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 Arlington Street Church
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Right Speech

The woman seated next to me on a flight home from Arizona earlier this month propped up her iPhone on her tray table and glued herself to the news for the entire time we were in the air — almost five uninterrupted hours. I felt a little sick-at-heart for her, but I also understand the addiction to the news cycle — especially speculation about the 2020 election. As of today, fifteen contenders have thrown their hats into the ring to be the next president of the United States, and I'm all about discussing — endlessly — who the best prospect is for the next occupant of the White House.

That said, I read something about six months ago that's really stayed with me, inspiring today's reflection. Someone said — and I'm sorry I don't know who to credit — that it's so important now, more than ever, that we not disparage anyone who's running. We can compare, we can argue the fine and not-so-fine points, but we needn't demean anyone — demean: “to cause a severe loss in the dignity of and respect for someone.” And not only should we not disparage or demean, but, when the primaries are behind us, the smoke clears, and one person emerges victorious, even if it means holding our nose, we line up behind the candidate representing our party (whichever party that is) and do what we can to help make them the winner.

I find this directive compelling. This morning, I want to dive in to the spiritual practice of Right Speech, which invites us to speak in a way that we can answer Yes to these four questions:

Is it true?

Is it kind?

Is it necessary?

Does it improve upon silence?

Right Speech is one of Buddhism's Five Precepts for ethical conduct; the other four are protecting life and not killing; taking only what is freely offered and not stealing; using our sexual energy in ways that don't harm ourselves or others;

and refraining from the use of intoxicants to the point that they cloud the mind. The Buddha taught that these precepts are the foundation of our spiritual lives; to undertake the practice of these Five Precepts, also known as the Five Gifts, is to offer a gift to others and to ourselves: the gift of freedom from fear, hostility, and oppression.¹

It's important to understand that the “Right” of “Right Speech” is not a moral judgment. Some people say Wise Speech or Virtuous Speech is a better translation. The point is that we're talking about that which leads to happiness — for others, and for ourselves.²

The Buddha was precise in his definition of Right Speech: abstinence from false speech, malicious speech, harsh speech, and from idle chatter.” So ... not lying; not using our words to sow discord; not swearing or using a cynical, hostile, or raised voice; and not gossiping. Or, reframed in the positive: Speak only what is true, in ways that promote harmony, with beautiful words in a gentle voice. Pay attention! Is there a kinder way to say what we're about to say? Is our purpose wholesome? Remember regret! Is silence the better choice?

On a good day, we embellish, exaggerate, lie; use harsh words and speak aggressively; speak out of turn; and engage in useless banter. This is not an easy spiritual practice! Right Speech asks us to note what we are about to say and how we're going to say it before we say it, and to restrain our speech in moments of anger or confusion. As we get better at it, we can see how unskillful speech churns up our minds, creates agitation in our bodies, and ruins our peace. The spiritual practice of Right Speech asks us to speak from the heart.

North American Buddhist teacher Sharon Salzberg interviewed many people about practicing Right Speech at work. She shared a story that has stayed with me that I think you'll appreciate, too; it came from her friend, Paul. “I started as a coordinator in a [film] production company,” he says, “and I'd write up

¹ Thanks to Beth Roth, *Right Speech Reconsidered*, 10/13/17, for this succinct definition. Please see tricycle.org/trikedaily/family-dharma-right-speech-reconsidered/

² The other place where Right Speech shows up in Buddhism is on the Noble Eightfold Path: Right ... View, Intention, Speech, Action, Livelihood, Effort, Mindfulness, and Concentration are all spiritual practices on the journey to liberation.

documentary pitches and send them to an executive producer I trusted, hoping to get my big break.... Mostly, nothing happened with the pitches. Then one of [my] ideas was ... commissioned by a broadcaster. That's a big deal! But the EP [that's short for "executive producer"] never told me.

"I found out ... from another executive at the company ... [that] my pitch was in production.... When I mentioned [to him] that I [had] pitched that story, I was told ... I had nothing to do with it.

"I was furious. I felt betrayed, heartbroken.... That's where my [spiritual] practice saved me. Instead of acting out of my explosive feelings, I sat with the emotions for a couple of days. I sat until I could clearly summarize what happened in a one-sentence email to the EP I [had] trusted: ... 'I pitched my idea to you, it was [commissioned], and you didn't credit me.' And then I added a sentence that wouldn't [have been] possible without the days of letting the emotions pass through me: 'I didn't think you would do that.'"

Before I tell you the end of the story, I want to note that there were so many less savory ways to go about trying to right this wrong. Paul could have gone ballistic; he could have gone over his executive producer's head. And his righteous anger would have been justified. But instead, he sat with all those feelings, and, in the end, he spoke from his broken heart: I trusted you.

He concludes the story, "The EP stopped by my desk.... He explained it was ... a ...misunderstanding, offered me a job as an associate producer, [and] got me the credit on the film."³

In other words, the spiritual practice of Right Speech enabled Paul to hold back and metabolize the experience until he could express his deepest truth — the feeling of betrayal — and transform what might have been one of the most painful moments in his career into the big break he had so wanted. Another bonus is that his faith was restored in his colleague.

Here's how Vietnamese Buddhist teacher Thích Nhất Hạnh expresses the precept of Right Speech: "Aware of the suffering caused by unmindful speech and the inability to listen to others, I vow to cultivate loving speech and deep listening in order to bring joy and happiness to others and relieve others of their suffering. Knowing that words can create happiness or suffering, I vow to learn to speak

³ Sharon Salzberg, *Real Happiness at Work*, pp. 138-139

truthfully, with words that inspire self-confidence, joy, and hope. I am determined not to spread news that I do not know to be certain and not to criticize or condemn things of which I am not sure. I will refrain from uttering words that can cause division or discord, or that can cause the family or the community to break. I will make all effort to reconcile and resolve all conflicts, however small.”

Thích Nhất Hạnh — called Thầy, or teacher, by his students — is quick to say that this is an aspirational, “North Star” directive: We use it to navigate, whether or not we ever get there.

Personally, he had a lot of ideas and feelings about the Vietnam War, but the higher good he sought was to bring peace — as he says it, to Be Peace. He instructed his monks and nuns not to align themselves with either the communists or the anti-communists, but to align themselves with reconciliation. They went into the rural areas to help with health and education. They settled refugees and sponsored more than 10,000 orphans.

But Thầy’s writing was censored by both sides. His social workers were kidnapped and killed by both sides — each side suspecting they were working for the other. A grenade was thrown into his room and deflected by a curtain. Although devastated, Thích Nhất Hạnh and his community remained undaunted, listening to the suffering on both sides and speaking to each side about the other’s suffering, teaching, against all odds, that humankind is a family who must not kill each other over ideology.⁴ This is Right Speech — a path to spiritual awakening.

Years ago, Sylvia Boorstein was teaching a class about Right Speech and did a simple exercise that moved me very deeply. We can do it together now, if you’d like to try it:

Raise you hand if you’ve ever broken a bone.

And leave your hand up if that bone still hurts you now.

Okay, now raise your hand if you still feel pain from something someone said to you in the past year.

And how about something someone said in the last five years?

The last ten years....

The last twenty years....

Thirty years....

How about something someone said to you before you were five years old?

⁴ Thích Nhất Hạnh, *For A Future To Be Possible*, pp. 44-61

You can put your hands down. You get the idea: Speech is so powerful. We can feel compassion arise as we look around and witness the burden we've all borne, carrying the pain of hurtful remarks. Maybe we think, O, we're adults now; we should get over it.

We don't get over it.

In the 1960s, when the social ethos was "letting it all hang out," Sylvia Boorstein fantasized about writing a book called *Holding It All In*. She was genuinely alarmed by this vast forgetting of how really tender, how vulnerable we all are. After she learned the Buddha's teachings on Right Speech, directing us to be honest, truthful, and helpful, she revised her book title: *Holding It All In Until We've Figured Out How to Say It in a Useful Way*.⁵

Beloved spiritual companions,

This is not an easy spiritual practice,
asking ourselves,

Is it true?

Is it kind?

Is it necessary?

Does it improve upon silence?

But let's try it.

Let's offer this gift to others
and to ourselves:

May we speak from the heart.

Amen.

⁵ Sylvia Boorstein, *It's Easier Than You Think*, pp. 48-49