

Race to Judgment
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First Unitarian Church of Des Moines
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"It's not differences that divide us. It's our judgments about each other that do." —Margaret J. Wheatley

Sermon

One evening this past July, a message appeared on my Facebook page, with a link to one of the first news reports of the arrest of Harvard professor Henry Louis Gates, Jr. outside his Cambridge, Massachusetts home. The message my friend sent with the link read something like, "Another sad day to be an American..."

"Uh-oh", I thought before opening the link.

I briskly surveyed the report and discovered that Cambridge police had responded to a 911 call about a possible break-in at Gates' home, and, that circumstances at the scene of the non-crime had escalated to the point where Gates, himself, had been arrested.

Even as I was certain I had incomplete information, it was easy for me to leap to a conclusion similar to the one my Facebook friend had communicated. It just didn't feel right. What could this renowned professor have done on his own property that would have justified arrest by police officers who should have been able to quickly determine that no break-in had occurred?

I'll admit that I assumed some of the trouble came about because Gates is a black man. My understandings of the historical, systemic racism in our country have deep roots that go back to my own childhood in the south, the intentional study and reflection I was required to do to become a Unitarian Universalist minister, and the workshops in which I participated in order to work as a diversity trainer on behalf of the Anti-Defamation League. I've got some strong opinions, predispositions even, that lead me to assume that race is almost always an issue in some way, whether we want it to be or not. Mostly, my predispositions have felt like an asset, in that they have encouraged me to examine as many sides of a story as possible, particularly the often unspoken perspectives of those who might be perceived as "other" by the dominant culture, since the predominant cultural view, even today, is that race not only shouldn't matter, but that it doesn't matter, which, in my experience, is rarely true.

However, my contention that I typically examine “all sides” of a story was betrayed by my actions just a short time after reading the Facebook post, when I shared my hurried and incomplete understanding of the report with my wife. “Did you hear about Henry Louis Gates being arrested?” I asked. I told her some of the scant details that I knew and even added a conclusion. “This is messed up,” I said. Which was my shorthand way to say, “What is the deal with race relations in this country that a man can be arrested in his own yard for being angry that police have accused him of breaking in to his own house?”

Assumptions like the one I made that night were spreading all over the country, both for and against the arrested professor. People were choosing sides, making claims, even declaring indignation. Who was the real victim here? Gates or the police? The historically oppressed minority or the unfairly besieged just-doing-my-job civil servant? The righteously angry educator or the righteously defensive cop?

Of course, the biggest victim of all in this was not Gates or the police officer, especially in the days immediately following the arrest. The biggest victim was the truth. Nearly everyone, it seemed, was dealing in assumption, drawing conclusions without a full grasp of the most necessary component of any ultimately helpful decision, determination or diatribe: The facts.

Even our President, when asked about the racial implications of the still-fresh Gates saga, was so tantalized by the opportunity to draw a conclusion, that he sacrificed the impact of a carefully orchestrated White House press conference on health care to offer his opinion. He began by appropriately claiming a lack of knowledge: “I don't know,” he said, “not having been there and not seeing all the facts, what role race played in that.”

Then he uttered the most unfortunate word to follow any declaration of ignorance, “*But.*” “But,” he said, “the Cambridge police acted stupidly,” among other things.

I loved Jon Stewart's depiction of this Presidential foray into the unknown on *The Daily Show*. When, in the replay of the statement, Obama said, “But”, Stewart broke in with an extended, contorted, slow motion, “Nooooooooooooooooo...”

It's not that what Obama said was necessarily wrong. It was that his evaluation, just like mine when I first learned of the case, was based in assumption, emotion, and circumstances that didn't necessarily have anything to do with the facts surrounding the Gates arrest. Rather than deal with the facts of the case, which he admittedly didn't know, our President created for himself a story, a story produced more by his assumptions and presumptions than by the facts, a story that implied or led to conclusions that were not ultimately helpful and that took many days, and one awkward beer summit, to unravel.

This same basic story-telling dynamic seems to have been played out recently when former President Carter declared in more than one setting, that racism was at the heart of both Rep. Joe Wilson's "You lie" outburst during Obama's address to Congress and the heated opposition from many to Obama's proposed policies. Once again, the blanket charge of racism is a product of a story rather than the facts. The story could be more true than not; however, that's not really the point. Carter's assertion has diverted our national dialogue into topic areas that detract from the expression of honest differences in exchange for fear-based character attacks.

Lest you think I am going to condemn our current or former Presidents for being human, let me assure you, we all do this kind of thing. We all have the inclination, at times, to tell ourselves stories about what we see and feel without all the necessary information, to draw conclusions and act on assumptions about the actions and intentions of others that not only distract us from the reality of the situation, but that insure we will debilitate, if not destroy, any potential dialogue or decision-making going forward.

I learned to think about this all-too-human inclination to "tell stories" at the expense of the facts when I attended a "Crucial Conversations" workshop here in Des Moines just over a year ago. I've used this material before from the pulpit and return to it again today in the hope that it may help you to reflect upon your behavior in the relationships and crucial conversations of your lives. As my theology is rooted in part in the belief that we can actually will what I call God into being through a shared commitment to creative interchange—a process of conscious, open, and intentional engagement with each other and the world around us—I believe that developing our ability to relate more effectively, honestly, and lovingly with others is essential, hopeful, holy work. Work that demands that we manage the stories we tell in exchange for honest engagements with the facts.

What do I mean by "telling stories"?

One of the foundational assertions of the Crucial Conversations approach is that emotions are the primary drivers of our action. We act because we feel. Haven't most, if not all, of us, been in situations where we had emotional outbursts that seemed to come out of nowhere...you know, those moments when a force seemingly greater than ourselves takes over, our adrenaline gets flowing, and we are suddenly like puppets being manipulated into regrettable actions? What we may not realize, however, is that we choose our emotions, even then. That's right. All those times when we have said, for example, "That guy made me mad," or blamed our behavior on someone else, (for example, "I wouldn't have shouted at her if she hadn't come at me with such an attitude,") we were ultimately wrong. No one can make us mad. No one's "attitude" can make us shout. No one's behavior really controls our own. Our emotions and the actions that follow from those emotions arise as the result of the stories that we have told ourselves about something we have observed or experienced. We feel our emotions, endow them with a great deal of authority, (after all, we know how we feel!) and then convert those emotions into actions that often lead us even further away from the facts...and from the possibility of creative interchange. We choose our stories and therefore we choose our emotions.

[The above was a controversial assertion to some who attended the service, as articulated by a few who approached me afterwards to suggest that I had glossed over the usefulness of emotions as means of accessing truth. My intention in the sermon was not to suggest that emotions always can (or even should) be controlled or (even worse) ignored. Simply put, emotions will sometimes arise as they arise. We all know that from experience. The important point at the heart of this sermon is that emotions are not necessarily the final truth; in fact, when we allow ourselves to be controlled by our emotions, they actually can lead us away from the truth, because they can lead us to resort to silence (clamming up) or violence (lashing out) in ways that take us out of dialogue and the possibility of greater understanding.]

We shouldn't take this story-telling idea too literally or simplistically, though. It's not as if we always play out a whole emotional narrative in our minds before we act. If that were the case, we'd have lengthy gaps in our interactions, especially our arguments. We also need to acknowledge that mental illness can impact our ability to perceive reality and to make choices. But even for the most mentally stable among us, the stories and their attendant emotions can come like

bolts of lighting, infused with other stories or emotional memories, sometimes of the people involved in the episode, but not always. Our past experiences, our current fears, our future expectations can all impact our stories, and therefore, our emotional tendencies and judgments.

At the time of his arrest, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., had just arrived home after having been traveling from China for around 24 hours. When he was asked to prove who he was in his own home, it wasn't the request that reportedly made him angry. It was the story he must have told himself about the request, a story about injustice and racism and the challenges and frustrations of being a black male in America for 58 years, that stirred him up. Or maybe the tone of voice of the officer triggered a story that inspired the professor to be angry. Or maybe he was just tired and cranky and looking for an argument. Or maybe there are factors we just don't know. In any case, the police report suggests that Gates became "incensed" and shouted "This is what happens to black men in America!". When invited outside, Gates reportedly said, "...I'll speak with your mama outside."

Gates chose, consciously or unconsciously, whether through fatigue, fear, or presumption of intent, an emotional response and then acted on that response. Sgt. James Crowley, the primary officer involved later told a radio interviewer that Gates, "at any time could have resolved the issue by quieting down and/or going back inside the house," which is, of course, probably true. However, the issue could have also been resolved had Officer Crowley chosen to tell himself a different story about the situation rather than *this 58-year-old man with a cane man is a danger to me, or this man needs to be taught a lesson not to question a cop*. As one commentator put it, Crowley could have "resolved the issue by rolling his eyes, wishing the cranky old professor a nice day, getting in his car, and going off in search of an actual crime."

Choices were made in this squabble on both sides, choices based in stories, leading to emotions that had everything to do with the unfortunate outcome.

This idea of "choosing" emotions can be difficult for us to grasp. We may even want to deny the idea all together. When things get emotionally challenging for us, when we feel like clamming up or lashing out, how could we possibly regain control over our emotions and move into a pursuit of the open, respectful dialogue that holds such hope for real, lasting resolution and understanding? When our

emotions are heightened, the last thing we may want to do is pursue dialogue. In fact, the circumstances may clearly indicate that dialogue is not something to pursue at all, at least in the moment. But eventually, it is to the possibility of dialogue that we must return if we are to hope for greater understanding, because it is through dialogue that we can learn the facts of the situation, the facts that could help ground our heightened emotions, and, in the process, save us from ourselves.

So how do we do it? When difficult circumstances arise, how can we learn to tell ourselves different stories, stories that won't immediately lead to emotions that will lead to regrettable actions?

First of all, we need to accept that we are in control of the stories we tell. If we can't accept that we can change the course of our emotions by changing our stories, then we probably won't be willing to find a way to alter our behavior in the crucial conversations of our lives.

If we can accept that we are ultimately in control, then we can more readily question the stories we are telling by working our way back from the action we feel led to take. In other words, we can train ourselves to sense when we are wanting to clam up or lash out, and we can use that sense as a cue that our emotions are controlling us. Then we can ask ourselves *What story am I telling that is actually creating these emotions?* And finally, *What evidence do I have to support this story?* In other words, *What are the facts? Can I see or hear what I am calling a fact? Is it actual behavior or just an assumption or projection?*

I'm thinking each of you could come up with an example from your life, a relationship in need of a crucial conversation perhaps, or maybe an encounter where your emotions got the better of you and led you to an unpleasant exchange that still negatively burdens your memories and your relationship with the person. Sometime soon, I encourage you to take a few moments to write out the details of your chosen situation or difficult relationship that is weighing on you, describing all that has led to the current state of affairs. Then I invite you to cross out everything you have written that is not a verifiable fact, anything that wouldn't stand up in a court of law. Look for words that express judgments, and not just easily apparent ones like *racist* or *misogynist* but words like *scowled* or *sarcastic* or *attack* or *jealous* or *crazy*. We did this exercise at the Crucial Conversations training and I was shocked at how much of my own colorful, but subjective, language and story-telling had seeped into my attempt at an objective narrative of

my situation. I had to remove big chunks of my story, because they just weren't verifiably true, and therefore, were not helpful in releasing me from emotions.

This is difficult, sometimes gut-wrenching work that takes a good deal of humility and courage. It is far more comfortable to assume that we are right than to acknowledge that we could be wrong. If we wish to pursue relationships based in truth and growth and possibility, and receive all the attendant challenges and benefits of understanding and awakening to what life really offers, then we have to be willing to question our emotions and the stories behind them, especially those clever stories in which self-justification is more important than results. We have to be willing to slow down our race to judgment and see the benefits of translating our clever stories into useful stories, which actually create emotions that can lead to healthy action, dialogue, and creative interchange.

What is the difference between a "clever" story and a "useful" story. Clever stories are those where we are seeing someone as a villain or ourselves as a victim. Clever stories are those that we tell to justify our silence or violence. They are the stories that abdicate us from our own responsibility in the situation or relationship. A useful story, simply put, is one in which we assume that the person with whom we are communicating is a rational actor. We may not like or agree with the person's actions, but we assume basic good will. We may believe we have a good deal of evidence that the other person is not in fact rational. But until there are substantive facts proving their irrationality, it is in our best interests to assume goodwill...or at least to fake it long enough so that we don't make a bad situation worse.

One my most recent forays into story-telling at the expense of facts, came here at church. I was in line at a potluck when a thoughtful member of the church asked me what I perceived to be a pointed, not-very-thoughtful question about a recent decision I had made; so pointed, in fact, that I had heard her question as an accusatory attack. My spine stiffened and I bought myself a few extra seconds by asking this member to repeat what she had asked. "What did you just say?" I asked. When she raised same question again, with what I thought was an attitude that was just as venomous as the first time (notice the descriptive words I am using...), I found, along with a racing heart and a flushing face, a need to tell this member where to get off. I knew I was succumbing to a clever story because I really believed I needed to lash out. This all happened very quickly and shook me up quite a bit. I rode some feelings of self-justification the rest of the evening (I had

to set her straight...I just had to...!), but by the time I got home and shared with Susan what had happened, it was becoming apparent that I had over-reacted in a big way. It didn't help my need for self-justification when Susan responded, "What was the big deal? She was just asking you a question."

At which point I even lashed out a bit at Susan. "I need you to support me," I said.

Luckily, Susan thought that was really funny.

And it was.

I needed fantasy more than facts? I needed affirmation more than I needed the truth? What a joke! Especially because, in the end, the truth is the only thing that will lead me, or any of us, where we really need to be because it will be the only thing that will lead us some place real.

It's like the old oil filter commercial used to say, "You can pay me now or you can pay me later."

We can deal with the truth now, or we can deal with the truth later. Either way, we're going to have to deal with the truth, we're going to have to learn from the truth and we're going to have to be led by the truth. Because in these troubled times of political wrangling, health care squabbling, and ever-continuing debates over the environment, the economy, marriage equality, religion and more, we need as much truth and the useful stories that come with truth, as we can get.

For more information about the "Crucial Conversations" content, consult:

Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking When the Stakes Are High by Kerry Patterson, Joseph Grenny, Ron McMillian and Al Switzler (New York: McGraw Hill, 2002).