

Spending the Allowance

Unitarian Universalist Church of Olinda

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A couple years ago, I mentioned that disclosing to a new acquaintance that I am a minister of religion can lead to... interesting conversations. And a common outcome of this kind of conversation can be a kind of litany of questions about what I am “allowed” to do. These are often questions about what kind of family I can have (or if I can have *any* kind of family), or about what lifestyle I can lead, including what I can eat or drink, or about what I am allowed to say – sometimes people wonder if I can swear.

I’m often amused by this kind of conversation. It’s not that it’s entirely unexpected – there is baggage that comes with religion and the people involved in it – but it strikes me that the question of what is allowed, and of what rules we’re expected to follow, often seems to take a disproportionate amount of attention in comparison to what actually occupies my mind in ministry, or what drew me to this community of faith in the first place.

And it turns out that we *do* have a set of rules, or at least a code of conduct that we pledge to observe. This happens to include *some* firm directives, though it is largely a set of guidelines that outline a set of best practices toward a more responsible ministry.

And if you're still wondering, swearing is not specifically prohibited, though there are some guidelines around appropriate speech, which might often be interpreted as a call to be... judicious when using hard language.

This question of how we use speech has been particularly trendy over the last several years, both in society at large, as well as in the Unitarian Universalist community.

There are times when someone's speech has been harmful to others, and the people who are harmed can often include folks who have been already marginalized by varied systems of oppression. I have seen that when this kind of harmful speech is named, the conversation is often framed as a matter of what people are "allowed" to say, and harmful speech is defended as exercise in free speech.

And it can be true that most kinds of harmful speech are protected by our legal and cultural norms of free speech. It can also be true that naming it for the harms that it does is *also* an exercise in free speech itself. I find that, when framing it as a matter of whether it's allowed or not, it kind of misses the larger point around the value that speech, and how it is used, has on our society, our communities, and our relationships. I also find that, in many cases when people claim that their speech is being disallowed, the people making that claim already have an extensive platform, which they are usually free to continue using.

As a minister of religion, I have been entrusted with a somewhat high-profile platform... sometimes literally, as I do when I stand on the chancel that holds up the pulpit in our building. By definition, my job is largely to say things for people to hear them. I not only have the freedom of speech that most of us enjoy in this country, but I also have, contractually and by tradition, the freedom of the pulpit. From a certain

perspective, this could be interpreted as me being able to say pretty much whatever I want.

But I don't.

It may perhaps surprise some of you that, in my work, a good deal of the thought and time that I put in it, is in fact spent deciding on things that I *won't* say... that I realize I don't want to say, or that perhaps I don't need to say. In other words, I filter my speech.

Now some folks might consider this practice of filtering as *censoring* myself... and depending on how you define or view censorship, that *might* be true. But most of the time, I don't really see it that way – rather, I see it as being disciplined so that my free speech may *also* be – as Buddhist teachings call it – *right* speech... useful speech, helpful speech, responsible speech.

And while this might make the work more challenging, and I may well at times feel hindered by this practice, I actually feel – in the balance – quite liberated. Because even within the constraints that I am held by – often, by which I *choose* to hold myself – I have a great deal of freedom... in fact, the constraints that I accept allow me to have an enduring freedom to say what I feel is necessary.

This works at different levels.

At a merely practical – perhaps even cynical – level, we could say that it's simply a matter of self-interest. It is in my self-interest to watch my speech.

Just as our tradition recognizes and affirms our religious professionals' freedom of the pulpit, it also proclaims a congregation's freedom of the purse. It is, ultimately the congregation which calls a minister, and it is the congregation which... makes decisions on ministerial transitions. And you'll be aware that this isn't just theoretical either, our tradition has ample examples of congregations exercising this prerogative. So, at

a basic level, it may make sense that I watch what I say, lest my speech lead to some harder conversations.

But this particular scenario is not usually what I have in mind when I filter my speech. The kind of consequences that I tend to worry about are much broader, and include considerations that are as much for others' sake as they are for my sake.

Because if I don't watch my speech, and speak irresponsibly, I'm aware that I may hurt someone, or break trust and perhaps lead to the breakdown of relationships, not to mention hinder my ability to lead in this community. There is still an element of self-interest, in that these are not things that I want for myself – and they come with a consideration that it is also against the community's interest.

So, the real reason for a practice of considered speech – “filtering” my speech – is a more essential philosophical and theological concern with how it will impact where I am and who I am with. It is neither entirely selfish nor selfless... it's something I like to think about as “self-full” – a practice that will help me cultivate a more wholesome relationship with all whom I interact with.

And this doesn't mean that I only look to say things that will please... it is my job, contractually and by tradition, to say things that may be challenging or uncomfortable, even if these might seem unpopular in the moment. My covenant is to choose speech that will direct this church toward greater spiritual growth.

And this is where the question shifts from a matter of what I am *allowed* to say, to a question of what makes sense for me to say that will *serve* us better. And when ministry is based on service, being thoughtful about what is said and how it's said – considering how it will *serve* – then speech can be *ministry*.

Now I've spent a lot of time speaking about how this applies to *my* ministry, and that's partly because these are pretty central parts of my profession and my vocation. It's literally my job, as I stand on this platform.

Here's the kicker – this is also part of *your* ministry... it is part of *our shared* ministry.

My friends, in our free and responsible search for truth and meaning, we covenant to enjoy and exercise our access to options, to experiment, and be ready to fail so that we may learn from mistakes or occasionally, as Bob Ross might say, “happy accidents”. We also covenant to practice and perform actions that are considered and considerate, to follow a discipline and a discipleship that invites us to think before acting – while being bold enough not to overthink, lest our actions lose impact. This covenant invites us to employ a measure of self-regulation, of self-evaluation, of self-reflection. That is another practice of accountability.

My friends, this accountability does not mean that every single word has to be correct – accountability does not demand perfection. It is impossible to imagine every single outcome from what we say and how it will impact others. It does mean that when our understanding of our speech is invited to expand in considering others more thoughtfully, we may be open to listen and grow into deeper relationship.

My friends, our covenantal tradition offers space for grace, and it calls us to spiritual growth.

So may it be,
In Solidarity, in covenant, in faith,

Amen

Suggested Hymns:

Opening Hymn #126 Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing

Words: v. 1 Robert Robinson, 1735-1790, adapt.,

~)-| vs. 2-3, Eugene B. Navias, 1928-

Music: John Wyeth, *Repository of Sacred Music, Part II*, 1813

NETTLETON

Hymn #182 O, the Beauty in a Life

~)-| Words: Based on a text by Bishop Toribio Quimada

Music: Traditional Visayan (Filipino) folk tune

QUIMADA Irregular

Closing Hymn #318 We Would Be One

~)-| Words: Samuel Anthony Wright, 1919-

Music: Jean Sibelius, 1865-1957, arr. from *The Hymnal*, 1933, © 1933, renewed 1961 Presbyterian Board of Christian Education

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