

Call to Worship

*Sometimes when we have walked the streets
Saluted we have been
By guns and drums and cow bells, too
And horns of polished tin.
With warnings, threats, and words severe
They visit us at times
And gladly would they send us off
To Africa's burning climes.*

Words sung by black female students in the Canterbury Female Boarding School in 1833 under the instruction of Prudence Crandall, Quaker Educator. They sang in response to the disapproval of Connecticut residents to the education of blacks in their state.

Sermon - Speaking Our Truth

Rev. Adam Lawrence Dyer/ February 4, 2018

So, as I launch in, I would like to state plainly that I think social media is great. The chief “twit” aside, I believe that the wide variety of ways in which people are now able to connect is an incredible boon to humankind. We are able to communicate across tens of thousands of miles with seemingly limitless numbers of people with about as much effort as it takes to tickle someone and like tickling, for the most part the result includes a positive response. When I think that I maintain contact with friends from halfway across the world who I haven’t seen in many years, I am just blown away. In fact, you might even say I’m tickled.

Social media has also been an incredible benefit to people who are challenged by meeting in-person, whether it is because of physical access or differing communication styles. It has allowed people who would in an earlier time have been shut off or worse, shut away from community to be invited into dialogue and contact.

Social media has also changed the way we engage language. New words, new rhythms and cadences, new priorities and new punctuation are part of the evolution. For us purists (those who are still committed to two spaces after a period) this has been particularly galling. Emoji mock us with every semi-colon wink and asterisk kiss.

Social media is (for now) the apex of the information age and seems poised to dump us squarely in the next “age” which is already being touted as the “imagination age.” There is little possibility of us backtracking or undoing what the information age and specifically social media has brought us, unless someone figures out a way to program all of that capability directly into our brains...

And yet with all of this advancement, only 47% of the world has internet. Out of the 35 countries that I was able to find where there is no internet, 22 of them are on the African continent. “Developing” nations lag far behind the rest of the world in internet access and therefore social media.

And of course, these same nations that have no access are all former European colonies and all people of color. So it is really more correct to say that social media has changed the western and economically westernized world. But I'm getting ahead of myself...

Toward the end of 2015, I decided to step back significantly from social media. I was very concerned that as a minister, it would make me highly vulnerable in a variety of ways. You may notice that if you have been able to find me and friend me on facebook, I may not have friended you back yet. It is not that I'm being rude, but rather, I am still trying to figure out how to manage my social media presence in this new role. I am determined to keep a presence and to be able to share with people through social media, but I want to be sure that however I do it does not contribute to any of what I see as abuse happening in the social media environment. Hence today's message.

Last week, I was asked by a friend to look at a conversation that was taking place in a closed group to which I belong on Facebook. As I started reading through the conversation, which began with a very innocent question, I realized that I was witnessing a slow motion, verbal attack from the person who responded to the question. As more defenders piled on, I had the feeling I was reading the online equivalent of a schoolyard brawl. The original question was fairly thoroughly silenced and the defenders continued to justify and pronounce.

It is not the first time I have seen this behavior online. I have been privy to way too many people who are determined to "speak their truth" or "tell it like it is" with little regard for how their words may land in the world of un-erasable conversation threads. As I witnessed this most recent one, I had to ask myself why this was happening. The people involved are intelligent and usually thoughtful. Why would people be worked up to a level of self-righteousness that would never be tolerated in person? And in that question, I answered my question...because they are not in person. The distance of social media makes it very easy to hide behind manifesto-like language that lets people portray themselves as the lone voice of truth.

I thought briefly of engaging the conversation because I could so easily see the holes in the argument of those who were being defensive; then I thought again. I realized that if I engage in that moment, I would likely add to the fire. I also might be received as “Adam” or I might be received as “The Minister of First Parish”...or both. I do not ever want to abuse the free pulpit I’ve been given to engage in petty squabbling or more importantly, demeaning and defensive language and behavior. So, I turned away from the post and committed to changing the environment that enabled that situation to arise. I am now actively taking direct steps offline to call the people who fostered that moment back into covenant. I also decided to write this sermon that will be recorded and published and will hopefully serve as a cautionary tale to all of us about how social media makes it for us all to fall into abusing the privilege of being able to speak our truth.

This is the blessing and the danger. Social media is an echo chamber. It is the ultimate game of “operator” where one message is communicated at the start and then a completely different message arrives on the other end...at twice the volume. The positive side of that echo chamber is something like hashtag movements...Black Lives Matter and MeToo, both of which used the echo chamber to beautiful effect. But the downside is the concept of “fake news” and coming to grips with the exploitable openings that such echo chambers create.

The media echo chamber is not new. Last week, I wrote a blog post about Martin Luther and the Reformation. My writing was prompted by reading a book called “Brand Luther”. The book describes the incredible impact that Martin Luther had on the world. Not so much in terms of theology, but more in terms of leveraging the technology of his day (printing) to spread a message. The broad publication of Martin Luther’s work including not just the German Language Bible but multiple pamphlets with his thinking, was responsible for what we now call the “Reformation” taking hold. The birth of Protestantism was a direct result of the mass produced written word...16th century social media, being made available to European masses.

Of course, the success of this early echo chamber was built upon there being enough people who could read...

Thinking about the history of literacy, I picked up a book from the library titled *Word by Word: Emancipation and the Act of Writing*. It reveals the stories behind some of the writing of slaves in the United States before emancipation. The book by Christopher Hager details the challenges of deciphering inconsistent spelling and grammar in these letters but also emphasizes how slaves understood the importance of having the ability to put words in one place and have them read and received by someone far away. This is the same basic premise upon which Luther's success was built: sharing words and as a result sharing meaning. Slaves in the United States were almost uniformly prevented from learning to write or read and this is one reason that the research in this book is so compelling. It is also a reminder of what a stark contrast our modern-day echo chamber is with the exclusive and segregated listening room of the 19th century:

Here's a reminder of some of the laws that obstructed literacy for blacks prior to emancipation:

1740 Negro Act - The comprehensive Negro Act of **1740** was passed in South Carolina, during Governor William Bull's time in office, in response to the Stono Rebellion in 1739.

The act made it illegal for enslaved Africans to move abroad, assemble in groups, raise food, earn money, and learn to write (though reading was not proscribed). Additionally, owners were permitted to kill rebellious slaves if necessary. The Act remained in effect until 1865.

1819, Missouri: Prohibited assembling or teaching slaves to read or write

1829, Georgia: Prohibited teaching blacks to read, punished by fine and imprisonment

1832, Alabama and Virginia: Prohibited whites from teaching blacks to read or write, punished by fines and floggings

1833, Georgia: Prohibited blacks from working in reading or writing jobs (via an employment law), and prohibited teaching blacks, punished by fines and whippings (via an anti-literacy law)

In **1833**, Quaker Educator, Prudence Crandall attempted to open a school for black girls in Canterbury Connecticut. The reaction by the state of Connecticut was something call the “Black Law”. Part of it reads as follows:

Black Law of Connecticut (1833) – *An act in addition to an Act entitled "An Act for the admission and settlement of Inhabitants of Towns."*

WHEREAS, attempts have been made to establish literary institutions in this State for the instruction of colored persons belonging to other states and countries, which would tend to the great increase of the colored population of the State, and thereby to the injury of the people: Therefore,

Sec. 1. Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives, in General Assembly convened, That no person shall set up or establish in this State, any school, academy, or literary institution, for the instruction or education of colored persons who are not inhabitants of this State, nor instruct or teach in any school, academy, or literary Institution whatsoever in this State, or harbor. or board, for the purpose of attending or being taught or instructed in any such school, academy or literary institution, any colored person who is not an inhabitant of any town in this state, without the consent, in writing, first obtained of a majority of the civil authority...

Crandall with the help and encouragement of William Lloyd Garrison from Boston was successful in opening the school, but she was brought to court in violation of the black law. Although she persisted and the case was ultimately overturned, she was ultimately forced to recon with the public resistance to her efforts.

A website on the incident describes how...“On the night of September 9, 1834, an angry mob broke in and ransacked the school building. With clubs and iron bars, the mob terrorized the students and broke more than 90 windows. What the Black Law and local ostracism had not been able to accomplish, this mob achieved. Fearing for the girls' safety, Crandall closed the school the following morning.”

The history of literacy driven disenfranchisement in the United States still resonates in the disparities we see in data about who can read and who

cannot today, and yes those disparities follow racial lines with black and Latino populations at double the rates of illiteracy. What was true in the 19th century is still true today: literacy is a primary form of access in our society. Literacy impacts everything from family unity, voting, entry into higher education, etc. It has also been linked directly to health and economic outcomes as well. It follows on that if you do not have access in these other areas, you are likely to be limited in the access you have to social media, which means that in our modern world, you simply have no voice.

Not everyone is going to go out and write a book, but increasingly, the place and the mechanism through which voices are heard and taken seriously is through social media. We watched a president tweet his way to the White House, typos, lies and all. If someone doesn't have access to social media, whether we like it or not, they are going to be left out of the dialogue of progress. What is more, if they cannot read or if their reading level is insufficient to navigate social media or to acquire access to social media, they have no chance of being heard.

But I want to bring this back to the toxic misuse of social media where a "my way or the highway" tone or defensive behavior can too quickly transform this miraculous tool into a bludgeon. This is particularly relevant for those of us who seek to advocate for those who may not have access or who we perceive as not having a voice in public discourse. As Unitarian Universalists, I believe we are called to take an intelligent and just approach to these efforts that avoids the pitfalls of self-righteousness.

We are a covenantal faith. As such, we have our mutual promises to one another to maintain our relationships. Sure, we may share values and agree on principles, but we are also committed to our "independent search for truth and meaning"; we agree to disagree. But the only way this works is if we actively engage in creating and upholding our covenant with one another to do no harm. Most every Unitarian Universalist covenant functions as both a window and a mirror; a megaphone and a microphone; inspiration and expiration. Our covenants allow us to receive respect and room and agency for our own independent selves. But they also ask us to

give respect, room and agency to the independence of others. Balancing the receiving and giving requires humility. Sometimes, we may be in danger of forgetting this last part. If we are always so hell bent on making our point...on *sending* our message out into the world, how are we ever going to know that the message was actually heard unless we can be quiet long enough to hear what is being said back to us. Frankly, sometimes we just need to shut up and listen. I for one would love to experience more of that in social media.

Our education and our literacy is a gift, but in a world where only 47% of that world has access to the internet, social media is still truly a miracle. How dare we who have access and education and literacy take this gift for granted and ever sink to using it for petty self-aggrandizement or worse as a tool of oppression and bullying. How dare we ever let any of our community fall so far out of covenant.

Our ability to communicate the way we do with one another is a gift. Our literacy is not only a gift, but it is a hard won right that we are still fighting for. As communication gets easier and hopefully more accessible to all, it doesn't release us from any of the responsibilities that we have when we are face to face. Let us always speak our truth, but let that truth reflect our commitment to the humility that let's us hear and acknowledge other people's truth as well.

Benediction

Let us leave here today committed to speaking our truth, but also committed to hearing and listening for the truth of others, without commentary or feedback. Remember, it is called social media...not solo media. – Go in peace.