as the breath becomes less and less, our coloring becomes mottled. When the last breath leaves the body, the body is no longer spirit-filled.

Our breath serves as a barometer to our feelings. When we are surprised, we gasp; when we are anxious or fearful our breathing may become shallow and rapid; when we are relaxed, our breathing is deep, slow and easy. If we pay attention to our breath, it can tell us much about the state of our emotions.

So when you feel your adrenalin rising because of what someone said, it is time to take a deep breath or two, and know that your ego is involved. Instead of hanging onto your ego at all costs by immediately blurting out, "I don't agree ..." or "I can't believe you said that ...," it is time to shift into compassionate curiosity. It is fair to say I don't agree with you and I'd like to tell you why, but first let me make sure I heard you correctly, "Did you say ...?" and repeat what

you heard them say. If they state you have heard them correctly, then you can ask, "Tell me how you came to that conclusion?" You may want to ask some more follow up questions, before you explain why you have a differing opinion. By being transparent - letting the person know you don't agree - but by showing compassionate and non-judgmental curiosity, you affirm the inherent worth and dignity of the other; you also "stand on the side of love and equality" and "actively protect minority voices." Through your questioning, you are inquiring about what is most alive in them. When we practice this kind of communication, we open ourself to the possibility of transformation.

You may be thinking well this is just great but what about what is alive me? All too often we jump into conversations from the perspective our story or our issue. In so doing we trigger just the kind of reactions we are trying to avoid. We begin precisely the place the other person thinks is causing the problem. If we describe the differences in non-judgmental terms, we allow the other to speak freely - not defensively. An example of this is: "My sense is that you and I see this situation differently. I'd like to share how I'm seeing it; and I want to learn more about how your are seeing it." Both may or may not find common ground, but you will have built a foundation based on mutual respect and trust.

I have a confession. I find this very challenging to do, especially if the other person is my husband, one of sisters or my children. I am not unusual. Because our egos are very closely identified with those whom we have a close relationship, an unintentional slight can pain us deeply.

Compassionate and non-judgmental curiosity is essential in any democratically run enterprise, but especially in our congregations. According to Thom Hartman in his book, What Would Jefferson Do?, "The price of democracy is eternal vigilance. That doesn't apply just to invaders from the outside; it applies to internal forces that try to dismantle the fundamental protections that make democracy work."

So what are some of the fundamental protections that make democracy work in a covenantal congregation? Genuine democratic communities do not just happen. It requires conscious effort and commitment to be **inclusive**. It is not merely a matter of including different sexes, sexual minorities, races, and creeds. It is also inclusive of the full range of human emotions and idiosyncrasies. Tears are welcome as well as laughter, doubts as well as faith. Sooner or later the differences within the group will raise the critical decision as to whether one is going to exclude another or exclude themselves. **Exclusion is the great enemy to community**. This is the moment when one needs to make the conscious decision to be committed to the group.

For true community to develop, there comes a time when our individual differences have to be acknowledged and they need to be held in creative tension. Instead of asserting our individualism by claiming our way is the only way, we need to inquire about the other's intentions. All too often, we think we know why someone said what they said or did what they did; but we never check out our assumptions. As a result we live in a world of self-generating beliefs, which remain largely untested. We adopt these beliefs because they are based on conclusions, which are inferred from what we observe, plus our past experience. Our ability to achieve the results we truly desire is often eroded by our feelings that:

Our beliefs are the truth.

The truth is obvious.

Our beliefs are based on real data.

The data we select are the data.

Let me give you a fictional but realistic example from Peter Senge's book, The Fifth Discipline, that illustrate these four points. In this fictional account I will be a manager giving my first hand account. Here is my story, "I am standing before the executive team of my company, making a presentation. The participants seem engaged and alert, except for Tom at the end of the table, who seems bored out of his mind. He turns his dark, morose eyes away from me and puts his hand to his mouth. He doesn't ask any questions until I am done, then he breaks in:, stating, "I think we should ask for a full report." In the culture of this company, this typically means, "Let's move on." Everyone starts to shuffle their papers and put their notes away. Tom obviously thinks I am incompetent – which is a shame, because these ideas are exactly what his department needs. Now that I think of it, he never liked my ideas. Clearly, Tom is a power-hungry

jerk. By the time I've returned to my seat, I've made a decision: I am not going to include anything in my report that Tom can use. It's too bad I have an enemy who is so prominent in the company.

This story is a great illustration of the mind talk – the ego that we believe is true. Whenever I am aware that I of this judging mind talk, I know it is time to be curious – to express non-judgmental and compassionate curiosity. Often we don't check out our assumptions, because the first questions that come to mind can sound like this. "Tell me, do you really think I am an idiot?" or "You really found my presentation boring, didn't you?" These questions are really accusations; and therefore are unlikely to get honest answers.

In those few seconds before I take my seat, I have climbed up what Senge identifies as the 'ladder of inference,' – a common mental pathway of increasing assumptions, often leading to misguided beliefs. At the time, my thoughts can seem so reasonable, it happens so quickly, that I'm not aware I have done it. The more I believe that Tom is an evil guy, the more I reinforce my tendency to notice his future behavior as malevolent. Before long, for no apparent reason, Tom and I may find ourselves becoming bitter enemies."

We live our lives by adding meaning to or drawing conclusions about everyday interactions. But we do not need to become slaves to the on-going meaning-making engines in our minds. Instead we can improve communication through reflection and awareness, and we will come to experience meaning in a whole new way. First we need to become aware of our thinking and reasoning. Second, we need to make our thinking and reasoning more visible to others. And third, we need to inquire into others' thinking and reasoning. These three steps invite the spirit of love and equality. These steps also invite minority voices to be heard and considered. They also provide the opportunity to learn what is alive in the other.

In the example of Tom, the first step requires I become aware that I am going up the ladder of inference and I need to stop myself, take a few deep breaths and reflect on what is going on inside me. This means I do not project my anger on Tom. Second, I check my assumptions (or inferences, which I perceive to be the real data) while learning what Tom is thinking. "Tom, I want honest feedback regarding my presentation. Tell me, was the material I presented relevant to your department? Was I clear?" The point of the inquiry is not to nail Tom, but to make both of our thinking processes visible so that we see what the differences are in our perceptions and what we have in common.

Notice that in this example there was no effort to show one of us was right and the other wrong. Instead the question becomes “Was the presentation relevant? Was it helpful?” The issue is no longer about Tom or about me. Instead it is about the material presented and its relevancy. These questions invite input and diversity of opinion. These are the little but significant opportunities to create the experience of inclusiveness within community.

In the initial scenario when I rapidly rise on the ladder of inference with Tom, I believe my viewpoint is right. When only one viewpoint is considered, there is the illusion of limited to no possibilities. People do not feel free to offer their thoughts. We lose the opportunity to learn what is alive in the other. But when we take responsibility for our thinking and share it publicly and ask others what they think, we create an attitude or spirit of abundance. The environment becomes rich with ideas. People feel that the community respects their inherent dignity. When this happens in a democratically run congregation, we may not all agree with each other but we will know we heard and respected.

This morning we sang the Advent hymn *O Come Emmanuel, O Come*. The name “Emmanuel” means “God is with us.” In this season of Advent, in which we prepare for the promise of Love Incarnate, may we experience the life-giving power of Divine Energy that is available to each of us when we truly connect with one another.