



Speaking with One's Voice

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11 APR 2010

READING

This morning's reading is from 1859. Penned by John Stuart Mills, an English philosopher and member of British parliament, this adaptation of his renowned essay called "On Liberty" presents Mills' thoughts on the freedom of the individual in the context of democracy.

Protection against the tyranny of the magistrate is not enough; there needs to also be:

- *protection against the tyranny of the prevailing opinion,*
- *protection against the tendency of society to impose its own ideas and practices as rules of conduct on those who dissent from them,*
- *and protection against any attempt to compel people to fashion themselves upon a model of its own.*

There is a limit to the legitimate interference of collective opinion with individual independence. To find that limit, and maintain it against encroachment, is as indispensable to a good condition of human affairs as protection against political authoritarianism.

Over himself, over his own body and mind, the individual is sovereign.

SERMON

Boards of Unitarian Congregations, including this one, are comprised of Trustees charged with managing the institution's finances, bearing witness to resolutions, and ensuring the community is healthy and vibrant. Formally, our Board – and more precisely the President – is the voice of our organization. Of course, to be effective, the Board must listen to the Congregation Members. This means dealing with letters like this (and I read this with the permission of the author):

There is a growing sentiment among the Religious Education families that First is not visible enough as being "family welcoming". We believe the Board needs to be proactive to establish a clear statement that First is a safe spiritual haven for all. To that end, 50 of the 80 member families who have children have signed a petition advocating that First mount an 8 metre bronze statue of a man and woman holding a child over their heads as a symbol that

"family", "education" and spiritual growth are respected and treasured within our congregation.

These 50 families have also pledged over \$37,000 to create the sculpture. A further \$50,000 has been offered by Kellogs to sponsor the "Kellogs family spirit statue" to appear outside our front door, and be pictured on cereal boxes in October.

Yours in faith, Helen I*, Property Convenor, May, 2002

Now, when I accepted the invite to be on the Board and the challenge to be President, it was because I felt the experience would deepen my spiritual connection and commitment to this community. I would need to learn to work with all of you. And now a third of you want a bronze statue? [PAUSE]

Well, I dutifully brought this issue to a Board meeting where a very stimulating discussion transpired.

Financial policies, Corporate sponsorship, a heterosexual family profile; And does this proposal need Congregation approval, or can the Board decide?

OK, after a half hour of passionate debate – with Board members starting to dig in with their positions – I confessed the letter was fake. I was using the letter only to *teach the democratic process* the Board would use to resolve the many difficult issues we were likely to encounter over the upcoming year.

I thought the exercise was a success. But the overwhelming response, expressed most elegantly by Bill G*, was that the Board would not work with me if I kept this nonsense up.

This was my introduction to Bill. For 2 years we would work together on the Board to manage the affairs of the Congregation. Bill was not shy to voice his insight into the important implications of the decisions we had to make, the relevant challenges hidden in the details, his understanding of good governance, and quite simply – his perspective.

Bill's periodic dissent would clarify my understanding of what healthy, civilized debate is – and how we all benefit as a result. For 2 years he was the most difficult member of the Board for me to reach consensus with – but I wouldn't trade that for anything.

Perhaps you also have a colleague or friend in this Congregation, or another institution that you belong to, that pushes you to better decisions – or furthers your spiritual search? Do they know what they mean to you? [PAUSE]

That's the first story. I have a few more to illustrate the valuable yet delicate balance that exists between the Board and Congregation. The stories draw on how we make decisions based on our current interpretation of our principles:

- the dignity of every person
- our free and responsible search
- and, in particular, our use of the democratic process

For the second story, let me roll the clock forward a year to First's Annual General Meeting. It's May 2003, and the issue on the table: should we sever our ties to the American Unitarian denomination organization – the UUA – and align, instead, with the newly independent Canadian Unitarian Council – the CUC. Seems like a no-brainer now but back in 2003 it wasn't so obvious. As one of Canada's 3 largest congregations we needed to make our voice heard, demonstrate leadership, and show commitment to a Canadian future.

For me, the process took 1.5 years to unfold, starting with the 2002 CUC conference in Kelowna. There, delegates voted unanimously to establish the CUC as separate from the UUA. After that, I:

- Brought the idea that First should also sever ties with the UUA back from Kelowna to the Board.
- Prepared 10 pages of objective reasons both for and against such an initiative.
- Outlined the process this issue needed to follow to become real.
- Wrote the resolution.
- Chaired debates at the Board.
- And spent months educating the Congregation of the implications of the decision and the Board's collective perspective.

OK, lots of process talk. I know. But stay with me as we now go to the meeting. I was chair, Bill was at the front with me as our Parliamentarian to ensure we follow proper process. The formal resolution aligning our relationship with the CUC using language suitable for amending our Bylaws was read aloud to about 100 members. A summary of the material was presented and some casual debate and requests for clarification ensued.

Pretty standard stuff. But imagine my surprise when I looked up to see Bill at the mic preparing to object to the Board endorsed motion. I've got one second to decide what to do. [PAUSE]

Isn't the Board supposed to "speak with one voice"? Shouldn't Bill and I have the same message for everyone? Is this a failure in our relationship?

[PAUSE] Well, Bill temporarily relinquished his Parliamentarian role in order to speak as a member. I considered muzzling him and calling him out-of-order to avoid the confrontation, but I chose to let him speak and prepared to channel the energy that was building in the room. What followed was a transformative experience for me. One of those AH HA moments.

Bill voiced a personal opposing view to the one put forward by the Board. In the spirit of a free exchange of ideas and our democratic principles, Bill spoke with "his voice". I believe that Bill wanted to help members with the integrity of their decision when it came time for the vote. Bill offered us a spiritual gift – visualization for members to "see" both sides of the argument acted out. For anyone in the audience who may have reservations about the motion, Bill demonstrated support, hopefully, to help draw them to also speak out or vote against the resolution comfortably. Bill was challenging what is sometimes called the "tyranny of the majority".

But this story doesn't stop there.

Next up to the mic to speak in favour of the motion was our former minister, Donna MR*.

Now, I have incredible respect for Donna and how she helped and inspired me during her ministry. But that's the point. The relationship and position that Ministers have with the general Membership give them lots of influence. Is it fair to let Donna speak?

Well, technically, Ministers are members, just like you and me, so she is allowed to speak, and I let her. And we got the complete package! Do you remember the high pitched voice, the flailing hands? [You do don't you!] Now double the intensity. No, triple it. And throw in a red face and flying hair.

What Bill and Donna illustrated was the sometimes-ugly reality of running a Congregation: that important decisions need to be made that will impact and represent our collective self – and that the decision process is not always easy. This was a slice of Congregational life. This was the Congregation at work. Such is the integrity of our institution.

When the dust settled I was actually relieved that the vote was not unanimous. Collectively, we had critically considered and cared for the issue. As Mark, our other minister, once told me, unanimous resolutions without debate are boring. This was not boring.

And the story doesn't stop there.

Next Board meeting – OK no bronze statues – but we do have a motion requiring Board members to "speak with one voice" once resolutions have been established. This is where Bill became animated. He passionately argued that if being on the Board meant he could no longer speak as a Member, then he would resign the Board immediately. Bill, Donna, small room, red faces. You get the picture.

But by then I had also discovered that such a motion was a misuse of our Carver policy governance model. Board members are required to "speak with one voice" ONLY on matters that pertain to staff (Jane, Anna, Dallas, . . .). Otherwise, Board members can disagree and they can publicly express their dissent before and after issues have been voted on.

The Board voted against the motion – and not just because we didn't want Bill to take his marbles and go home. It was the right thing to do. At Toronto First, Board members are free to speak.

But the story doesn't stop there – one more chapter.

Two years later, May 2005, I am a delegate attending the business meeting of Canadian Unitarian Council's Annual General Meeting in Hamilton. To my surprise, the following motion was on the floor [You know what's coming, don't you? Here is a simplified version]:

Recalling that our UU principles uphold the inherent worth and dignity of every person, and the right of conscience and use of the democratic process within our congregations . . . The CUC Resolves to . . . require Board members to speak with one voice, once decisions have been taken.

[PAUSE]

The minutes incorrectly stated "The Resolution passed unanimously" for I know at least one person voted against it. But my allotted two minutes at the CON mic was not enough for me to sway the sea of glass-eyed delegates when I explained the virtue of a "Bill experience" and the abuse of Carver. Of course, I respect the decision and the democratic process that defeated me, but I continue to work with the CUC on ways to engage Board in the debates.

Can examples from history give us other perspectives on democracy and "Freedom of Speech"?

- The 1982 Canadian Constitution guarantees "Freedom of Speech" unless the speech incites harmful acts.
- The Universal Declaration of Human Rights of the United Nations – written by a Canadian over 60 years ago, prescribes that "everyone has the right . . . to hold opinions . . . and to seek and receive important information and ideas."
- And the First Amendment to the US Constitution, ratified in 1791 after 20 years of individual state bills, secured Free Speech at the same time as *Freedom From* and *Freedom For* religion. Fitting, isn't it?

How does "Freedom of Speech" and Democracy fit into the institutions of your life?
[PAUSE]

I leave you with one last story.

The announcement: Edith B* was stepping down as First's Archivist. It read something like "I am retiring from a job I have loved and a service I have been proud to perform." There was the usual accolade deserved by someone who has contributed so much. For many this announcement was noted with sadness that our facility would no longer benefit from her determination and efficiency. For me, it also meant there was now a deadline. Monday, June 9, 2008.

The stack of papers and personal notebooks that needed to be organized was over a metre high. It had been collecting dust in my home office for over 5 years. So, the Sunday evening before the deadline I went through everything. I wanted to know, after half a decade – *did any of this stuff still matter?*

Board minutes, personal notes, memos, printed e-mails, reference material, legal letters, and so on. Lots of listening. Lots of dialogue.

The meetings with Keith, Virginia and Janine where we established the mathematical model to guide our budget strategy. The choir consultations. The 9/11 Refugee family endorsement. The 2 page letter from long time member Michiomi and my 2 page response. His 3 page reply to me and my 7 page response to that. My very

public debate with Calvin D* over the 2004 budget where we took up the cause of Dream vs Discipline; Imagination vs Management; and Congregation rediscovery vs Cost cutting. The Board deliberations. The operational planning lunches with Ken, Nancy and Jane. The Safe Steps program to protect our vulnerable. The credo from now-deceased Board member Fox H*.

Lots of listening. But, Edith had made it very clear to me during my time on the Board that while I was free to speak and govern, everything I write, say, and e-mail in my capacity as President *belonged* to First and not to me. [PAUSE]

She knew about the metre high stack of paper – and she knew she was supposed to have it. So, 10:00 Monday morning I'm in the basement under the narthex. Everything I have goes into Edith's last box number 502.09.78 with a list of contents, and labeled "President 2001-2004". With a smile, Edith tells me "Scribbled notes on agendas are juicier than sanitized minutes; they are the true colours of Congregation Life. Personal reflections are important. After all, we are in the *business of people.*"

Boxed up is just a slice of *Congregational Life*, the candid record of my Board days where I had the privilege to put our democratic principles into practice while ensuring there was room for genuine dissent. I had grown to understand our principles far more intimately than if I had stayed an observer. The Board engagement had become a spiritual experience – Speaking with one's voice.

() Members full names are suppressed in this electronic version – but were read aloud at service.*

CLOSING

As you head out for your week take time to think about the institutions that are important to you, and your role in evolving them based on your current understanding of our principles.

I leave you with a quote from about 1820 by Thomas Jefferson, considered by many to have Unitarian leanings.

". . . Laws and institutions must go hand in hand with the progress of the human mind. As [the mind] becomes more developed, more enlightened, as new discoveries are made, new truths disclosed, and manners and opinions change with the change of circumstances; institutions must advance also, and keep pace with the times."

"[And] I willingly acquiesce in the institutions of my country, perfect or imperfect; and think it a duty to leave the modifications [of the institutions] to those who are to live under them, and are to participate of the good or evil they may produce. . . . "