

You Have a lot of Chutzpah

a sermon by

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The Humboldt Unitarian Universalist Fellowship

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Last Fall, our Humboldt UU Board of Trustees chose “Healing the Heart of the Fellowship” as our theme for this year. The theme is based on the work of author and educator Parker Palmer – who calls us to practice Five Habits of the Heart. He says if we want to heal our democracy on all levels:

- 1 We must habitually refuse to make enemies out of one another and remember we are all in this together.
- 2 We must habitually listen deeply to “others.”
- 3 We must habitually neither fight nor run away – but deal in positive ways with the tension of our differences.
- 4 We must habitually, in positive ways, speak our own individual truths.
- 5 And we must habitually act in a positive ways as communities.

Those habits are all intertwined, of course – and we’ve talked about four of them already. But this morning we will examine what speaking our own truths in positive ways might mean – what it might demand of us in ongoing self-understanding – and what it might demand of us in courageous self-revelation.

I want to begin by saying that I really appreciate that Palmer understands ‘healing’ and restoring healthy relationship does not mean that we denigrate ourselves or make ourselves doormats.

While we surely must listen to and honor the humanity and needs of other people – we ourselves are also valued parts of the Web of Life. We’re not “chopped liver.” And in the words of our Yiddish speaking friends – we need to have the “chutzpah” to reveal what we truly need and say what we truly believe and know that it’s a valuable part of the truth.

Last Thursday our Social Action Committee screened Robert Reich’s film “Inequality for All” here at the Fellowship.

One of the things that struck me as I watched that film is how reticent most of us are to humbly but honestly reveal our needs.

In the 1970s, Reich pointed out in that film, the health and well-being of the American middle class began to seriously crumble – but workers were hesitant to protest. Union membership, in fact, declined – and workers did everything they could to adjust to injustice instead of standing up and saying “No!”

Families began to send two people instead of just one into the workplace. That wasn't enough of an adjustment – so workers began working longer hours and took on two or three jobs. That wasn't enough either – so workers began to borrow on the equity in their homes. And in the process many workers lost to big banks and big financiers all of their wealth. They began living pay-check to pay-check. Their children – if they went to college – took on huge debt and put themselves in the modern condition of indentured servitude.

To the few who resisted and tried to unionize and organize against this oppression – the big money folks said – “You have a lot of chutzpah to complain! Look at all the comforts of Wall-Mart and Fast Food that we have brought you!!! You rabble rousers are against the American Way of Life!”

Sadly – many of us lulled to sleep by sugar, fat, salt and light beer – have also swallowed the corporate analysis of our current economic situation.

Again – from the film “Inequality for All” – in a scene where workers from Calpine Energy were gathered to talk about company lay-offs – one worker said: “You know, Calpine is a good company. They have to maximize profits – and I'm uneducated and not too smart – so it's my fault I've lost work.”

I am sure that this worker really believed that – and he had the urge to say it. But for me his statement brings up another important part of speaking our own truths.

We have to keep deepening our understanding of ourselves and the world.

Just saying what we think in a given moment – and holding onto it as if it were fixed in cement is not so healing. I'd like, for example, to talk to that self-deprecating worker about where he got the notion that humble working people with basic skills do not have the right to have the work of their hands support themselves and their families.

I'd like to talk to him about his youth – and who might have bullied him – and how he discovered “playing small” and cooperating with bullies kept him safe.

I know about both low self esteem and playing small because it was part of Environment I grew up in. Fundamentalist religion taught me that I was basically evil. Hyper-competitive capitalism taught me that rich people were just better than me. And bully-boys taught me to lay low and not challenge them.

Fortunately, some good teachers, some good psychotherapy, a liberal education and liberal religion in the form of my favorite brand – Unitarian Universalism – taught me some other things.....

Not that my needs are the only needs, or that I deserve more than other people around this hurting globe - But that I am, indeed, a child of the Universe – and no less than the trees and the stars, I have a right to be here.

I am a child of the Universe – and divine providence (in Emerson's words) is speaking a unique little piece of its truth through me – and I need to practice giving voice to it.

Sometimes, I am sorry to say, I don't do that so well.

Several decades ago, when Edie's and my son Josh was in high school, his Friend Shane broke his ankle in a football game. Shane's mom, Joyce, hadn't gotten off work in time for the kickoff – but just as Shane was lying in the center of the field, she arrived.

Edie and I were new in town and didn't know Joyce well – but I knew I needed to go to her and explain what had happened. I hesitated though – and a guy who didn't even know her at all went over and cared for her. I was ashamed.

I vowed then and there NOT to wait when I felt the urge to care for someone even if the situation seemed a little uncertain to me. I've done better a lot of the time since then.

But sharing our truth – or our piece of truth – at a given time is complicated.

Ten years ago in Fresno, Edie and I and a number of other UUs were working to help put together a branch of the Interfaith Alliance. A number of liberal Christian churches were involved – and Jews and Muslims, Buddhists and Mormons, Sikhs and Hindus, Catholics and Baha'i.

The leaders suggested we, as the Interfaith Alliance, weigh in against Proposition 22 which restricted marriage to heterosexual couples – and, of course, I was personally against that measure. I knew the motion for the Interfaith Alliance to stand against Proposition 22 was going to pass – but I knew also, that it put the Mormons, the Muslims and the Roman Catholics in a difficult position – and we, as a group, had not talked about it. Because I knew the interfaith people from those traditions and we shared so many values together – and because we had not processed the motion – I stated my concerns. I said

I am against Prop 22 and I am fully supportive of full human rights for gay and lesbian people – but I am going to abstain from this vote because I don't think we've given ourselves adequate time to hear from our members for whom this public stance might create a problem in their local congregations.

Some of the UUs in the group were really angry with me for abstaining. How could you do that? They asked – and it might, indeed, have been wrong for me as the UU minister in town to abstain at that given time. But the motion passed – and the Alliance held together.

And when I expressed to our gay UU members who were present, how conflicted I felt, they assured me they knew I was a closet homophobe, I hated them and did not support them at all, but they would forgive me and ask me to do their wedding anyway when it became legal.

Speaking our own truths in a positive way is not always a bed of roses. When we're full of confidence and righteousness, we still may not have the whole truth. And when we're conflicted and troubled and we say so – our voice still might be helpful and contribute to the healing.

As fate would have it – the “Readers Write” section in the May edition of “Sun Magazine” is on the theme of “Speaking Up.” I will close with a story shared in that space by Brooke Ervin of Webster, New York.

When she was a junior in high school, her volleyball team made it into the final four round for the New York state championship. Her team was one point away from winning the game. – The opposing team's middle hitter slammed the ball out of bounds and the referees called the game. And it was over, except for one small detail. – Brooke had actually touched the ball on its way out.

Much to the horror of her coach and team mates – she told the referees – they continued the match and her team eventually lost.

“Watching my team mates cry was heart wrenching for me,” Brooke said. “I felt guilty and horrible. I doubted what I had done.”

Then...several weeks later at the mall, a group of girls approached her and said they had been at the game to cheer for the other team and her honesty and true sportsmanship had inspired them and she had their deep respect.

It truly does take a lot of chutzpah for us to stand for ourselves and others in the face of bullying behavior and oppressive economics and social norms that collude to diminish our humanity.

And it truly takes a lot of chutzpah to speak our truths in complex situations where we have conflicting drives within ourselves.

Many in our culture say our best response is to give ourselves to winning at all costs.

But others say, it ultimately doesn't matter if we win or lose – what matters is how we play the game.

My prayer for myself and for all of us – is that we keep growing in our ability to be that honest and true.

Talk about chutzpah?

That takes a lot of chutzpah!!!

PLEASE STAND NOW AS YOU ARE WILLING AND ABLE – AND JOIN IN SINGING
#168 – One More Step.

Closing Words –

God make us ones whose aims will be – not to defend some ancient creed – but to live out the laws of right in every act and word and deed.

God make us ones with steadfast will – patient, courageous, strong and true – with vision clear and mind equipped – Love's will to learn – Love's work to do.

God make us ones with hearts ablaze all truth to love – all wrong to hate....
For this is what will heal our hearts and make our nation truly great.

And as we keep learning to embody these values – may we go in peace...