

Statement of the Problem

Let's say you love Roswell's many parks and preserved wooded areas and you come to find out that the city is considering converting one of these parks along Big Creek into a large tennis facility. You then hear of a meeting held at the local library where people who wish to preserve the park as is are gathering to plan and strategize in an effort to prevent this development.

As you're walking through the library parking lot on your way to the meeting, it's no surprise to you that you notice many cars have UU bumper stickers yet you also notice that lots of cars have NRA stickers in the windows. It strikes you as a bit odd.

At the meeting you come to find out that a large number of attendees are card carrying NRA members. They love fishing Big Creek and they want to see it, and the park, preserved as is. You have been working for many years advocating for stricter gun control measures and now, faced with this situation, you don't really even know how to feel. What do you do?

Let's say that in the town in which you live, all local government employees are unionized under a collective bargaining agreement. The Mayor then proposes a right-to-work initiative that would effectively eliminate collective bargaining and the union. You then hear of a meeting held at the local library where people who wish to preserve the union are gathering to plan and strategize.

As you're walking through the library parking lot on your way to the meeting, it's no surprise to you that you notice many cars have UU bumper stickers yet you also notice that lots of cars have blue lives matter stickers in the windows. It strikes you as a bit odd. The sticker shows a black and white flag with a single blue line representing the police as being the first line of defense in protecting our communities. The Blue Lives Matter movement arose in response to the Black

Lives Matter movement, which, among other things, maintained that people of color are often inordinately targeted by some law enforcement officers.

At the meeting you come to find out that a large number of attendees are police officers and Blue Lives Matter supporters. They are union workers and supporters who want the union preserved as is. You have been working for many years advocating for Black Lives Matter - seeking changes in how law enforcement sees and treats people of color and now, faced with this situation, you don't really even know how to feel. What do you do?

Do you turn around, leave the meeting before it even starts because merely being in the presence of those people makes you furious? Do you use this opportunity to call out, admonish and scold a captive and unsuspecting audience to advocate for your personal issue and then leave after having your say?

What else might you do? What do you do?

Message

Even prior to the 2016 election, I was having my doubts as to the effectiveness of certain social justices strategies. One that I'd specifically like to kick off the cart is the idea of "speaking truth to power." We've all heard people say this before, "C'mon everybody, we need to speak truth to power!"

Yet we now live in a world whose narratives are created by spin doctors, pundits, ideologues who create their own version of facts. For them, truth is merely an irritating obstacle that happens to be in the way of their own personal agenda; an irritating insect to be swatted away.

Speaking truth to power is of no concern to those in power. So...what to do? Another strategy gaining some traction is the idea of public shaming. It has precedent not only in cultures but also in social justice movements. No one wants to bring shame upon their family or tribe. Steven Pinker, in his book "The Better Angels of Our Nature," makes the argument that the world, contrary to what you might believe, is actually safer and more just than it has ever been...and it is safer essentially because people, countries and even dictators do not wish to look bad on the world stage. In this age of mass-media and instant data transmission, blatant atrocities can be readily exposed, subjecting the perpetrator to worldwide shame and disapproval.

Many of Gandhi's and Martin Luther King, Jr.'s nonviolent actions were staged and carried out for maximum publicity and effect. Scenes of Bull Conner's reaction to peaceful civil rights marchers in Birmingham were transmitted to every television screen in America. Most of us did not wish to be associated with those turning fire hoses and attack dogs on their own citizens. It was shameful to our vision of a civilized American society.

So I began to think, since people don't seem to care much about truth and facts, maybe this shaming tool could be used in new ways to create justice in our communities, our cities and towns.

But then I began to think further. Has this shaming truly changed things for the better? Does it sometimes merely shape-shifted the injustice to take another form? In Alabama, on the 3rd Monday in January they now celebrate Martin Luther King's birthday. Also on that day they celebrate Robert E. Lee's birthday. They also celebrate Confederate Memorial Day and Jefferson Davis's birthday as official state holidays.

In Georgia, Robert E. Lee's birthday has shape-shifted from being an official holiday in January to one in November. Now, the date is simply called an unnamed "state holiday." The 4th Monday in April used to be Confederate Memorial Day, now it too is an unnamed state holiday.

Maybe shaming, and yes, even the non-violent strategies of Gandhi and MLK, didn't, and haven't, truly worked. Maybe these strategies simply drove the injustice underground, shape-shifted it into new forms.

Social researcher Brene Brown says, "Shame never drives positive behavior. What shame drives is rage, anger, rationalization and blame. Let say white supremacists, or KKK or Nazis are marching through town and you say "let's shame them" ...let me tell you, if they weren't ass-high in shame already, they wouldn't be marching through town.... Dehumanization is not a social justice tool. It is emotional offloading. It is gratuitous, it is self indulgent, it is a way to offload our anger, our fear and our rage; but it has nothing to do with social justice (Brene Brown)."

Shaming, and its online Facebook and Twitter counterpart, cancel culture, call-out culture, of which I write in our newsletter and on the UUMAN website minister's column is mean-spirited, self-serving and lazy. And again, let's not confuse it with a social justice tool. Proponents of those techniques think they're tearing down the walls of injustice yet they're merely building new ones while they burn their own bridges; while their opponents start digging trenches and underground tunnels.

With cancel culture, call out culture and "let's shame them," there's no interest in relationship, there's no interest in the other's humanity.

So how can we bridge the gap with others with whom we disagree?

Well, I see three possible paths forward. The third path, which I'll call the third rail (as in a subway system; the rail carrying to electrical power for the train, the rail in which one's touching leads to one's dying). The third rail is to do nothing – simply continue to let things unravel into confusion, anarchy until we are taken beyond the point of no return.

(Obviously, I'm not going to be advocating that that is a viable option. 😊)

The second path is the "our backs are against the wall" path. It's a path of last resort...and actually a path of moral weakness. Philosophers would call this the aporia path: a set of circumstances, an impasse, just before the point of no return that forces us to unite.

Such circumstances might include:

Economic threat – there is evidence that there is agreement amongst the political parties that China poses a real threat to our economic well being (intellectual property rights, 5G communications, etc.)

Political threat – Undermining of our political system and our way of government

Threat of war – nuclear or otherwise

Environmental threat – once Wall St. goes under (literally...as in under water) people will come together

Again, the “our backs are against the wall” path is a path of moral weakness and unfortunately, it’s a path we know all too well.

The first path, the first road, is unfortunately is the road less traveled. It is the road comprised of what one might call relational first principles – fundamental concepts, fundamental ideas regarding how we can relate with one another – especially with those who see the world differently than us and those with whom we are not necessarily in covenant.

As Unitarian Universalists we believe in the inherent worth and dignity of every person; and this includes those with whom we disagree. It includes those with whom we don’t like very much. We have to accept that. This inherent worth and dignity may be hidden - it may be buried deep within an exterior of hate and bigotry; it most certainly isn’t apparent within the white supremacist neo-Nazi - yet It is fundamental.

So what might be the stepping stones, what might be the first principles, of this road less traveled?

This was essentially the question Jennifer Phillippi posed to me over lunch several months ago. She purchased this sermon in November’s Harvest Moon Service Auction.

...and I’ve been thinking about this question for months now.

While I was riding MARTA home from the State Capital last month, reading the NY Times on my phone, I came across a story that clicked. It switched a light on.

The article, “A Disgusting Yale Professor Moves On” (Frank Bruni, NY Times, 03/19/19) details sociology professor Nicholas Christakis’ response to a

student-led firestorm in the fall of 2015. Earlier in the week, his wife, also a professor at Yale, circulated a memo, in support of free expression, that would permit students to wear culturally offensive Halloween costumes if they so desired. She indicated that the students could be trusted to hold one another accountable if any such costumes were deemed offensive or insensitive. In the memo, she indicated that her husband too supported this position.

Well...a predictable firestorm erupted.

An encounter between Mr. Christakis and students is captured on Youtube. Some, but not all, not all by any means, some of the student behavior, likely fueled by real anger, fear and possibly trauma, represents call out cancel culture.

“BE QUIET!” a young woman screams at him. “WHO the F*** HIRED YOU?...You should not sleep at night! You’re disgusting!”

Now I don’t know what happens next, or even the next day, or the day after that but when the young woman who says this in the video is done, she immediately turns, picks up her backpack and leaves. Be quiet! No conversation allowed, no response permitted, no relationship desired. (Interestingly, that’s exactly how it works on Facebook.)

I could have told Mr. Christakis that if you’re party to a memo like that, you might get some blowback. People will come looking for you. You might be able to run but you won’t be able to hide....But Mr. Christakis wasn’t hiding, hundreds of students were gathered in protest against him and he voluntarily ventured into the belly of the beast to meet them. And meet with them he did – for over two hours. Two hours of conversation and listening...and he listened to insults...and to tirades – to a withering barrage of hateful speech.

Why do this? Why subject yourself to this? I believe he did it for two reasons. The second, and what I consider the less important of the two was that he felt that he had to model the principles that he believed in. (He says that in the article.) The first, and more important reason, is that despite him seeing firsthand "... the effects of overidentifying with one's group and [witnessing] mass delusions up close (Frank Bruni, NY Times, 03/19/19)" he believes that as a species we are inherently predisposed to the good; that we've evolved and been wired to both give and receive love, to cooperate and create positive social relationships. (His book "Blueprint," that he wrote *after* this incident, has the data to back this up.)

After reading this article, and seeing the videos of this encounter, the light that went on was this:

I could give you laundry list of first principles, stepping stones, to help build bridges to those with whom we disagree; and these principles are all worthy and useful and good... but they truly aren't first principles at all. They're more like tools. Yet underlying these tools, supporting them, holding them up, is an orientation...an orientation...that is truly fundamental.

Without this orientation, many tools could be deployed as Machiavellian machinations that end up merely shape-shifting the narrative into some other insidious alternative. Yet in the video, I can see all the stepping stones, all the tools to build bridges in use; yet it is his underlying orientation that makes it all possible.

Very few people embody this orientation. I can't claim to embody it. And most unfortunately, very few people even care to embody it.

How do we feel about the people in the vehicle sporting the NRA sticker, or the Blue Lives Matter sticker or the Confederate flag? How do we feel about the person wearing the MAGA hat? How do we feel about Hillary Clinton or Mitch McConnell? Is the sole reason for our political advocacy merely an effort to trounce the Republicans...or the Democrats? Might you be part of the "forty two percent of the people [who regard Republicans] as downright evil [and lacking] the traits to be considered fully human (Thomas Edsall, "No Hate Left Behind", NYTimes, 03/13/2019)." If so, well, congratulations, there are groups of Republicans out there who think the same of you.

We reap what we sow. “A plague on both your houses (William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*).”

Things will not change unless we are oriented as Mr. Christakis: oriented to not only see the humanity of those with whom we disagree but also, despite not liking them all the time, love them for who they are; to be oriented toward and having faith and hope not only in the inherent worth of the other, but also in the inherent goodness of the other. It’s in there somewhere.

He writes, “Beneath all our inventions – our tools, farms, machines, cities, nations – we carry with us innate proclivities to make a good society (Nicholas Christakis, *Blueprint*).”

Why can’t we be the ones oriented toward bringing out these innate proclivities? Why can’t we be the ones oriented toward bringing out the very best in the other? Why can’t we be the ones? Why not us?

Let us be the ones to take this first step. Let us be the ones to offer the olive branch. Let us be the ones to lean in and begin building this house of peace for us all.