

White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church

Say All the Words

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FIRST READING *from the book On the Rez by Ian Frazier*

The basketball coaches on the Pine Ridge Reservation know that when Pine Ridge is the visiting team, usually their hosts are courteous, and the players and fans have a good time. But Pine Ridge coaches also know that occasionally at away games their kids will be insulted, their fans will not feel welcome, the host gym will be dense with hostility, and the referees will call fouls on Indian players every chance they get...

In the fall of 1988, the Pine Ridge Lady Thorpes went to Lead [South Dakota] for a game. Getting ready in the locker room, the Pine Ridge girls could hear the din from the fans. They were yelling fake-Indian war cries, a ‘woo-woo-woo’ sound. The usual plan for the pre-game warm-up was for the visiting team to run onto the court in a line, take a lap or two around the floor, shoot some baskets, and then go to their bench at courtside. After that, the home team would come out and do the same, and then the game would begin. Usually the Thorpes lined up for their entry more or less according to height, which meant that senior Doni De Cory, one of the tallest, went first. As the team waited in the hallway leading from the locker room, the heckling got louder. The Lead fans were yelling epithets like ‘squaw’ and ‘gut-eater.’ Some were waving food stamps, a reference to the reservation’s receiving federal aid. Others yelled, ‘Where’s the cheese?’ - the joke being that if Indians were lining up, it must be to get commodity cheese. The Lead high school band had joined in, with fake Indian drumming and a fake-Indian tune.

Doni De Cory looked out the door and told her teammates, ‘I can’t handle this.’ SuAnne quickly offered to go first in her place. SuAnne was a freshman, fourteen years old. She was so eager that Doni became suspicious. ‘Don’t embarrass us,’ Doni told her. SuAnne said, ‘I won’t. I won’t embarrass you.’ Doni gave her the ball, and SuAnne stood first in line.

She came running onto the court dribbling the basketball, with her teammates running behind. On the court, the noise was deafeningly loud. SuAnne went right down the middle, but instead of running a full lap, she suddenly stopped when she got to center court. Her teammates were taken by surprise, and some bumped into one another. SuAnne turned to Doni De Cory and tossed her the ball. Then she stepped into the jump-ball circle at center court, directly in front of Lead’s home team fans. She unbuttoned her warm-up jacket, took it off, draped it over her shoulders, and began to do the Lakota shawl dance. SuAnne knew all the traditional dances – she had competed in many powwows as a little girl – and the dance she chose is a young woman’s dance, graceful and modest and show-offy all at the same time. ‘I couldn’t believe it – she was powwowin’, like, ‘get down!’’ Doni De Cory recalled. ‘And then she started to sing.’ SuAnne began to sing in Lakota, swaying back and forth in the jump-ball circle, doing that shawl dance, using her warm-up jacket for a shawl. The crowd went completely silent. ‘All that stuff the Lead fans were yelling – it was like she reversed it somehow,’ a teammate said. In the sudden quiet, all you could hear was her Lakota song.

SuAnne stopped singing. She stood up, dropped her jacket, took the ball from Doni De Cory, and ran a lap around the court dribbling expertly and fast. The fans began to cheer and applaud. She sprinted to the basket, went up in the air, and laid the ball through the hoop, with the fans cheering loudly now and stomping. Of course, Pine Ridge went on to win the game.

SECOND READING *Kent Keith, 19 years old*

People are often unreasonable, illogical, and self-centered;
Forgive them anyway.

If you are kind, People may accuse you of selfish, ulterior motives;
Be kind anyway.

If you are successful, you will win some false friends and some true enemies;
Succeed anyway.

If you are honest and frank, people may cheat you;
Be honest and frank anyway.

What you spend years building, someone could destroy overnight.
Build anyway.

If you find serenity and happiness, they may be jealous;
Be happy anyway.

The good you do today, people will often forget tomorrow;
Do good anyway.

Give the world the best you have, and it may never be enough;
Give the world the best you've got anyway.

You see, in the final analysis, it is between you and God;
It was never between you and them anyway.

THIRD READING *Colin Kaepernick*

I don't understand what's un-American about fighting for liberty and justice for everybody, for the equality that this country says it stands for. To me, I see it as very patriotic and American to uphold the United States to the standards that it says it lives by. That's something that needs to be addressed.

Say All the Words

A few weeks ago, you may have been shaken, as I was, by the story about workers at the Centers for Disease Control, who quietly advised their colleagues to stop using certain words, in all their communications, reports, grant applications, research publications- seven words they should no longer say. At first the news reported that these seven words had actually been banned by the

Administration – and it matters that so many of us could so easily believe that to be true. But in fact, the workers were self-censoring, and this was somehow even more distressing. They believe that unless they just remove, avoid, redact certain key words from everything they write, their urgent work to promote and protect public health will be perilously undermined and underfunded. These are words without which it's pretty hard to speak about health or public health at all:

- vulnerable
- entitlement
- diversity
- transgender
- fetus
- evidence-based
- science-based

A few weeks ago, one of you sent a note about this. It was actually a note of thanks for the holiday services here, and especially for all the stories (Christmas, Hanukkah, solstice, winter), for telling them truly, and for the music, for singing the carols and songs just as they are, not watered down. She attached an article about the CDC censorship, which in her mind was related, and said, "It's so important, now and always, what we do here: that we tell all the stories. Say all the words."

They are sharp tools, words, and the stories we make of them: sharp tools and fine instruments, blunt weapons, healing balm, revealing or disguising truth, depending on how we wield them. Spoken or unspoken, they can disrupt the known universe. They can ruin everything, or they can bless the world.

From the Latin, "disruptus," and from "disrumpere, to break or burst asunder..."

Disruption sounds loud, raucous, like a classroom of sugared-up third-graders on a Friday afternoon, or a stadium full of frenzied frozen football fans. Disruption is loud and disconcerting; words from the same root include *rupture*, *corrupt*, *bankrupt*, *interrupt*, and *erupt*, like a volcano, or a riot or a rash, or a revolution. Disruption, the shattering of order, sounds jangling - and sometimes it is and it needs to be -and sometimes it is silent. Disruption may be quiet as a prayer, a decision *not* to speak. Sometimes, simply, it's soft-spoken, the persistent plain-speaking of words that must be said.

Which is more disruptive, a whisper or a shout?

A child, a girl, a young woman 14 years old, runs out onto center court, her whole team behind her, pumped to play hard, and that girl just stops. Without warning, she stops, faces the stands of screaming people, stamping their feet in the metal bleachers, spewing hatred and disdain, centuries of fear and violence, a roar of racist mob-slobber falling on her face - and slowly she begins to dance. She starts to sing, in her own language, her other language, quietly at first. This actually happened in Lead, South Dakota, in 1988. She sang ancient words, words not often heard by white people, holy words of beauty, truth and power, and as she sang, the gym went

quiet, the known universe shattered, cracked open right there – and which was more disruptive that night of the big game: her dignity, or the wilding of those white students and their teachers and their parents? What disrupted what? You wonder: what is the right and natural order of things, and what gets in the way of this? When is disruption a sacrament?

One writer says, *In times of widespread chaos and confusion, it has been the duty of more advanced human beings--artists, scientists, clowns and philosophers--to create order. In times such as ours, however, when there is too much order, too much management, too much programming and control, it becomes the people's duty to fling their favorite monkey wrenches into the machinery. To relieve the repression of the human spirit, they must sow ... disruption.*
[Tom Robbins]

Our theme this month is “disruption- the practice of being fully present.” Sometimes it’s just noise and disorderly conduct, and sometimes it is sanctified.

I think of Charlottesville last year, and police surrounding a small circle of clergy who were praying near a statue, who had come to the city pleading for peace. The police menaced them with dogs and mace and armored cars, yelled at them through their bullhorns and arrested them for disturbing the peace, while supremacists marched freely and marauded, with guns and clubs and torches, and a murderous car, and were cited as “fine people” by the President. What disrupted what that day, and what is it about kneeling, in the street, in a gym, on a football field, or anywhere... what is it about prayer... about intention, about speaking truth and being fully present, that so threatens the status quo? What makes some words, some actions, so combustible that everything conspires to shut them down?

I heard a woman on the radio two weeks ago telling a reporter why she’d made a statement against Larry Nassar, the Michigan doctor found guilty of hundreds of counts of sexual abuse. This woman is older than many of the athletes who have testified so publicly; she’s maybe in her forties, a middle school teacher with career, a life, and a secret, ugly trauma that hurt her soul indelibly, that she’d hoped for years was buried now forever. She’d never talked about it. Now she spoke quietly, reluctantly and haltingly, with the kind of authentic bravery that just trembles with fear. Not bravado, but conviction. She said, “I don’t like to make waves, but I heard those girls, those other women speaking, and I knew I couldn’t face my classroom - all these students, young women and young men, children – I knew I couldn’t go in there one more day without having spoken my truth.”

A poet asks,
What would happen if one woman told the truth about her life?
The world would split open

And it has. And it is, and it’s good, even through the pain. Tell all the stories, say all the words.
Trouble the water. Wade in the water, children.

Sometimes disruption is loud and disorderly and completely out of place, and sometimes it’s loud and orderly, and erupts in exactly the right place at exactly the right time. It is like the ice on the lake in late winter, the way it will be in another month (or two), when suddenly one night

you hear it booming out there, cracking, like an explosion, and in the morning it's not one fissure on the surface but a massive web of ruptures, and into every hairline fracture the sun streams in and water flows, and soon the ice is compromised entirely, and then it's gone and you can't quite believe it was ever there at all, that firm, intractable foundation. Sometimes disruption is loud and powerful and appropriate, and sometimes disruption is quiet, devastatingly quiet, like a still, small voice inside you, the voice of reason or the voice of conscience, the voice whispering your worth. Sometimes it's the sound of peace, sinking a deep, deep root into cracked, dry soil, making about as much noise as any root does, down under our feet, under the concrete, silently, steadily, bringing moisture and life and green, good news into the darkest places. Sometimes disruption is sudden, and sometimes it builds for a long, long time. It builds in us and among us for a long, long time, in stories handed down, songs, sacred dances, words – they give voice to what's within and underneath, and when it bursts forth, it's beautiful.

There's a story about Dorothy Day, who was the founder of the Catholic Worker movement in New York City in the 1930's. She established "houses of hospitality," more than 50 soup kitchens and shelters, run by volunteers, many of them homeless themselves and all of them poor; they published a newspaper and dedicated their lives to radical, non-violent Catholic socialist activism. The paper's still in print and the houses are still open, serving soup and kindness without judgement. In the mid-1930's Robert Coles, the famous psychiatrist and writer was an awkward young medical student who wanted to volunteer, so he went to one of the houses on the Lower East Side to present his credentials and apply. He was very shiny, full of earnest idealism and propriety. He wrote, years later,

Dorothy Day was sitting at a table, talking with a woman who was, I quickly realized, drunk, yet determined to carry on a conversation. ... I stood nearby, trying to listen in while not appearing to do so... I found myself increasingly confused by what seemed to be an interminable, essentially absurd exchange taking place between [these] two middle-aged women. When would it end -- the alcoholic ranting and the silent nodding, occasionally interrupted by a brief question, which only served, maddeningly, to wind up the already overtalkative one rather than wind her down? Finally, silence fell upon the room. Dorothy Day asked the woman if she would mind an interruption. She got up and came over to me. She said, "Are you waiting to talk with one of us?"

One of us: with those three words she had cut through layers of self-importance, a lifetime of bourgeois privilege, and scraped the hard bone of pride. With those three words, so quietly and politely spoken, [she revealed what these houses of hospitality were for, actually, and what her entire life was for].

In three words she gave him a sermon, a systematic theology, an ethics and a politics, a worldview, a story, a glimpse of her heart, and soul and intelligence. With those blunt words, she began and ended the interview, disrupting, disordering, disturbing, rearranging his every preconception of poverty and wealth and worth. It messed with his certainty about who exactly was serving whom, and invited him in, *dared him* to enter, a kind of raw, fierce, discordant, and joyful, authentic Christianity that he had never experienced before. Her words, not ironic, not sarcastic, undermined the standing order of assumptions, fractured the known world, shot it

through with light, made things very clear and very simple, and Robert Coles said decades later that this encounter shifted his perception utterly, and he shaped his life and work around it.

We think of righteous disruption, moral disruption, and we think of action and noise, even violence— Jesus in the temple with his whip, enraged, driving out the bankers and the merchants, with their gold coins and their livestock, who had made of sacred space a kind of shopping mall, literally a stock exchange, pandering to wealthy, greedy, well-connected traders. He makes a whip of cords and drives them out, turning upside down their tables. And that was certainly disruption, a righteous disruption, and it's consistent with the miracles, the healings, walking on the water, all these showy tricks that upend the old order. Even much of his speaking – the parables, the preaching, the brave and clever repartee, the banter back and forth with kings and courts – all of this has a kind of brazen quality. But sometimes disruption is quiet, not many words, maybe two or three or none at all, words which don't themselves cause, but in fact reveal, a deeper, more lasting disorder. I think of the radical Jesus and think not only of the temple and whip, but of more subtle disorientations:

Let the children come, he said, even as his handlers tried to chase them all away.

Let this woman come, this sex worker, let her come;

Bring this man close to me, though he's poor and ragged. His child is sick, so let him come. The poor are blessed and the poor in spirit too (which is everyone, at some point);

Forgive these others over here, my tormentors; they have no idea what they're doing.

I think not of Jesus the rabble-rouser, striding around with his preachy pronouncements (as later accounts all painted him), but withdrawing from the crowd and even from his friends a while, seeking solitude and even loneliness to rest and pray and ponder. That also was disruption, to step away from the center and breathe and think, to search for different kinds of language, to be present to a different kind of faithfulness. Spiritual practice is always a disruption. Sabbath (on Sunday or Monday whenever you observe it, even for the shortest time) crashes in to the crazy busyness of all the other hours, all the other days, upends their dominion and resets the agenda. Reading, walking, meditating, praying, running, singing, blessing the meal, all these deliberate gestures, spoken and unspoken, speak a different truth, tell a truer story, about your life and purpose. Tell all the stories. Say all the words, not only those required or expected. Disrupt, when you can, the mindless, mechanical order. Remember who you are and why you are and what this life is for.

*People are often unreasonable, illogical, and self-centered;
Forgive them anyway.*

*If you are kind, People may accuse you of selfish, ulterior motives;
Be kind anyway.*

These lines by Kent Keith are called “The Paradoxical Commandments,” and they are, because nothing in them makes practical sense. They're risky, they're foolish, they're counter-intuitive,

they play fast and loose with convention and the best practices of the market and the boardroom and the bottom line.

*If you are honest and frank, people may cheat you;
Be honest and frank anyway.*

*What you spend years building, someone could destroy overnight;
Build anyway.*

*If you find serenity and happiness, they may be jealous;
Be happy anyway.*

*The good you do today, people will often forget tomorrow;
Do good anyway.*

*Give the world the best you have, and it may never be enough;
Give the world the best you've got anyway.*

*You see, in the final analysis, it is between you and God;
It was never between you and them anyway*

And thus is the known world rearranged, replenished and redeemed.

From the Latin, dis-rumpere, to break or burst asunder...

When I think about disruption, I want to think not only of *rumpere*, the wild rumpus, but also of holy disturbance; not only about dramatic demonstrations, massive protests, actions in the street, but all the daily, deliberate disturbances that open our eyes, soften our hearts, center our intentions, melt our distractions and wear down our denials; not only once-in-a-lifetime or once-in-a-while flashes in the pan, but also something more steady and accessible, as in *Were you waiting to speak with one of us?* A tiny question that holds inside it a mighty work, a way of seeing the world and everyone upon it, holds humility and generosity, holds dignity and contrition and counter-intuitive wisdom, holds hope and hard work and the possibility of making right what's wrong, in small significant ways.

Some of you saw on Friday the dramatic footage of a father in the courtroom in Michigan, where the testimony of women and girls continues. This man's daughters had just spoken, told their story, said the words, about the sexual abuse they'd sustained, and he asked to speak next, as a parent. The judge said yes and he began calmly, but within seconds, he lunged at the defendant, furniture and papers flew, people screamed, three officers leapt up to tackle and subdue him, chaos and confusion reigned, and he was led away in handcuffs. Some time later he was back to stand before the judge himself; he apologized profusely and the judge dismissed him sternly. And I am left convinced again that the real disruption in that courtroom, the holy disturbance in our world, was not the violent, vigilante outburst of this man, however understandably outraged and heartsick he is- but the clear and steady courage of his daughters, and other people's

daughters, saying all the words deliberately, telling all the stories, the stories no one really wants to hear. They are shattering denial and the conspiracy of silence, rupturing all cultural expectations of polite conversation, ladylike behavior, upending our comfortable definitions of shame and acquiescence, power and control. They are disrupting everything, joining their solitary voices, quavering, unwavering, fully present to the task, and world we thought we lived in is cracked open, torn asunder, sanctified, redeemed and blessed with grace.

Tell all the stories.

Say all the words.

It's risky, disruption. People are often unreasonable, illogical and mean. They may accuse you of false motives, and frighten you, disdain you.

Speak anyway.

Be kind, build up, do good anyway.

Dance your sacred dance on the basketball floor.

Sink to your knee on the field, bow your head and say a prayer there, revealing your allegiance to what is true and hard and holy and hopeful. They may not let you play their game anymore – but maybe you don't need to. Disruption is not always spectacular.

There's a song we've heard here many times, written by The Wailin' Jennys:

*This is the sound of one voice
One spirit, one voice
The sound of one who makes a choice - This is the sound of one voice*

*This is the sound of voices two
The sound of me singing with you
Helping each other to make it through - This is the sound of voices two*

*This is the sound of voices three
Singing together in harmony
Surrendering to the mystery - This is the sound of voices three*

*This is the sound of all of us
Singing with love and the will to trust
Leave the rest behind it will turn to dust - This is the sound of all of us*

*This is the sound of one voice
One people, one voice – A song for every one of us...*
