

Right Speech

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“Gentle words, gentle words, what the dew is to the flower, gentle words are to the soul.”

These words, sung by our choir, are from a piece traditionally called one of the “Shaker Humility Songs.” The Shaker people had a rich and complex theology, and part of their theology was that pretty much everything was expressed in music – every part of their worship, everything that they taught, was expressed in music. And Shaker Humility Songs are a rich strain of the music that they used in their worship. They remind people about the different aspects of humility. You’re probably familiar with the tune “Simple Gifts.” It’s another of the Shaker Humility Songs.

Their music, sounding through the centuries, reminds us that speaking gently to one another is a spiritual gift. Their music encourages us to recapture and re-practice the lost art of humility in our lives. Choosing gentle words, choosing to speak in ways that are just and right, is in this framework of practice of humility. Choosing words of love for another rather than words of anger or hatred, words of sarcasm or derision, especially when we feel worked up about something, making that choice to use words of love, puts another person’s needs as equal to, or ahead of, our own. And that is a practice of humility.

Choosing the gentle words asks us to examine our own emotional responses to something that has been said to us or done to us, before we react, before we blurt out the first words that come to our mind, before we say the thing in that tone that really wants to burst forth from us.

The Buddhist concept of Right Speech is one of the foundations of ethical living in Buddhist theology. It’s very much related to the Shaker concept of choosing gentle words. Right Speech is one of the Noble eight-fold path of Buddhism.

If you’re familiar at all with Buddhism you know that they like lists of things – there’s, you know, the Three Jewels and the Five Precepts. Well this is the Noble eight-fold path, and Right Speech is one of those, it’s the third of these practices taught by the Buddha to promote an end to suffering, to free the practitioner from attachments and delusions in our world.

Those eight-fold paths, those practices include the Wisdom paths – paths to increase the wisdom in our spiritual journey of Right View and Right Intention ; the Ethical paths – the paths of ethical living of Right Speech, Right Action and Right Livelihood; and the Mental paths – the paths of Right Effort, Right Mindfulness and Right Concentration – those paths that guide people in their spiritual practice.

Right Speech is included in that group of Ethical living paths, because in Buddhist practice, in Buddhist theology, our words lead to our actions. And so if we choose the words that we speak carefully, we will choose the actions that we do carefully. Right Speech recognizes the power of communication on all aspects of our lives.

Buddhist teacher Thanissaro Bhikkhu writes, “If you can't control your mouth, there's no way you can hope to control your mind.” Bhikkhu also writes that, “Right Speech, explained in negative terms, means avoiding four types of harmful speech: lies (words spoken with the intent of misrepresenting the truth); divisive speech (words spoken with the intent of creating rifts between people); harsh speech (words spoken with the intent of hurting another person's feelings); and idle chatter (words spoken with no purposeful intent at all).”

The precepts of Right Speech are often phrased in the negative – “Don’t do this, don’t speak in this way, avoid these kinds of speech,” - but they can also be phrased in the positive. So seen in the positive way, the practice of Right Speech means telling the truth, it means speaking warmly and gently, and it means talking only when necessary. These things are harder than they sound - telling the truth, speaking warmly and gently, and talking only when necessary.

I believe that the concept of Right Speech is a good one for all of us to explore in our lives, whatever our theology, whether you resonate with traditional Buddhist teachings or not. I think that the teachings of Right Speech should be filtered through whatever your world-view is, translated in whatever way you need. Because I think that they’re good ones – they’re good ways to ground our living and our way of being in the world.

I’m not a Buddhist, but I’ve seen many instances – in ministry and outside of ministry - where relationships and communities have been harmed because of wrong speech. It’s not an unusual institution where gossip and rumors undercut the lives of people and the workings of the institution. Gossip and rumors are wrong speech.

It’s not an unusual community where people talk about one another behind each other’s backs. Talking about someone else behind their back is wrong speech – spreading rumors and gossip – “Have you seen that person?” – that’s wrong speech. It’s not an unusual practice, but it’s not Right Speech. It’s not an unusual community where people bend the truth a little bit to suit whatever purposes that they have in mind. It might be called “little white lies,” but they’re not truth all the same. And little white lies are not Right Speech.

Central to my own theology are relationships between and among people. I believe very firmly that goodness happens in our world when people understand and recognize their relationship and interrelationship with other beings in our universe in every action that we do. I believe that goodness happens in our universe when I ground my action, my every action, in an understanding of the effects of those actions on the people and beings with whom I’m in relationship.

This doesn't necessarily just mean people. In my own theological viewpoint it goes to how I eat, for example, and the ways in which I choose what I eat. I try my very, very best to ground my eating choices in an understanding of how those choices effect my relationship with our environment, with the animals in our world, with the plants in our world, with the atmosphere with which I'm in a relationship, in addition to with the people that I share our planet with, the people that I know and the people that I do not know directly.

Relationship is central to my theology of how we increase goodness in our world. And the ways in which I communicate go directly to how I see myself in relationship with other people and other beings. And if I'm really acting right, if I'm really acting in true consonance with my own values, then every time I open my mouth to speak, I am weighing how what I'm going to say, and how I'm going to say it, will affect all of the relationships that I'm involved with, affect all the people that I'm in relationship with. And that's really hard to do.

It's a real challenge in our world – it's a real challenge to try and make everything you say be that mindful. It's one of the reasons why the Buddha didn't say very much. Maybe it's a lesson. Maybe I should just stop – we can just sing our closing hymn and go home.

It's a challenge to us. And sometimes, communication is harder than it needs to be, especially when we are feeling angry, upset or defensive. Later in the *Tricycle* magazine article from which Marion read earlier, Beth Roth talks about the challenges of right speech as a mother of children, in particular the challenges of right speech with her teenaged son Emilio. She writes:

“About the time Emilio entered sixth grade, a combination of influences, including what he aptly named “raging hormones,” converged at once. Suddenly it was much more difficult for him to listen to what I wanted to say. It became equally difficult for me to tolerate his unwillingness to listen. And of course, the more conflicted our points of view, the more impossible was our communication. The patience, respect, and mutuality we had enjoyed for years disappeared.”

She continues:

“The speaking and listening skills we had so carefully cultivated were replaced by mistrust, impatience and defensiveness. Time after time, I would approach him in what I thought was an open and friendly way, employ what I thought was Right Speech, and find myself face-to-face with a being I barely recognized. Within seconds, I would be left staring at my son's back as he stormed out of the room, arms flailing in the air and a stream of incomprehensible sounds pouring forth from his mouth.” (<http://www.tricycle.com/web-exclusive/family-dharma-right-speech-reconsidered>)

Many parents in the room can relate. Those of us who are not parents are challenged to understand that though Beth Roth talks about her challenge with talking to her teenage son, those

challenges happen talking with all sorts of people, people of all ages, people older than us, people younger than us, people the same age as us, people we're related to, people we barely know. Those challenges exist, because in all sorts of situations sometimes things get said that raise our hackles, things get said that make us defensive, that put us on edge, that make each and every one of us want to flail our arms and turn our backs and storm away muttering incomprehensible things. I know, it happens to me, all the time.

Roth goes on to explain that she and Emilio worked through this together, using the Buddhist concept of Right Speech, including the practice of Right Listening, as her guide. She realized that both she and her son felt attacked and defensive when they tried to talk to one another, that she was trying to use these precepts of Right Speech, and not spending the time doing Right Listening, to understand what it was that she was saying that was raising defensive postures in her son, that was getting him worked up. And he was doing the same thing back to her.

And feeling this way just made them attack one another, and communication became impossible. And so getting over this required mindfulness. It required both of them to sit down and practice mindfulness, to understand how their bodies reacted, how their emotions welled up, how their spirits changed when people said various things to them or around them.

When we are mindful of our own speech, and our body's reactions to the speech of others—our physical reaction, our emotional reaction, our mental reaction—we can short-circuit those impulses that lead to anger, that lead to defensiveness, that lead to frustration, that lead to hatred, that lead to divisiveness, that lead to the harsh speech that comes from all of those feelings. It takes a lot of work.

It takes a lot of work to be that mindful. And it takes mutuality. It takes all parties involved to sit down and want to be that mindful. But it's possible. It's possible. Beth Roth worked things out with her son. They don't always get it perfect. She admits that they have imperfect systems and sometimes they get just as frustrated with one another, but most of the time in their systems they're actually able to communicate, that most of the time they're actually able to hear what each other is saying.

When I was training to be a minister, one of the things that I had to do was spend time working as a chaplain. And one of the reasons why this is required training for Unitarian Universalist ministers is that this is one of the practices that chaplain training teaches you – mindfulness in communication.

As a chaplain it was often my job just to listen to people. And sometimes people said things, people said things that pushed buttons in me, people said things that pushed theological buttons in me, people said things that pushed emotional buttons in me, and they said things that made me want to flail my arms and turn my back and walk out of the room muttering incomprehensible things. It happened more than once, and I would have been a failure as a chaplain if that had

been my reaction. I probably wouldn't have lasted very long. I certainly wouldn't have successfully completed the internship that was required.

And so, I had to cultivate in myself mindfulness – mindfulness that when someone was saying something that pushed my buttons, it wasn't that they were trying to get me riled up. It's the rare patient in the hospital that tries to rile up their chaplain. But rather, it was that I had buttons that were being pushed and I had to recognize what they were, so that when someone inadvertently or on purpose sometimes pushed them, I could short-circuit the response to that button being pushed – I could say “okay, I understand why I'm getting defensive, I understand why I'm getting worked up, and I am going to choose not to get defensive, I'm going to choose not to get worked up in this situation. I am going to respond with compassion. I am going to respond assuming Right Intention to that person who said that thing that is getting me worked up.

I'm going to assume that what they said was not meant in the way that pushed my button, and I'm going to respond with Right Speech. I might have to point something out to them, gently, lovingly. I might have to point out to them that they might want to be more careful the next time they say something like that. But I'm not going to get worked up. I'm not going to break the relationship that we've begun to build just because they said something that I don't like.”

And that was my choice to make – to sit there in the room, to keep engaged in the relationship, to, if necessary, engage in reconciliation of something that had been broken in that relationship, but keep in the relationship. It was my choice to remain mindful, to practice Right Listening, which led to Right Speech, which led to Right Action.

It's a good thing that that's required practice for Unitarian Universalist ministers. I use it almost every day, not always successfully. Not always successfully.

Beth Roth reminds us that we have to fail sometimes in order to teach ourselves to do better. But that doesn't mean that we can't try to do better. We have to fail. We have to not always be successful, because we're human beings. It's who we are. But it doesn't mean we can't try to do better.

“Gentle words, gentle words, what the dew is to the flower, gentle words are to the soul.”

May we renew our intention to develop real and right relationship with all those we are in contact with, relationship that requires effective and productive and right communication. May we resolve to use gentle words with those around us.

May we try always to practice Right Speech, in this community with all of the others we find ourselves coming into contact with. May it be so. Blessed Be.