Sticks and Stones

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Maya Angelou says, “You may shoot me with your words...” A month ago many people were asking whether the violent words of right-wing commentators and politicians such as Sarah Palin and Glenn Beck, the rhetoric of lock and load, and taking aim, and cross hairs, had furnished ammunition to the crazed mind of Jared Loughner when he shot Congresswoman Gabriel Giffords and others in Tucson. I said in a newsletter column and on Facebook that because Loughner seemed to be clearly schizophrenic and it’s not at all clear what his political leanings are, it is stretching logic to lay this violence at the door of the pundits. But that is not the end of the matter, for I think it raises serious questions about when words can incite physical violence, and when words themselves can harm.

Two other things are on my mind today. This is Black History Month, and I contemplate the remarkable period in American history known as the civil rights movement, when a great liberation was accomplished largely through nonviolent means. And I contemplate the revolution in Egypt, where, though the future direction is uncertain, it seems that a great liberation has happened largely without violence. Both are examples of how the word is more powerful, in the end, than the bullet.

Yet words can have their own violence. The playground adage from which I take my sermon title this morning has two versions. One is “sticks and stones may break my bones but words can never hurt me.” The other is “sticks and stones may break my bones but names can never hurt me.”

The first thing to be said about this is that in neither version is this true. Words and names can hurt directly. Moreover, words can have an intimate connection with acts of violence.

This came home to me yesterday as I attended a screening of a movie about bullying at the Eldredge Library. The movie had been made by the Southern Poverty Law center and its screening was sponsored by the Cape Cod chapter of the Fellowship of Reconciliation. It focused on a gay youth in Wisconsin who had had to endure merciless bullying in junior high and high school after he came out, to the point where he made suicide attempts, ran away from home, and finally brought a lawsuit. He really went through hell in his formative years, and though his parents were very supportive, the school administration turned a blind eye to what he was going through. He was trapped without recourse. It was a gripping story, and he was

vindicated by a verdict of over 40 million dollars, but what I was interested in was how the terror created for him was both a terror of being beaten and a terror of being called names. We had a discussion after the film with a few Cape teens in the Gay Straight alliance, and that affirmed my impression – bullying goes on through verbal means as well as physical.

Now in thinking about public policy, what's right and what's wrong, we try to draw a bright line between speech and conduct. We believe in free speech, a speech with few if any restrictions imposed. We allow a lot more rules about what we can do than about what we can say. And particularly in the public arena and talking about politics, we allow and expect a very robust debate.

As I said in my newsletter column last month, I am close to a First Amendment absolutist. I am so committed to free speech that I would allow almost anything to be shown on television or the internet, and published in print. Now I'm going to date myself: in the movie "Easy Rider," Jack Nicholson has a bit part as a young southern lawyer, a local who meets the two motorcyclists who are the focus of the movie and shares a campfire with them on the outskirts of town and acknowledges to them that he "does a little work for the ACLU." I identified with that line, I spent my mid-life years volunteering for the American Civil Liberties Union and vindicating free speech against the forces that would suppress it.

The ACLU in those days had a national convention every two years, and I remember going to one in the early 1990s in Madison Wisconsin, the town where some fascinating scenes of democracy are playing themselves out this week. I had a roommate for the conference, a Latino lawyer. One of the hot topics that year was campus hate speech codes.

There had been a famous incident at the University of Pennsylvania where a crowd of sorority girls, many of whom were African American, were singing and raising a ruckus outside a dormitory, and a Jewish student yelled out the window, "shut up, you water buffalo." The student was prosecuted under the campus hate speech code for a racial slur, even though he explained that in modern Hebrew, which he spoke, the word "behema," or water buffalo, refers in slang to a loud rowdy person. The case drew national attention as an example of political correctness run amok.

We debated this case and others like it. The question was whether we should make a hole in the First Amendment guarantee of freedom of speech, whether colleges should be able to discipline and even expel students for making racial or ethnic slurs. What struck me about the ACLU debate was how passionately my Latino roommate felt that there needed to be some protections for the sensibilities of minority groups. He said he had been called racial names when he was growing up, and when you are called one, it

just stops all conscious thought and gives you a desperate, enraged feeling. I tried to see it from his point of view. I realized that my enthusiastic embrace of the freedom side of the issue might stem from the fact that nobody in my life had ever called me a name based on my ethnicity.

The tension between free speech and equality was raised many times during my years with the ACLU, and continues as a problem in our public life. As a lawyer, I expressed it as a conflict between the First Amendment's guarantee of free speech and the Fourteenth Amendment's guarantee of equal protection of the law. As a minister, I now see it in the light of our principles and purposes: the equality value is enshrined in our first principle, the inherent worth and dignity of every person, and in the second principle's call for justice equity and compassion in human relations, while the freedom value is contained in our fourth and fifth principles – a free and responsible search for truth and meaning, and the right of conscience and the use of democratic process within our congregations and in society at large.

It should not shock us that there are tensions within our principles and purposes, for we are used to living in the paradoxes and tensions of life. We don't have any illusions that the principles and purposes dropped down from heaven or were written by a spirit hand on the wall; no, they were forged in the democratic processes of the UUA, drafted by a committee and then amended on the floor of the convention in 1984.

I am particularly struck by the fourth principle's wording: a free and responsible search for truth and meaning. A lot of people think freedom of speech means you can say anything you like and get away with it. But freedom of speech does not repeal the law of consequences. Just as actions have consequences, so do words, and you can no more divorce words from their natural consequences by calling them free than you can actions.

A good example is reputation. Words can ruin reputation. If I say that Joe Smith molested my daughter and he didn't, he can sue me for slander and recover money for the injury to his reputation. But if he is a public figure – an office holder or candidate, or celebrity – freedom of speech comes into play, and he will have to prove that I said the words maliciously knowing they were false. This is how the law balances the freedom value and the private reputation value for comment on public figures.

Freedom of speech is founded on the value judgment that we can make the best decisions when all points of view have been considered, and that everyone has a right to speak and to be heard. That means we have agreed to put up with a lot of talk that we consider boring, wrong-headed if not outright false, scandalous, repetitious and offensive.

That's the classic liberal defense of free speech – the marketplace of ideas, or the

jousting round where truth will emerge from the clash of vigorously advocated points of view. But I am beginning to wonder whether this model really serves us.

As I try to put my finger on it, the model doesn't match the function words play in human nature. In real life, it seems to me, we live in worlds made of words. It may seem that we live in buildings made of brick and mortar and on a planet made of dirt, but the most important worlds we inhabit are woven of words. We are prisoners of the verbal constructs we make. This is true at the organic level

Last week I talked about oxytocin, the hormone involved in love and trust, which is secreted during the birth process and during lactation and bonds the mother to the baby, and about recent studies that have shown that oxytocin tends to reinforce ethnocentricity. It doesn't lead to love for everyone, but only for one's clan or tribe.

Oxytocin is only one part of a system of responses that evolution has given us, and that we share with other animals. All our close animal relatives have what is called a flight or fight response, where, when the organism perceives a threat, adrenalin starts pumping and the muscles start moving to get the creature out of harms way or into an aggressive posture to repel the threat.

In animals, these responses for the most part are triggered by perceptions from the environment which are immediate. In humans, they can be triggered by direct perception, but they can also be triggered by words. In the oxytocin experiment, the Dutch test subjects reacted according to whether the name given was in group – Dutch – or out-group – Muslim or German.

Life in the state of nature has been described as a constant struggle on two fronts – getting lunch and avoiding being lunch. Animals who live in a stable environment evolve instincts for which other species are predator and which are prey. The scent of a rabbit tells the bobcat that lunch may be just around the corner, while the scent of a wolf might tell him to go hide.

For humans these same instincts are triggered by words, words that divide humanity into categories like poor and rich, black and white, male and female, us or them, Chatham or Harwich. We learn who to be afraid of and who might give us opportunity for something we want.

So to get back to the relation of speech and violence, words can open the way to violence in a very direct way, as when a commanding officer gives a direct order to the person holding the gun, "shoot him." But words also can assign a particular person to a category which will make it OK to perpetrate violence. So the bully calls the gay kid "fag" or "queer' before knocking his schoolbooks out of his hand, to assure himself that

his victim is not a regular fellow.

Before violence can be perpetrated, the object of the violence must be verbally removed from the clan, from the "we," he or she must be made into a "them," or even more remote, an "it." We owe our ethical duties under the golden rule to those who are persons; if we can remove the object of our violence from the category of person, we give ourselves permission to act. The person must be placed beyond the range of the perpetrator's oxytocin.

A good example of this is the incident I mentioned last week in Knoxville TN in July of 2008, when a gunman came into a UU church determined to kill "some liberals." He held "liberals" to be the enemy because his ex-wife had attended the UU church before she left him. He had to create a "them" before he could open fire.

But just where the boundaries of the in-group can be changed by learning. In the bullying film I saw yesterday, some words encouraged violence in a different way than what I have just discussed. When the boy's parents demanded a conference with the middle school principal, and the perpetrators and the victim and all the parents were present in her office, what did this authority figure say? She said, "boys will be boys." And so the young man was in for three or four more years of merciless harassment. The principal had the perfect teaching moment; had she said "gay bashing will not be tolerated at my school," the violence would have stopped. Instead, she said, "boys will be boys."

Lest you think that gay bashing at the high school and junior high school level came to an end with that 40 Million dollar verdict in Wisconsin, a counselor was there yesterday to assure us that bullying goes on in our Cape schools today. I am going to investigate the local situation to see what safeguards are in place.

Emphasis on freedom of speech looks to law-based solutions. I believe in law, which is, after all, an attempt to control behavior with words. But the remedy for violence is not to be found in laws but in the spread of compassion. It is only when we can see ourselves in the other that we will refrain from harming him or her.

There is a whole discipline called non-violent communication which tries systematically to take apart the way we customarily talk and teach us to talk in a way that generates empathy and compassion rather than alienation. I have been to one workshop on it several years ago; perhaps some of you are experienced in this worthy work.

But I want to return to the right-wing rhetoric, the lock and load and take aim and the map with the cross hairs. If it did not inspire Jared Loughner to his murderous spree, does it nevertheless make us less safe?

I think it does, but not by any direct incitement to violence. I don't think that

these pundits intend to say to anyone, go shoot up some liberals. But they do it indirectly.

The rhetoric of lock and load is aimed to appeal to gun owners and gun users. It is intended to reinforce the idea that one's firearm is an essential component of one's freedom, and that the big bad government is always threatening to take away this bulwark of freedom so it can impose tyranny on all citizens. State legislature are easing restrictions on gun ownership and people are carrying loaded guns at political rallies, which would have been unthinkable just five years ago.

How hollow that claim that guns are bulwark of freedom appears after Egypt. The Egyptian people claimed their freedom from a repressive state after 30 years of tyranny. They had no guns. The only guns on the scene were those of the army and the security police.

What the Egyptian people had was words, and the ability to communicate them. They had cellphones and laptops and Facebook and Twitter. At one point, the government succeeded in shutting down the Internet for 48 hours, and the revolution almost fizzled.

Words with linkage can coordinate a nonviolent popular movement and topple a dictator. Guns are irrelevant. Those who really value our freedom should be a lot more concerned about the proposal being batted around the US administration for a government kill switch for the Internet than about keeping guns in the hands of citizens.

Sticks and stones may break your bones. Bullets can kill you. But more powerful than sticks and stones, more powerful than knives or swords or bullets, are words. Words can hurt you and heal you, words can support your essential worth or tear it down, words can set you off as the unique individual you are or consign you to the rubbish heap. Let us learn to speak the language of compassion to one another.

And let me give the last word to Maya Angelou:

Out of the huts of history's shame
I rise
Up from a past that's rooted in pain
I rise
I'm a black ocean, leaping and wide,
Welling and swelling I bear in the tide.
Leaving behind nights of terror and fear
I rise
Into a daybreak that's wondrously clear
I rise

Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave,
I am the dream and the hope of the slave.
I rise
I rise
I rise.

Amen.
Reading

Still I Rise – Maya Angelou

You may write me down in history
With your bitter, twisted lies,
You may trod me in the very dirt
But still, like dust, I'll rise.

Does my sassiness upset you?
Why are you beset with gloom?
'Cause I walk like I've got oil wells
Pumping in my living room.

Just like moons and like suns,
With the certainty of tides,
Just like hopes springing high,
Still I'll rise.

Did you want to see me broken?
Bowed head and lowered eyes?
Shoulders falling down like teardrops.
Weakened by my soulful cries.

Does my haughtiness offend you?
Don't you take it awful hard
'Cause I laugh like I've got gold mines
Diggin' in my own back yard.

You may shoot me with your words,
You may cut me with your eyes,
You may kill me with your hatefulness,
But still, like air, I'll rise.

Does my sexiness upset you?
Does it come as a surprise
That I dance like I've got diamonds
At the meeting of my thighs?

Out of the huts of history's shame
I rise
Up from a past that's rooted in pain
I rise
I'm a black ocean, leaping and wide,
Welling and swelling I bear in the tide.
Leaving behind nights of terror and fear
I rise
Into a daybreak that's wondrously clear
I rise
Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave,
I am the dream and the hope of the slave.
I rise
I rise
I rise.