

“Difficult Conversations”

A Sermon by the Rev. Terry Sims
Unitarian Universalist Church, Surprise, Arizona
April 3, 2011

Reading: *Responsibility*, from The Book of Awakening by Mark Nepo

“I felt angry toward my friend.

I told my wrath. My wrath did end.

I felt angry toward my foe.

I told him not. My wrath did grow.’

William Blake

True inner responsibility centers on our willingness to give voice to whatever is happening to us in the midst of a relationship. This is important both for you and the person you are relating to. If you are not present, there is nothing to respond to. And love only becomes real in the world through our ability to respond. Bringing who you are to a relationship – being your True Self – gives others the opportunity to transcend their limitations by acting on their love. It gives the other person a chance to show up.

If you remain voiceless, then I can unconsciously keep living out whatever inequity or imbalance I am involved in with you. But once you show your hurt or frustration or confusion or question, then I have the chance to stop my unconscious participation in the pattern of our relationship. The key to whether I will respond to you or not [,] often has to do with love, the one thing that can break the inertia of old behavior.

We can be driving along the endless summer highway locked in some pattern that has become suffocating to you. But until you are moved by some sudden wind that shows the willow’s trunk as we speed by, until you are moved to say, ‘I can’t go on like

this,' I can't have the chance to say, 'I don't want it to be like this either.' Until you break your silence, I can't have the chance to say, 'What can we do to change all this?'

Often, we spend so much time waiting for the other to catch on and see our pain, getting more and more frustrated and wounded the longer they don't. But this is the definition of a limitation: not being able to see what is obvious.

So, while we dread voicing our fears and hurts to one another, love has no way of being acted on without something truthful to respond to.”¹

Responsive Reading: # 658 in the gray hymnal, *To Risk*, Anonymous

“To laugh is to risk appearing the fool.

To weep is to risk appearing sentimental.

To reach out for another is to risk exposing our true self.

To place our ideas – our dreams – before the crowd is to risk loss.

To love is to risk not being loved in return.

To hope is to risk despair.

To try is to risk failure.

To live is to risk dying.”

Sermon: I would not want a solitary life, living without connecting to other people. For most of us, we interact with our fellow humans all our lives. Much of that interaction is centered on communication. The longer I live, the more I long for real connections. I don't feel that I have time to waste in insubstantial pursuits or unimportant conversations. I appreciate people who are willing to “go deep.”

But being in a relationship with someone, or interacting even with strangers, often means that we will experience conflict. Sometimes “going deep” uncovers things

¹ Mark Nepo, *The Book of Awakening*, Conari Press, 2000, *Responsibility* March 8, pp. 81-82.

we don't like in ourselves and those we're in relationship with. Such conflict can make it difficult to have the real conversations we need to have. As I look at our world, conflict is inevitable. But we could perhaps deal with the inevitable conflicts better if we could get better at having difficult conversations.

Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton, and Sheila Heen, of the Harvard Negotiation Project, wrote a book called Difficult Conversations. "The dilemma," they say, is to "avoid or confront[.] It seems there is no good path."² "Desperate for a way out of the dilemma, we wonder if it is possible to be so tactful, so overwhelmingly pleasant that everything ends up fine."

"Tact is good, but it's not the answer to difficult conversations. Tact won't make conversations with your father more intimate or take away your client's anger over the increased bill. Nor is there a simple diplomatic way to fire your friend, to let you know that she drives you crazy, or to confront your colleagues' hurtful prejudices."

*"Delivering a difficult message is like throwing a hand grenade. Coated with sugar, thrown hard or soft, a hand grenade is still going to do damage. Try as you may, there's no way to throw a hand grenade with tact or to outrun the consequences. And keeping it to yourself is no better. Choosing not to deliver a difficult message is like hanging on to a hand grenade once you've pulled the pin."*³

The authors explain that every difficult conversation really consists of three conversations. The first is the "what happened" conversation. Second is the "feelings" conversation. And third is the "identity" conversation.

² Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton, Sheila Heen, Difficult Conversations, How to Discuss What Matters Most, Penguin Books, 1999, xvi.

³ *Ibid.*, xvii-xviii.

First, the “what happened” conversation. “Most difficult conversations involve disagreement about what has happened or what should happen.”⁴ “Who’s right, who meant what, and who’s to blame?”⁵ The authors of the book say many of us make a central mistake in the “what happened” conversation: We assume that whatever the impact on us, that is what the other person intended.

“Margaret . . . had her hip operated on by a prominent surgeon, a man she found gruff and hard to talk to. When Margaret hobbled in for her first appointment after surgery, the receptionist told her that the doctor had unexpectedly extended his vacation. Angry, Margaret imagined her wealthy doctor cavorting in the Caribbean with his wife or girlfriend, too self-important and inconsiderate to return on schedule. . . .

When Margaret finally saw the doctor a week later, she asked curtly how his vacation had been. He responded that it had been wonderful. ‘I’ll bet,’ she said, wondering whether to raise her concerns. But the doctor went on: ‘It was a working vacation. I was helping set up a hospital in Bosnia. The conditions there are just horrendous.’”⁶

The second conversation, the one we often avoid having, is the feelings conversation. But the reason conversations become difficult is because they are about our emotions. “Solving problems seems easier than talking about emotions.”⁷

“Max and his daughter Julie are negotiating about how much to spend on Julie’s upcoming wedding. . . . The conversation feels difficult and stressful for both dad and daughter. Each is feeling impatient, sensitive, and ready to find fault with the other. . . .

⁴ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*, 47.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 87.

Max [is experiencing] a deep sense of both sadness and joy when he thinks of the event . . . To Max, the planning of the event represent a final opportunity for his daughter to be just his daughter, and not also someone's wife. He'd like her to ask questions and to seek advice from him, the way she did when she was younger."⁸ Julie is feeling that her dad cares more about the money than about her and her joy in getting married.

We often translate our feelings into judgments about the other person rather than saying what we're feeling. "You are self-absorbed. You are thoughtless." Those are judgments. The feeling statement is: "I'm feeling that you don't want to spend time with me. Is that true?" It's risky, because we may not like the answer. The other person might not be able or willing to make us feel better. But as Mark Nepo reminded us in our reading this morning: "[W]hile we dread voicing our fears and hurts to one another, love has no way of being acted on without something truthful to respond to."⁹

The question in the third conversation, the "identity" conversation, is "what does this say about me?" Difficult conversations have "the potential to disrupt our sense of who we are in the world, or to highlight what we hope we are but fear we are not. The conversation poses a threat to our identity – the story we tell ourselves about ourselves" ¹⁰ There are three core identities: "Am I competent?" "Am I a good person?" "Am I worthy of love?"¹¹

"I had intended to break up with Sandra that night. I began in a roundabout way, and as soon as she got the drift, she started to cry. It hurt me so much to see her in such pain. The hardest thing for me in life is hurting people I care about; it goes against

⁸ *Ibid.*, 86.

⁹ Nepo, Mark, The Book of Awakening, Conari Press, 2000, *Responsibility* March 8, pp. 81-82.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 112.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

who I am spiritually and emotionally. I just couldn't bear how I was feeling . . . [So] after a few moments I was telling her how much I loved her and that everything would work out between us."¹²

The book's authors suggest some things we can do to do better at having difficult conversations. For instance, in the "what happened" conversation, most of us think the other person is the problem. They're selfish, or naïve, or controlling, or irrational. And they think we are. Stop arguing about who's right. That just blocks us from exploring their story. Move from certainty to curiosity about their story. Accept that our stories are different and each is true for each of us. We each have different information and interpret that information differently. Our interpretations reflect our past experiences, our biases, our self-interest.

Next, share the impact on you and ask about their intentions. "That hurts my feelings. Is that what you meant to do?" "Abandon blame" and instead map out how each person contributed to the problem. "When blame is the goal, understanding is the casualty."¹³ Acknowledge that you contributed to the difficulty. That can be risky because the other person may seize on that and refuse to acknowledge her or his own contribution. But if we have already said we have contributed to the problem, the other person may find it easier to do the same.

The first part of the solution to the second conversation, the "feelings" one, is to be willing to talk about what you are feeling. "Try to get everything you are feeling into the conversation." Most people are horrified by this rule," the authors say.¹⁴ But "[w]hen important feelings remain unexpressed . . . [y]ou deprive your colleagues,

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*, 64.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 99.

friends, and family members of the opportunity to learn and to change in response to your feelings. And perhaps most damagingly, you hurt the relationship. By keeping your feelings out of the relationship you are keeping an important part of yourself out of the relationship.”¹⁵

The second part of the solution is to negotiate with your feelings before sharing them. Don't just vent. Then, examine and describe your feelings carefully. Brad and his mom are having their umpteenth conversation about his job search, which has so far been unsuccessful. “Instead of saying, ‘Mom, you're driving me crazy!’ Brad might say, “when you ask me how the job search is going, I feel a couple of things. One thing I feel is angry. I suppose that's because I've asked you not to bring it up, and you do anyway. But at the same time, part of me is appreciative, and reassured that things will be okay. It means a lot that you're looking out for me and that you care.’

And when his mother asks why he's not being more aggressive about looking for a job, rather than saying, ‘Stop bugging me,’ Brad might say, ‘It's hard for me to talk with you about this. Whenever I think about it, I end up feeling ashamed, like maybe I'm wasting my potential or letting you down.’”¹⁶

In the “identity” conversation, the mistake most of us make is all-or-nothing' thinking.” “I'm either competent or incompetent, good or evil, worthy of love or not.” “When faced with negative information about ourselves, all-or-nothing thinking [leaves us either trying] to deny the information that is inconsistent with our self-image, or we . . . exaggerate its importance to a crippling degree.”¹⁷ What the authors suggest instead

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 90.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 103.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 114.

is to accept three things about yourself. You are “a mix of good and bad behavior, noble and less noble intentions, [and y]ou have contributed to the problem.”¹⁸

The world of international politics and diplomacy is mind-numbingly complex. But I wonder what would happen if nations conducted their difficult conversations as the Harvard writers suggest. Take conversations between the United States and Saudi Arabia about Bahrain. According to an article in the March 26, 2011 issue of *The Economist*, “Saudi Arabia pushed Bahrain’s [Sunni royal family] to crush the month-old democratic uprising embraced by their majority Shia subjects. . . . “The intervention has quietly dismayed the Saudis’ Western allies, who fear comparisons between their zeal for boosting democracy in Libya and their reluctance to do so in Bahrain. [Bahrain] happens to be the home base of America’s Fifth Fleet. Yet the Saudis have not only brushed off complaints; they have also let it be known that more active Saudi backing for the punishment of Colonel Qaddafi is contingent on Western silence over Bahrain.”

It seems impossible to imagine, but what would happen if we had a learning conversation with Saudi Arabia. What if we acknowledged that we have different stories because we each see the world differently. That we have different interpretations influenced by our own past experiences and internal biases. That both of our countries have contributed to the situation in Bahrain and in other countries. And that what we believe about what is happening and what should happen in Bahrain reflects our own self-interest.

Even harder to imagine would be a conversation with another country in which each country was willing to find the feelings lurking under attributions, judgments, and accusations. Where each country recognized its own identity crises. A conversation in

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 118 and 120.

which we didn't deny or exaggerate the bad facts about ourselves. What if, instead, we acknowledged that our country has made mistakes, that our intentions are mixed and complex, and that we have contributed to the problem. Such honesty and risk-taking is hard to come by even in conversations with other individuals. It sounds impossible for nations, even if it might be very helpful.

Why did I want to talk about difficult conversations this morning? For two reasons. First, unlike nations, as individuals we can risk honesty and learning in our conversations with each other. We need to. Having those conversations means engaging on a deep level with other people who have inherent worth and dignity, as we do. Having those conversations is about how we see ourselves and others, how we want to be with each other. Doing better with difficult conversations is about respecting ourselves and each other as part of the interdependent web of all existence. It is about accepting one another even when we disagree. About encouraging our own and others' spiritual growth. It is about the democratic process and working toward justice, equity, and compassion in human relations. In other words, doing better with difficult conversations is putting our UU principles in action.

There is a second reason I wanted to examine how we talk with each other today. Next Sunday we are going to begin a process of re-imagining our church as we move into our future. The sermon next Sunday is entitled, "What Might We Yet Be?" I'm going to present my vision for our church. It is going to be a shorter sermon because right after the service, we're going to have the first of several congregational conversations to explore a vision we might share. As we have these conversations, I hope we will keep in mind the three conversations: the "what should happen" conversation, the "feelings" conversation, and the "identity" conversation. I hope we will be generous in how we listen

and speak with each other. I'm going to try to use the principles of turning difficult conversations into learning conversations every time I talk with anyone.

Sharing my vision next week with you feels a little risky. That's because it may not be everyone's vision. I suspect some of us may want different things for and from our church. The conversations may or may not be difficult. "To reach out for another is to risk exposing our true self."

But the risk is worth it. I believe in our church, in us. Sharing what we want our church to be, what it can be, means we are willing to be real with each other, to talk deeply about what this community means to each of us. Having those conversations means we trust each other. And I do trust us. I hope all of us will share our individual visions with each other. Until we come to a shared vision of what we want this church to become. Because love has no way of being acted on without something truthful to respond to."¹⁹
I'm excited about our future! Blessed be.

Benediction: May we bring who we are, our True Selves, to this church. That will give the rest of us the chance to show up, too. Go in peace.

¹⁹ Mark Nepo, The Book of Awakening, Conari Press, 2000, *Responsibility* March 8, pp. 81-82.

“Diplomacy is the art of saying 'Nice doggie' until you can find a rock.” **Will Rogers**, *US humorist & showman (1879 - 1935)*.

As I mentioned in a previous sermon, I was involved in a car accident about 8 weeks ago. I was not injured and the other driver was not either. My car, however, which I just got back, was a different story. The impact crumpled the front passenger door and part of the front quarter panel. When I took the car into the repair shop, they estimated the car would be repaired in 20 days. That was good, because the insurance policy I have would only pay for a rental car for 20 days.

On the 19th day the shop had had my car, the shop’s service advisor, Dave, called to tell me there was a delay in getting a needed part, and that he’d try to have my car finished in a few days. On the 27th day, I wrote to Dave telling him pretty strongly that I was displeased. On the 29th day my car was in the shop, I wrote again to Dave asking him to set up a meeting for himself, his general manager, the on-site representative for my insurance company, and me. On the 30th day, the shop finally told me I could pick up my car. I said I still wanted the meeting. I was frustrated and upset before I ever walked through the door of the repair shop. I expected a difficult conversation.

I’ll illustrate some errors I made in this conversation with the repair shop. First, I assumed that I knew the truth of what had happened. The repair shop had negligently delayed ordering the needed part. Second, the repair shop was indifferent to my increased charges for the rental car. I assumed that the impact of the shop’s delay on me was what the shop intended. And third, I was fully invested in blaming the shop. It turned out that I was wrong on all counts. The shop explained that they could not have

known the internal part was needed until the car was disassembled. They didn't want my car any longer than I wanted them to have it, were concerned about the extra cost of the rental car, and offered to split those costs with me.

When I talked to the shop, I wanted to appear rational, business-like, no-nonsense. But what I didn't want to say was that I felt they were indifferent to my problems and that they were taking advantage of me. I was wrong about that.

The story I tell myself about myself is that I care about people and treat them fairly. But I don't mean to be taken lightly or cheated. It turns out the shop was just as frustrated as I was and wanted to treat me fairly, not take advantage of me.

I'd like to see us use the principles discussed today in our everyday interactions with each other.