

What's Your Frame?

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Ee-ther, eye-ther; nee-ther, nye-ther. . .

Wouldn't it be great if it turned out that all of our disagreements were rooted in how we pronounce our words? That we could solve all our disputes by realizing that we only disagreed about language rather than substance? Unfortunately, language and communication are often much deeper and more complicated than that. Our disagreements more often about feelings than language; feelings, attitudes and assumptions that can be hard to find, much less understand. How often do we feel isolated in our own inner worlds and despair of ever truly knowing another?

No one is alone, but all too often we often feel that we are. Like hunger in the midst of abundance, loneliness can isolate us even in the loving embrace of our family and friends. Each of us hidden in our own secret chamber, each listening, each trying to speak – yet none fully understanding, none fully understood. How often do we build walls between ourselves out of the brick and mortar of anxiety and misunderstanding? How difficult is it to know the thoughts and intentions of another? Isn't it easier to just assume that we know the contents of each other's secret chamber of the self?

There is a Zen teaching story retold by Paul Reps in his book, *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones*, that illustrates the difficulty of understanding one another. It's set in Japan, long ago, where, "provided he makes and wins an argument about Buddhism with those who live there, any wandering monk can remain in a Zen temple. If he is defeated, he has to move on.

"In a temple in the northern part of Japan two brother monks were dwelling together. The elder one was learned," Reps reports, "but the younger one was stupid and had but one eye.

"A wandering monk came and asked for lodging, properly challenging them to a debate about the sublime teaching. The elder brother, tired that day

from much studying, told the younger one to take his place. “Go and request the dialogue in silence,” he cautioned.

“So the young monk and the stranger went to the shrine and sat down.

“Shortly afterwards the traveler rose and went in to the elder brother and said: ‘Your young brother is a wonderful fellow. He defeated me.’

“ ‘Relate the dialogue to me,’ said the elder one.

“ ‘Well,’ explained the traveler, ‘first I held up one finger, representing Buddha, the enlightened one. So he held up two fingers, signifying Buddha and his teaching. I held up three fingers, representing Buddha, his teaching, and his followers, living the harmonious life. Then he shook his clenched fist in my face, indicating that all three come from one realization. Thus he won and I have no right to remain here.’” With this, the traveler left.

“ ‘Where is that fellow?’ asked the younger one, running in to his elder brother.

“ ‘I understand you won the debate.’

“ ‘Won nothing. I’m going to beat him up.’

“ ‘Tell me the subject of the debate,’ asked the elder one.

“ ‘Why, the minute he saw me he held up one finger, insulting me by insinuating that I have only one eye. Since he was a stranger I thought I would be polite to him, so I held up two fingers, congratulating him that he has two eyes. Then the impolite wretch held up three fingers, suggesting that between us we only have three eyes. So I got mad and started to punch him, but he ran out and that ended it!’ ”

One monk thought in terms of Buddhist discourse, while the other was obsessed with his missing eye. The way we frame our interactions makes a huge difference in how we interpret them.

In a 1999 Harvard University study entitled, “Gorillas in Our Midst,” researchers asked participants to watch a basketball game and count the number of times the ball was passed during each possession. At some point in the game a person dressed in a gorilla suit would walk onto the court, stop and thump his chest, and then continue walking off the court. When asked about it, nearly half

the participants said, essentially, “What gorilla?” They were so focused on their task that they didn’t even notice the gorilla on the court.

We see what we expect to see. We see what our frame tells us to look for. We see insults where none are intended. We fail to see the gorilla standing right in front of us. We will always have one frame or another influencing our perceptions and decisions, but there are many kinds of frames. Some frames help to bring us together, while others tend to keep us apart. And, like the monks in the Zen story, it can be almost impossible to communicate with someone whose frame is different from yours.

And there are some very different frames being used in American discourse today, frames that keep us from being able to understand each other. In religious terms we are experiencing the contrast between Calvinism and Universalism. These two religious worldviews proceed from some very different assumptions about human nature. Calvinism assumes that people are basically bad, and they need to be punished in order to keep them from getting worse. Universalism, on the other hand, assumes that people are basically good; that they want to be safe and happy, and that being part of a nurturing community of compassion and trust can help people learn to be better.

Calvinists and Universalists have a really hard time understanding each other because they proceed from completely different assumptions about human nature. Each position looks immoral to the other, yet each is thoroughly moral from its own point of view.

George Lakoff, a cognitive linguist at the University of California at Berkley, has done a lot of research in the areas of metaphor and framing. Instead of Calvinism and Universalism, though, he describes this division as one between the conservative right and the progressive left. His book, *The Metaphors We Live By*, points out some of the frames that are hidden in the way we use language. In his books, *Moral Politics: How Liberals and Conservatives Think*, and (one of my favorite titles ever) *Don’t Think of an Elephant!* Lakoff explores the cognitive frames that define and separate the right and the left in America.

Lakoff says that one of the reasons for the ascendancy of the conservative right is that, since as early as 1964, they have been underwriting think tanks

which employ cognitive linguists to shape their message in a way that controls the framing of American political discourse. An example of their work can be seen in the loaded phrase, “tax relief,” that immediately frames the debate in such a way that makes it seem immoral to oppose tax cuts. Once the conversation is framed in terms of tax relief, you can’t argue for a tax increase without appearing to be in favor of burdensome affliction. Reframing the taxes levied upon the estates of the wealthy as the “death tax” would be another example.

Some years ago, George Lakoff spoke in several forums at our General Assembly in Fort Worth. He explained that progressives are suffering in the debate because of a naïve belief that the truth will prevail if people can only hear it. But the conservative right has been framing the debate in a way that dismisses the progressive perspective altogether.

He suggested that the difference between the worldviews of left and the right might best be described as the contrast between two very different models of what constitutes a good family.

The conservative right sees the world as a dangerous place, and it always will be, because there is evil out there in the world. The world is also difficult because it is competitive. There will always be winners and losers. There is an absolute right and an absolute wrong. Children are born bad, in the sense that they just want to do what feels good, not what is right. Therefore, they have to be made good.

What is needed in this kind of a world is a strong, strict father who can:

- Protect the family in the dangerous world,
- Support the family in the difficult world, and
- Teach his children right from wrong.

What is required of the child is obedience, because the strict father is a moral authority who knows right from wrong. It is further assumed that the only way to each kids obedience – that is, right from wrong – is through punishment – painful punishment, when they do wrong.

The rationale behind physical punishment is this: When children do something wrong, if they are physically disciplined they learn not to do it again.

That means that they will develop internal discipline to keep themselves from doing wrong, so that in the future they will be obedient and act morally. Without such punishment, the world will go to hell. There will be no morality.

Such internal discipline has a secondary effect. It is what is required for success in the difficult, competitive world. That is, if people are disciplined and pursue their self-interest in this land of opportunity, they will become prosperous and self-reliant. Thus, the strict father model links morality with prosperity. The same discipline you need to be moral is what allows you to prosper. The link is the pursuit of self-interest. Given opportunity and discipline, pursuing your self-interest should enable you to prosper.

They are very clear about the connection between the strict father model and free market capitalism. The link is the morality of self-interest, which is derived from Adam Smith's view of capitalism. In 1776, Adam Smith published a book entitled, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* – usually called, simply, *The Wealth of Nations* – which established the theoretical basis for free market capitalism. One of its basic themes is that if everyone pursues their own profit, then the profit of all would be maximized by the invisible hand – that is, by nature – just naturally. Go about pursuing your own profit, and you are helping everyone.

If everyone pursues her or his own self-interest, then by the invisible hand, by nature, the self-interest of all will be maximized. That is, it is moral to pursue your self-interest, and there is a name for those people who do not do it. They are called do-gooders. A do-gooder is someone who is trying to help someone else rather than him- or herself and is getting in the way of those who are pursuing their self-interest. Do-gooders mess up the system.

In this model there is also a definition of what it means to become a good person. A good person – a moral person – is someone who is disciplined enough to be obedient, to learn what is right, do what is right and not do what is wrong, and to pursue one's self-interest in order to become self-reliant and prosperous. A good child grows up to be like that. A bad child is one who does not learn discipline, does not function morally, does not do what is right, and therefore is

not disciplined enough to become prosperous. This child cannot take care of him- or herself and thus becomes dependent.

When the children are mature, they either have learned discipline and can prosper, or have failed to learn it. From this point on the strict father is not to meddle in their lives. This translates politically into no government meddling. This theory says that social programs are immoral because they make people dependent. Promoting social programs is immoral.

The progressive left is working from a different family model, one which Lakoff calls the nurturant parent model. Unlike the strict father model, this one is gender neutral.

In this model, both parents are equally responsible for raising the children. The assumption is that children are born good and can be made better. The parents' job is to nurture their children and to raise their children to be nurturers of others.

What does nurturance mean? It means two things: empathy and responsibility. If you have a child, you have to know what every cry means. You have to know when the child is hungry, when she needs a diaper change, when he is having nightmares. And you have a responsibility – you have to take care of this child. Since you cannot take care of someone else if you are not taking care of yourself, you have to take care of yourself, too.

All this is not easy. Anyone who has ever raised a child knows that this is hard. You have to be strong. You have to work hard at it. You have to be very competent. You have to know a lot.

In addition, all sorts of other values immediately follow from empathy and responsibility. Think about it.

First, if you empathize with your child, you will provide protection. This comes into politics in many ways. What do you protect your child from? Crime and abuse, certainly. You also protect your child from cars without seat belts, from smoking, from poisonous additives in food. So progressive politics focuses on environmental protection, worker protection, consumer protection, and protection from disease. These are the things that progressives want the

government to protect their citizens from. Protection is important. It is part of our moral system.

Second, if you empathize with your child, you want your child to be fulfilled in life, to be a happy person. And if you are an unhappy, unfulfilled person yourself, you are not going to want other people to be happier than you are. Therefore it is your moral responsibility to be a happy, fulfilled person. Your moral responsibility. Further, it is your responsibility to teach your child to be a happy, fulfilled person who wants others to be happy and fulfilled. This is part of what nurturing family life is about. It is a common precondition for caring about others.

There are some other nurturant values.

- If you want your child to be fulfilled in life, the child has to be free enough to do that. Therefore freedom is a value.
- You do not have very much freedom if there is no opportunity or prosperity. Therefore opportunity and prosperity are progressive values.
- If you really care about your child, you want your child to be treated fairly by you and by others. Therefore fairness is a value.
- If you are connecting with your child and you empathize with that child, you have to have open, two-way communication. Honest communication. That becomes a value.
- You live in a community, and that community will affect how your child grows up. Therefore, community-building, service to community, and cooperation in a community become values.
- To have cooperation, you must have trust, and to have trust you must have honesty and open two-way communication. Trust, honesty, and open communication are fundamental progressive values – in a community as in a family.

So, what's your frame? Actually, we all have both of them. They're inherent parts of our culture. But about a third of Americans use the strict father frame almost all the time, and another third use the nurturing parent. The rest of us

take a little from one or the other, as the situation seems to call for. When you choose your frame, I want you all to remember, the strict father model is rooted in Calvinist assumptions which Unitarians and Universalists have repudiated and rejected for centuries. We affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person. This is rooted in the belief that, although people may do bad things, they are, by and large, good. People are worth loving.

Our Unitarian Universalist religious tradition promotes empathy, responsibility, freedom, fairness, trust, honesty and open communication. But these are countercultural values in a society where the strict father frame is in the ascendancy. Which frame do you choose?

I believe that our decision matters. I believe that is why our faith is so critically important at this time. The world needs our Unitarian Universalist values more than ever, right now. I invite you to show the way with your hearts and minds so that we can – together – finally build the beloved community of peace, love, and understanding.

Gandhi said, “You must be the change you wish to see in the world.” This is why I invite you this morning to go forth and love boldly, communicate honestly, trust guilelessly, and forgive easily, for it is of these things that the beloved community is made.