

SACRED SPEECH

Last Sunday, Michael Dowd visited our congregation and reminded us of the great, wonderful story of evolution. How we all come from star dust... and life on our planet has grown more and more complex through time. What could be more wondrous than this creation story? As Brian Swimme said, “Four billion years ago, earth was molten rock and now it sings opera! You take a great cloud of hydrogen and leave it alone and it becomes rosebushes, giraffes and human beings.”[\[1\]](#)

In the last few days we were treated to the wondrous of the diversity of our earthly creativity... golden, bright red and orange leaves stretching to deep true blue skies. And as we stand on water shores we see the reflection. And to think all this grew out of star dust, water and bacteria. Not as random chance, but as a great surge of ever-unfolding creativity. And he points to us that one of the most remarkable things about human evolution is the ability of us-human creatures to be conscious of our existence ... the fact that we are born and die...the fact that we can reflect on our existence.

Part of the evolving complexity of human life is the evolution of speech. Speech evolved to aid in human beings cooperating with one another. In our culture... in our family and friendship relationships, at work, in the community and certainly in this congregation, speech is the main way that we nurture and damage relationships and community. I know I'm not telling you anything new, when I say it matters what we say. And of course, how we say it can change the meaning or effect of what we say.

This morning, I invite you to join with me in exploring the evolutionary roots of speech and the origins of morality, inherent in human discourse- drawn from the work of Michael Shermer in his book, *The Science of Good and Evil*.[\[2\]](#) Then, we'll use our evolved capacity for reflection to look at what has been learned from the thousands of conversations studied by the Harvard Negotiation Project from their book *Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most*.[\[3\]](#) Then, we'll begin to take a look at the possibilities that speech is sacred when it invites spirit in- based on the work of Donna Schaper, who wrote a book called *Sacred Speech: A Practical Guide for keeping Spirit in Your Speech*. On November 12th in a second sermon on sacred speech, we'll look at some of the liberal theologies about relationship and speech that may enliven our spiritual lives.

The thread throughout these three books is that intention and skill matter. Words trigger thoughts. And thoughts create chemical changes in our bodies. So speech is not something ethereal... words can have the same power as a punch in the gut or a soothing soft touch—and often the memory of words can have a longer lasting effect than either of those physical sensations.

Communication evolved out the need to cooperate... and as we grew more complex in meeting our survival needs, communication grew more complex, too.[\[4\]](#) According to

Michael Shermer in his book, *The Science of Good and Evil*, it all began with “the universal problem found in all primate species- food sharing and its anticipated consequent reciprocity.” In an episode of the old television series, *The Honeymooners*, a conflict arises when two families decide to share the same apartment to save on rent. They are dining together and Alice has just served dinner.

Ralph says to Norton: Hey, when she put two potatoes on the table, one big one and one small one, you immediately took the big one without asking what I wanted.

Norton replies: Well, what would you have done?

Ralph says: I would have taken the small one, of course.

Norton says: You would?

Ralph says: Yes, I would!

Norton says: So what are you complaining about? You got the little one!

Ralph and Norton are of course talking about the Golden Rule, which many of us learned as “do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” This may have been confused a bit in school... my daughter told me at some point... I think she was in second grade that she noticed that there were lots of Golden rules... for example when her school did a special program on fire safety... the “Golden Rule” was “stop, drop and roll” out of the way of fire and smoke.

But that of course is not the Golden rule, Shermer is talking about. He’s talking about the Golden Rule that is the foundation of most human interactions and can be found in “countless texts throughout recorded history and from around the world.” Hillel Ha-Babli “raised the Golden Rule to the ultimate moral principle: Whatsoever you would not want men to do to you, do not do that to them. This is the whole Law. The rest is only explanation.”[\[5\]](#)

Morality developed out of the instinct to survive... a kind of “you scratch my back and I’ll scratch yours.”[\[6\]](#) Shermer says morality evolved in small bands of 100 to 200 people. When groups got larger than 100 to 200, they split apart as a way for greater social discipline and easier conflict resolution. “In small groups, cooperation was regulated through a complex feedback loop of communication between members of the community.”[\[7\]](#) This might explain why people in larger cities get away with being rude, inconsiderate and uncooperative. They are not subject to the usual checks and balances that occur when we see the same people everyday.[\[8\]](#)

A couple of years ago, at Souhegan High School, there were occurrences of vandalism in the school building. I heard the Principle, Ted Hall, said the school had grown so quickly that it was hard to know everyone. As anonymity grew, so grew anonymous behavior- among teachers as well as students. One effective way that Souhegan balances that anonymity is with small groups of students meeting one another along with a teacher advisor for a time every day- for the purpose of connecting with one another- for the purpose of nurturing community.

The fact that anonymity leads to difficult and damaging behavior is why we need to take great care when we use written communication. When we are not actually in the presence of someone we want to communicate with, it is easy to say something damaging and hurtful that we might have tempered if we were in their personal presence and could witness

first hand the effect of our words. E-mail has become an effective way for us to accomplish so much of our work. It creates connections that would not be possible otherwise. Coordinating the work of this community has become easier as we are able to schedule meetings and send proposed agendas, committee reports and minutes to each other quickly. E-mail messages can offer comfort and inspiration. But difficulty sometimes arises when the content of e-mail includes opinions. This of course is just as true with letters and notes sent through the postal service. It is just now that things happen so fast- you type your thoughts, click on send...and your words may have their impact within seconds. We learn all too well, that words alone don't always convey our intended meaning.

Our ability to hurt one another with words is probably related to the instinct to survive- to preserve our identity. You might say it is bred into the human species- just as is the capacity for aggression, violence and war. But human society developed moral systems based on the universal golden rule... initially enforced by religious organizations and later enforced by secular institutions.[\[9\]](#) Shermer says these codified moral systems have truly civilized us, but "Our moral and immoral natures are in delicate balance...we have done well but we can do better."

"In an episode of Star Trek, the Enterprise crew encounters an alien civilization playing a war game that is about to escalate into a full scale war. Captain Kirk tells the alien leaders that war may be resisted.

The Alien says: There can be no peace. Don't you see? We've admitted it to ourselves. We are a killer species. It's instinctive. It's the same with you and the human species."

Captain Kirk replies: All right, its instinctive. But the instinctive can be fought. We are human beings with the blood of a million savage years on our hands, but we can stop it. We can admit that we are killers but we are not going to kill...today. That's all it takes—knowing that you're not going to kill... today."[\[10\]](#)

And so it is with verbal communication. Maybe it is not as black and white as to kill and not to kill. But communicating in a way that nurtures each other is possible... with a decision to be conscious of our communication. I like the Buddhist concept of "skillful means." When we feel discouraged about the way we've communicated with another... it may be helpful to think of it as less than skillful rather than "I am a bad person."

We usually find ourselves less skillful when dealing with tough problems. In this room we may all be privileged enough not be arguing about who gets the biggest potato. I hope that we all have enough food to survive. If you don't, please ask me or others on our Pastoral Care Network for help... we are lucky enough to have abundance to share.

However, we may be just aggressive about guarding our identity as we might otherwise be about grabbing enough food to live. The authors from the Harvard Negotiation Project who wrote the book *Difficult Conversations* offer some ways to deal creatively with difficult problems in a way that treats "people with decency and integrity."[\[11\]](#) Their core message is to turn our difficult conversations into learning conversations- to shift from thinking we know it all to a stance of curiosity.

The first step is to recognize that each difficult conversation is really three conversations. First, every difficult conversation includes the "What happened?" conversation-

there is disagreement about what has happened or should happen. Second, “every difficult conversation also asks and answers questions about feelings. Are my feelings valid? Appropriate? ...What do I do with the other person’s feelings?” Third, every difficult conversation includes the “Identity conversation”...the “conversation we each have with ourselves about what the situation means to us. We have an internal debate about whether this means we are competent or incompetent, a good person or bad, worthy of love or unlovable. What impact might the conversation have on our self-image and self-esteem, our future or our well-being?”[\[12\]](#) What does this say about me?[\[13\]](#)

There are assumptions that undermine our communication- like, “I am right and you are wrong.” It is wiser not to assume that we know the intention behind a comment or remark. It is more constructive to realize that as strong as the impact of someone’s words are- we cause more problems when we assume we know what the intention is... particularly, if we are assuming there is mal-intent. A third mistake is focusing on who is to blame for the difficulty. The authors refer to this as “the blame frame.” A way to get out of the blame frame is to distinguish blame from contribution. Blame is about judging and looks backward. Contribution is about understanding and looks forward. Instead of blaming, ask “What did each of us do to get ourselves into this mess?” Once you’ve looked at the contribution system, the second question is “What can we do about it as we go forward?”[\[14\]](#)

The key to moving forward constructively is to shift from these destructive assumptions to a learning stance. “Stop arguing about who’s right and explore each other’s stories.”[\[15\]](#) “Move from certainty to curiosity.”[\[16\]](#)

Honestly exploring our own feelings also underlies healthy communication. Our feelings are triggered by our thoughts... so it is important to notice what thoughts trigger which feelings. And it is important to share feelings carefully- without judging or attributing blame. An easy reminder is to say “I feel...” and then see if it is really a feeling you are expressing or a thought. In your conversation, be careful not to jump right to problem solving without acknowledging feelings first.[\[17\]](#)

As I said before, difficult conversations threaten our identity, as if our identity were a basic need of survival such as food. While each of us has unique aspects to our identity... there are probably three underlying identities that are challenged in difficult conversations: Am I competent?... Am I a good person? ...Am I worthy of love? The biggest factor contributing to a vulnerable identity, is “all-or-nothing” thinking. In other words, I am either competent or incompetent... good or evil... worthy of love or not. The authors say that “the primary peril of this kind of “all or nothing” thinking is that it leaves our identity extremely unstable, making us hypersensitive to feedback.”[\[18\]](#) They advise complexifying your identity. They say, “as for everyone, what is true about you is going to be a mix of good and bad behavior, noble and less noble intentions, and wise and unwise choices you’ve made along the way.” There are three things to accept about yourself. First... you will make mistakes. Second, your intentions are complex. Third, you have contributed to the problem.[\[19\]](#)

Again, the stance of curiosity is important... and a key ingredient, of course, is listening... Listening transforms conversations. And listening to another, helps them listen to you.

Donna Schaper calls speech that encompasses these attributes “sacred speech”. She says, “Sacred speech has at least the following qualities. It opens doors because it is not afraid to open them. It takes risks because it is not afraid of the “other”, even the “other” who speaks

another way. It contains more love than fear. It is neither fight nor flight, the normal modes of self-defense. Instead, it is aware of its protection as a creature of God and has plenty of boundaries, sufficient to habituate love as behavior. Even though sacred speech is good and virtuous... it is not proud. It is creaturely. The sacred art of speech is less a big thing than it is a good thing.”[\[20\]](#)

May each of us be encouraged and inspired to see the holy possibilities of curiosity and self-reflection in our conversations. May a love informed by the wisdom we’ve shared today guide us today and in all the days to come. So may it be.

[\[1\]](#) Michael Dowd. Workshop at Unitarian Universalist Congregation in Milford, October 8, 2006.

[\[2\]](#) Michael Shermer. *The Science of Good and Evil*. New York: Henry Holt, 2004.

[\[3\]](#) Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton, Sheila Heen of the Harvard Negotiation Project. *Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most*. New York: Penguin, 1999.

[\[4\]](#) Michael Dowd. Workshop at Unitarian Universalist Congregation in Milford, October 8, 2006.

[\[5\]](#) Michael Shermer. *The Science of Good and Evil*. New York: Henry Holt, 2004. Quotes and paraphrase and recounting of The Honeymooners episode.

[\[6\]](#) Michael Shermer. *The Science of Good and Evil*. New York: Henry Holt, 2004.

[\[7\]](#) Shermer, p. 42.

[\[8\]](#) Shermer, p. 43.

[\[9\]](#) Shermer, p. 223.

[\[10\]](#) Shermer, p. 223-224. quotes and paraphrase.

[11] Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton, Sheila Heen of the Harvard Negotiation Project. *Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most*. New York: Penguin, 1999. quotes and paraphrasing. Page xviii.

[12] Stone, et. al., p. 8.

[13] Stone, et. al., p. 14.

[14] Stone, et. al., p. 60.

[15] Stone, et. al, p. 25.

[16] Stone, et. al, p. 37.

[17] Stone, et. al, p. 96-106.

[18] Stone, et. al, p. 112, 114,.

[19] Stone, et. al, p. 120.

[20] Donna Schaper. *Sacred Speech*. Woodstock, VT: SkyLight Paths Publishing, 2003. Page 7.