

25 September 2016

We're going to start with a very short song, and I'll explain why in a moment. (sing Ubi Caritas 2ce)

The words are "Where there is care and love, there is God" or in my language, "When care and love are present, a special space has been created."

It's this idea of creating new, deliberately wholesome, spaces with words that I'd like to explore. I was inspired to think about this when I encountered Krista Tippett. Krista delivered the main event, called the Ware Lecture, at this year's General Assembly, the annual gathering of North American UUs. I watched the video of her speech and subsequently read her newest book, Becoming Wise: An Inquiry into the Mystery and Art of Living, and I started listening to her podcasts.

(1) This talk is intended to be a meditation on how to open new conversational spaces rather than shrink our world with polarized and polarizing language.

(2) It's about caring for people more than about issues.

(3) It's about the relationship between public discourse and how we behave with and speak to each other, especially on fraught topics.

To ground us in the UU principles, I intend to hew to the 3rd Principle: Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations; and to the 4th Principle: A free and responsible search for truth and meaning.

Some background about Krista Tippett and her work:

From Penguin (publisher of her latest book)

(<http://www.penguin.com/book/becoming-wise-by-krista-tippett/9781594206801>):

Peabody Award-winning broadcaster and National Humanities Medalist Krista Tippett has interviewed the most extraordinary voices examining the great questions of meaning for our time. The heart of her work on her national public radio program and podcast, *On Being*, has been to shine a light on people whose insights kindle in us a sense of wonder and courage. Scientists in a variety of fields; theologians from an array of faiths; poets,

activists, and many others have all opened themselves up to Tippet's compassionate yet searching conversation.

The open questions and challenges of our time are intimate and civilizational all at once, Tippet says – definitions of when life begins and when death happens, of the meaning of community and family and identity, of our relationships to technology and through technology. The wisdom we seek emerges through the raw materials of the everyday. And the enduring question of what it means to be human has now become inextricable from the question of who we are to each other.
(end quote)

Krista seeks out the most interesting and constructive people in religion, politics, sociology, academia, the arts, science and elsewhere. These are, for the most part, not people we read about in the popular press. But they are all people who have made and continue to make dramatic and beneficial differences in many peoples' lives.

One interesting fact about Krista is that she believes a new Axial Age, a worldwide shift in the nature of consciousness, is upon us and is up to us.

(from <https://www.udemy.com/krista-tippet-on-the-art-of-conversation/>)

Our political debates, newspaper headlines, and internet comments are all too often stripped of nuance and a sense of shared humanity. Too many public conversations are stuck in polarized language of confrontation and certainty. We need new ways to foster dialogue with people across lines of religion, politics, ethnicity, and experience.

One powerful common denominator of the lessons imparted to Tippet (by her interviewees) is the gift of presence, of the exhilaration of engagement with life for its own sake, not as a means to an end. But presence does not mean passivity or acceptance of the status quo. Indeed Tippet and her teachers are people whose work meets, and often drives, powerful forces of change alive in the world today. In the end, perhaps the greatest blessing conveyed by the lessons of spiritual genius Tippet harvests in *Becoming Wise* is the strength to meet the world where it really is, and then to make it better.

Krista models a conversational style that leads to growth, to the breaking down of barriers between and within people. Real growth can only happen if we are open to different points of view, to better understanding people who are not like ourselves.

We can learn to slow down and to listen. To embrace ambiguity. To find and stay with the difficult moments where real wisdom lies.

One of the conversations in *Becoming Wise* is with Frances Kissling, a thinker steeped in the particular context of reproductive rights. Kissling says, “The pressure of coming to agreement works against really understanding each other. And we don’t understand each other.” (paraphrased) We call each other names and demonize each other. So start with this idea, that there are some people –not all- who see some benefit in learning **why** the other thinks the way they do.

We’re not talking about “getting on the same page or finding common ground”. We want to learn to acknowledge what is good in the position of the person we disagree with; to have the courage to be vulnerable in front of those we passionately disagree with. We don’t have the answers to the problem of abortion in America – we have to admit that we don’t have a solution.

We need a crack in the middle where there are some people on both sides of an issue who **ABSOLUTELY REFUSE TO SEE THE OTHER AS EVIL**. It’s much easier to preach to the choir than listen to people who disagree with you. But the choir is already there; the choir doesn’t need us.

(end of paraphrased words of Frances Kissling)

Krista: The crack in the middle where people on both sides absolutely refuse to see the other as evil – this is where I want to live and what I want to widen.

There’s no more pressing realm where words are more starkly a cause of division, and more softly a source of healing, than in our reckoning with the natural world. There are fewer and fewer people alive on any continent who do not have a direct experience of environmental volatility. Yet our only sustained public discourse is a pitched battle around “climate change” – a battle that has real consequences but which is, nevertheless, a distraction. The non-strident voices are not in the news, but they exist in many corners. E.g. in the Hebrew bible (ref Ellen Davis,

professor of Divinity) has language about care for the land in nearly every text.

Lynn:

We find comfort in being sure of our position, we like to be right, we like to feel safe in our rightness. We imagine we can persuade others (maybe everyone) that we are right and get them to validate our position. But this is not the real world. In the real world people have different experience, different sensitivities, different dispositions, motivations, and inclinations. Most people, given supportive circumstances, want to be kind and morally upright – but we don't control our surrounding circumstances. We only see the options and choices we ourselves are faced with. How can we understand the black policeman who himself was arrested for something he didn't do when he was younger? We have to listen. Listen with presence, with all our receptivity and wisdom and care.

Poet Elizabeth Alexander – “Are we not of interest to each other?”
Can we care about each other – every person -- more than we care about being right?

Because we are surrounded with media inputs that are almost exclusively polarized and polarizing, it is easy to go along with that background noise, to adapt our personal interactions to that model.

[show Leunig slide]

But we can resist the tide. We can strengthen our filters so we are not inundated with nonsense. We can deliberately expose ourselves to facts we don't like and to people we may not agree with, but who are thoughtful and sincere. We can purposefully reach out from our comfortable information bubbles to those different from us. We can create a safe space within which to express opposing points of view, and perhaps come to understand the humanity of someone apparently unlike ourselves.

We choose our own tribes. BUUF can be one of our tribes where the polarization is set aside, where we practice listening respectfully to each other without needing to agree, without needing to reach a quick resolution, where we can be present in an open field of knowing that there is much we don't know. In this way, we can uplift each other and support each others' spiritual growth.