

## SPEAKING TRUTH TO POWER---WITH LOVE

Rev. Kit Ketcham, February 3, 2008

When I was a guidance counselor in Colorado working with young adolescents, one of my concerns was encouraging students to find appropriate help for the problems they faced as they moved from childhood through the teenage years and into young adulthood.

Early adolescence can be fraught with conflict with adults, particularly parents, and often young teens are unwilling or too shy to tell a teacher or counselor about the difficult realities they face.

Sometimes these are commonplace realities---the need to separate from parents and become one's own person rather than a parental clone; the concerns about "am I normal?" as childish bodies change and others' perceptions of those bodies seem a little scary or confusing; the many choices a teen must face as he or she thinks about further education, vocational possibilities, the age-old question of "who am I and what am I doing here?"

And sometimes those realities are too big to handle alone: alcoholic parents, domestic violence, sexual misconduct, suicidal thoughts. Many times youth are uncomfortable telling adults about these problems and more comfortable telling a friend, so peer counseling programs have been a popular approach in many schools.

Peer counseling curricula had been available in our local high schools for several years when my friend Carolee, who taught health education (aka sex ed), and I decided to write a peer counseling curriculum for our older junior high students, 9<sup>th</sup> graders.

Peer counselors, if you are unfamiliar with that concept, are not professional counselors; they are, instead, peers of the group they hope to reach out to. In our case, we were hoping to train our 14 and 15 year olds to listen helpfully to other students, to offer assistance as appropriate and to bring them to adult counselors or parents if the situation warranted it.

Carolee and I decided, once we got our administration's go-ahead, to choose a group of about 15-20 9<sup>th</sup> graders from applications submitted at spring registration time. We interviewed them and looked for students with leadership potential, students who were admired and respected by other kids, not necessarily the most popular kids, the most goody-goody kids, the most academically oriented kids. We admitted some kids that our principal took a dim view of.

But we wanted a diverse group, kids from all peer groups in the school, even the edgy ones thought of as the freaks or the stoners or the skaters. We were full of optimism, even though we knew we were taking on a huge and somewhat risky challenge.

Now, if you think about it, adults have a lot of power over kids. And adults do a lot of telling kids what to do. We do it because we're scared for them, we're a little scared of them, we're a little scared about what the world will be like when we're aged and they are running things. And we have a huge responsibility to guide them on worthy paths. So we tell them what to do----a lot.

And when kids reach adolescence, they often begin to respond negatively to our efforts because they are beginning to be aware of their own power to say no, to choose a different path.

Sometimes they start doing badly in school. Sometimes they get rowdy. Sometimes they act out in self-destructive ways. Sometimes they gang up---against us. Sometimes they close down and refuse to talk to adults or to acknowledge any responsibility for their actions. Sometimes they are compliant on the surface and go underground with their efforts to feel independent and different from their parents. All these are teenage power plays!

Many of those adults who have learned how to get along well with teens and older youth have discovered that one key is to recognize the power they are coming to have and to find ways to address that power with love.

In our peer counseling program one year we had quite a motley crew. Actually, we did every year, but this was a special group. Not only did we have a racially and academically diverse group, we had several young people about whom our principal just shook his head.

“I don’t know what you are thinking, taking on Jamie so-and-so” he said. “That kid isn’t going to do anything but end up in a gang. Sure, he’s irresistible to the girls and can talk teachers into anything, but with his background? Good luck.”

But we took Jamie on just because of who he was. Jamie was going to be a powerful young man someday and we hoped to be able to shape the ways he used his power. And Jamie loved being selected as a peer counselor, learning to listen between the lines, make responsible decisions about what he heard, and be seen as a student leader. Jamie was a good peer counselor---eventually.

Because there was that time, early in the semester, when Jamie, fooling around in the hall before class, chased a girl he liked down the hall and into a classroom. When Miss Shipley, the math teacher, shouted at him, “Jamie, what in the name of heaven are you doing?”, he called back, as he cornered this giggling girl, “I’m peer counseling her!”

That became, shall we say, a teachable moment for Jamie. The principal threatened to pull him out of the class and make him sit in study hall. But we intervened and kept him in class, and Jamie began to blossom. He never became an angel, but he did become a responsible young man.

When I saw the effect our peer counseling class, with its strategies of teaching kids to listen deeply to their friends, to know when to alert an adult about a problem, to be able to mediate a quarrel between students, when I saw the effect this had on our students’ lives, I became passionate about the value of giving kids the tools to address the problems in their lives and in their friends’ lives.

Acknowledging our peer counselors’ power, affirming it, giving it constructive avenues for expression---all these methods, taught through games and role plays and actual experiences of listening deeply to another person, produced remarkable results in our small junior high.

Peer Counseling class was the most sought-after class for 9<sup>th</sup> graders. And every semester, kids learned to use their power with love. Because isn’t that what we’re really talking about? Using power lovingly?

Let’s think about the idea of power. We often use it as a pejorative term: direct and oppressive actions toward a group or individual.

We think of the folly of the war in Iraq and the power of those who declared that war; we think of our own sense of powerlessness when it came to opposing and changing the course of those actions which took us headlong into a very unpopular and wrong conflict.

We think about torture and the power prison guards and interrogators have over suspected terrorists in our foreign prisons. We think about poverty and the economic structure of our society which maintains a poverty class, making it difficult for people to break out of the prison of low income and expensive housing.

Locally, we think of civic issues which pit the powerful over the ordinary citizen, imposing policy decisions without adequate community input. We think of insensitive actions by law officers which profile people stereotypically and unfairly.

In our families, we think of the power of adults over children and how easily it can be misused. And how, in retaliation, children sometimes turn the tables on us and use their less obvious power against us.

We don't often think of the power of the seemingly powerless, and when I was asked by Peggy to speak on the topic "speaking truth to power---with love", the story about our peer counselors of those long years ago popped into my head.

It's not the kind of thing we normally think of when we think of power. But the truth is, we all have power, we all have truth, and we all have love to use as a tool.

Power is not a bad thing. It is how power is used that gives it a bad reputation. "Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Great men are almost always bad men." said the historian and moralist who was known simply as Lord Acton, expressing this opinion in a letter to his friend the Bishop Mandell Creighton in 1887.

We have power over any number of the people in our lives. I trust we do not misuse that power but are careful with it. Any number of people have power over us and we hope for their sensitivity to our needs. We give people power over us through our electoral process, through the contracts we enter, through our relationships with one another. And we receive power from others in the same ways.

When power is misused, when an authority figure is unkind or cruel, we on an individual level want to speak up for ourselves. When a society is unkind or cruel to a group of people, we seethe with indignation and may devise ways of making our objections known.

“Speaking truth to power” has long been a hallmark of the Society of Friends, or Quakers as we know them. History is full of stories of the Quakers’ resistance to the groundswells of patriotic fervor that have swept our nation before each of the conflicts America has entered. For their convictions, Quakers have been jailed, persecuted, and even injured. Yet they persist in their non-violent resistance.

At the heart of Quaker non-violence is their strong commitment to their faith, a faith that is firmly based on the principle that humans are loving beings and that love is a better tool than hate.

What, in our Unitarian Universalist faith, gives us the resources to choose love over hate, to speak the truth to power---in love? I suggest that we know how to do this very well. And I suggest, too, that it is not easy.

Those of us who have been parents or teachers know how hard it is to give children the guidance they need without exerting undue power over them, giving them the freedom to make some choices without allowing them to be hurt.

Children use their power on us all the time, charming us into giving them what they want, hitting us up for something when we are at our most exhausted, playing one parent against another, manipulating situations so that we are not sure what the right thing to do might be. And we are often pushed so hard that we may respond in ways that feel violent, whether physically or verbally. We know how easy it is to feel a need for violence when we are faced with another's power, even that of a child.

I confess that I had these impulses myself, the urge to smack my kid when he talked back, exercising his own power in a way that inflamed me. And when I see some of our elected leaders on the TV screen, it's all I can do to restrain myself (and often I don't) from cussing out the lamebrains who run the country. Their power infuriates me and I respond with anger and a desire for vengeance.

And yet there is a better way. Non-violence as a political and personal strategy is a tried and true way of speaking truth to power---with love. It involves knowing our opponent, understanding what drives our opponent, doing the unexpected, and doing it out of a sense of compassion for our opponent.

In the movie "To Kill a Mockingbird", little Scout Finch, on the steps of the jail with her father who is protecting his client Tom Robinson, pipes up at the moment of highest tension between her father and the mob which has come to lynch Tom.

“Oh, hi, Mr. Cunningham,” she says to a man she recognizes in the mob. “Remember me? I’m Jean Louise Finch. I met you when you came to bring my dad a big sack of nuts the other day. Your boy Walter is in my class at school. He’s a nice boy. Tell him I said hello. And, Mr. Cunningham, I’m sorry if I embarrassed you the other day when you came to our house. I didn’t mean no harm.”

Mr. Cunningham is clearly taken aback by Scout’s friendly greeting and, twisting his hat in his hands, accepts her apology and says, “come on, boys, we don’t belong here, let’s go”. And the mob drifts away. Scout spoke truth to power in love, out of her child’s trusting heart.

Like the Quakers, we UUs have a faith that supports us when we speak truth to power. In our seven Principles, we find strength for this challenge. I’d like to invite you to turn to the back of your O/S and let’s read those principles aloud.

Our commitment to these principles of human attitude and behavior sustain us in our daily lives. Yet it is often hard to put them into concrete actions. Our anger and desire for change are often so strong that we feel paralyzed or helpless or impotent.

In 1961, a Detroit psychologist, Dr. Marshall Rosenberg, hungered to find a way to help people communicate compassionately with one another, believing strongly that human beings are not inherently violent, that they prefer peaceful resolution of conflict, and that violence is not the inevitable outcome of unresolved differences.

Since that time, the idea of Nonviolent Communication or Compassionate Communication has become widespread and is taught to people from all walks of life.

Nonviolent Communication helps us humans express ourselves and hear others by fostering respect, attentiveness and empathy, and teaches how to give from the heart and to encourage others to do the same.

NVC is founded on language and communication skills that enable us to remain human, even under the most trying conditions. These skills have been known and used for centuries and are innate in the human psyche, but violence has often blinded us to their presence in ourselves.

This approach to communication emphasizes compassion as the motivation for action, rather than fear, shame, blame, coercion, threat or punishment. It is not about guilt and manipulation. Those who use these methods find that they diminish defensiveness in others and make it easier to deal with critical, hostile messages without taking them personally or giving in.

This week the Christian world enters the period of Lent, a time of self-examination, repentance for wrongdoing, and making amends through self-disciplines of various kinds. It is useful, when reminded by one of our Unitarian Universalist Sources, to consider the worthiness of this important tradition.

The teacher and prophet Jesus, in his short life, taught the value of compassion and love as the key to the Kingdom of Heaven. Jesus didn't invent love, as some Christians might have you believe, because love has always been part of the human condition; but Jesus did say that acting out of love was more important than acting out of obedience to law.

At this holy time in the year, a time when we await spring with great anticipation, when we consider the events of the past year, when we regret our misdeeds and vow to do better, when we as a congregation face the stress of financial obligations, the heavy work of building our own home, the inevitable disagreements about process or priorities, this would be a good time to consider how we are with one another.

Are we careful with our words? Are we compassionate when we consider the effect of our words on another? Are we respectful of another's time or energy or commitments? Are we honest about our own? Are we able to say what we need without shame or fear?

One of the things we might consider doing, for ourselves and for the larger community, is to sponsor a training in Nonviolent Communication. We have access to trainers right here in Puget Sound. We could offer a huge service to our civic leaders, to our families, to our neighbors, by providing an opportunity to learn how to speak truth to power, in love. Thank you, Peggy, for challenging us with this powerful topic.

Let's pause for a time of silent reflection and prayer.  
Hymn # 95, "There is More Love Somewhere"

BENEDICTION: Our worship service, our time of shaping worth together, is ended, but our service to the world begins again as we leave this place. Let us go in peace, remembering that we have the innate ability to speak truth to power with love. May we dig deep within ourselves to listen carefully and with compassion to each other and to those in power, framing our truth in such a way that it can be heard. And may we consider offering this learning to our larger community, in the hope that love can prevail in our life together. Amen, Shalom, Salaam, and Blessed Be.