

COMMUNICATION AND CONFLICT

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In the world of journalism, a field in which I both participate and teach, there are several criteria for what makes an event rise from something we journalists might ignore to something we might want to write about. *Timeliness* is one factor. If it happened recently, then it's much more interesting than if it happened a week or even a couple of days ago. *Proximity* is another. If the event happened locally, it's probably more interesting than something that happened far away. A layoff at the local factory is always more interesting than if it happened elsewhere. *Impact and consequence* are important, because if the event has some effect on people, it's much more noteworthy. The more people it has impact on, the more newsworthy the event. *Prominence*, perhaps unfortunately, almost always makes us take note of something that is otherwise mundane. If it happened to someone famous, then it's news. Lots of people get stopped by police for drunk driving, and it doesn't get mentioned. If a celebrity or a politician does, though, the world is informed immediately. *Novelty* is one of the biggest reasons something is newsworthy. Firsts, lasts and onlys get covered. It's not the everyday events that are interesting – it's the unusual ones. I always tell my students that no one cares how many planes landed safely at our local airport today. We're only interested if one didn't. Sometimes we call them "Didja" stories, as in "Didja hear about the guy who got trapped in the mountains and had to cut off his own arm with a small knife in order to save himself?" Stories that help us understand the human condition better, called *human interest* stories, are often interesting, too. One person donating a kidney to a homeless person with kidney disease helps us see what human nature can sometimes accomplish.

But there is one more news criterion that is bigger than the rest. It's *conflict*. That's what's more interesting than all the others. When people are in conflict with other individuals, or with groups, or with nature, or anything else, that's always more interesting than if everything is going well. It's true of any kind of storytelling – fiction, anecdotal, or news.

If you go on a picnic with your significant other, and the sun is shining, and you place the blanket on the meadow, and peacefully enjoy the food and surrounding nature, and then go home with joy in your hearts, that might be a good day for you, and worth writing a sentimental poem about, but it's not very interesting. If you go on a picnic, though, with your significant other, and you spread your blanket on the meadow, and accidentally do so over a colony of fire ants that bite into you as you bite into your food, which you discover has been left in the sun too long and has spoiled and is giving you instant food poisoning, and your significant other discovers a love note from a rival (left in the picnic basket from the last time you secretly used it) and dark clouds descend and empty their contents in the form a vicious rain storm and you rush to the car and you turn your ankle in haste and then find you locked your keys in the car and you are stranded outside with lightning flashing all around you and your former significant other calling down curses on your head, well, that's just a more interesting story. That's a "didja."

That's because conflict is interesting. It's interesting in part because it is in contrast to the way things usually are.

The history of how and why we communicate with each other has its roots in conflict. Years ago communication was explained to me by a writer who likened it to the way oysters create pearls.

The oyster is perfectly content at the bottom of the ocean, and then a single grain of sand finds its way inside the shell. This creates an irritation in the oyster, which then secretes a substance to protect itself from the irritant. The secretions continue and sometimes they eventually harden into what we now call a pearl. But that pearl was created by something not being right – in contrast to how things typically exist. That’s how communication works. If everything is fine, no one speaks or writes. If something irritates, then we feel the need to tell someone. Instead of “Com theory,” think of it as “Clam theory.”

It’s true in everyday speech. I might be driving in the car with my wife or kids, and it might be silent (not because we’re mad, but because everything’s fine). Then someone speaks – out of discomfort regarding the silence, or to point something out, or because he or she wants something, or to feel closer to those in the car. The motive for speaking is often a dissatisfaction with the silence – as small as a grain of sand. And sometimes a pearl is produced.

But when *everything* is perceived as an irritant, and a personal attack, and an excuse to rant, well, then it seems that the value of the pearls is cheapened. They’re no longer unusual. They look more like poison than pearls.

The news industry has a spotty record in this regard. What we now know as newspapers (there are still a few good ones left), began in this country as pamphlets, each one espousing the news of the day through the prism of a particular political perspective, creating an atmosphere of fear and hostility. Sound familiar? Those were the days when there were several political parties, and each pamphlet trumpeted the merits of its own ideology and denounced all others. This is where the word “pamphleteering” comes from. It was mean spirited, competitive, and not interested in accuracy or verification.

The number of political parties shrank, and newspaper owners figured that they could sell more papers through sensationalism. Crimes, accidents, natural disasters, wars, were hawked at street corners by children selling the papers for a penny. It wasn’t until about the middle of the 20th Century that news organizations began to try for a more temperate, middle ground approach, to reporting the news. The word “objectivity” began to appear.

Television stations have followed this same pattern, only in reverse. They started in mid-century, and have gravitated more toward their own version of pamphleteering and sensationalism.

But because there was still competition among news organizations, getting the facts right mattered. If one organization got the facts wrong, then another competing organization would point that out. Verification became standard practice among journalists, leading to this cliché, which has endured for decades: “If your mother says she loves you, check it out.” In other words, just because someone says something doesn’t mean it’s true. I actually teach the art of skepticism to students. Skepticism simply means you wonder if what you have been told is true, and you do the work to find out. That’s different from cynicism, where a person’s mind is made up, and can’t be dissuaded by something as bothersome as facts. Skeptics are kind of fun to be around. Cynics are boring.

Journalism, when it is done well, gives the public a common set of facts so that citizens can make up their own minds about matters in their interest. Sometimes those facts are uncomfortable, such as showing governments or corporations lying to its citizens or customers. At the university where I teach, the student newspaper sometimes writes a story that holds the powerful forces accountable. As the advisor to that newspaper, I try to tell the administrators that shining this bright spotlight of public scrutiny on them is actually a loving gesture. It's one of the ways we live in community with one another. That spotlight provides the community with a common set of facts that hold powerful entities accountable on a topic that is in the public's interest. But they must be verified facts, not just assertions or half-truths. The truth matters. As former U.S. Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis said, "Sunshine is the best disinfectant." Bringing facts out in the open is best for everyone and protects citizens from abuse of power. Napoleon is said to have feared the written word far more than the bayonet. He was afraid of the facts.

This historical context is useful in considering the state of our present way of communicating with each other. Bloggers, tweeters, website hosts and others who put forth messages that are seen only through the prism of their own pre-conceived mindsets, are simply repeating the pamphleteering of our ancestors, creating fear and hostility. I don't doubt their sincerity. But history has shown us that this method eventually gets exposed as fraudulent, and a better way develops. We aren't to that better way yet.

What I have seen recently on the internet reminds me of the line in Ecclesiastes that there is nothing new under the sun. Half-truths, mean-spiritedness, ignorance of the facts, refusal to verify even the harshest claims, personal attacks – are we talking about the present day, or the world 200 years ago? Seems about the same to me. We could be talking about the 1950s, too, when Senator Joe McCarthy claimed to have a list of communists who were secretly serving in the U.S. Congress. The content of the list was never revealed, and McCarthy was finally shown to be a power-hungry, fear-mongering fraud. But he did a lot of damage in the meantime, ruined a lot of lives, and created a lot of fear and hostility. Or are we talking about the Church of the Nazarene in the 1970s, when leaders attacked the chaplain of Pasadena College, Reuben Welch, for what they said were his heretical beliefs? It turned out that very few of the leaders had actually read Reuben's work, or heard what he said. Para-church organizations repeated this kind of behavior in the 1980s in regard to the preacher and professor Tony Campolo, who ultimately was subjected to a heresy trial. These things give proof to the line attributed to Mark Twain, that a lie can get around the world before the truth has a chance to put on its boots. Just ask the employee of the U.S. Agriculture Department whose remarks were put on the website of a political opponent in 2010, edited to say exactly the opposite of what she did say, causing her to lose her job.

As many radio celebrities know, including some from religious organizations, if you can keep the audience afraid, you can guarantee that the money will continue to flow in. That's the worst kind of fear-mongering, in my view – fear that is motivated by greed for money and power.

The decline of the mainstream news media isn't helping matters, either. Very few news organizations check the accuracy of claims made in campaign speeches or in radio rhetoric. And with more internet options, the amount of disinformation, quotes taken out of context, and

outright lies seem to increase with impunity. Name calling and unsubstantiated rumors go unchecked. And very few sites exist to verify what's accurate and what's not.

The good news is that this is nothing new. It's been this way for a long time. The other good news is that it's easier for everyone to participate in making it better.

Which leads me back to Clam Theory and conflict.

To participate in the ongoing history of how we communicate, perhaps we can look at this harshness and dishonesty as the grains of sand in our shells. We can respond by evolving the way the newspapers evolved from the pamphleteering and sensationalism days and look at communication that will help us understand the world. We don't have to accept or perpetuate unsubstantiated or unverified information. We can find ways to communicate in ways that are motivated by love.

For instance, we can **Verify**. Recently the university where I teach hosted a speaker who seems to polarize people. Some love him, some hate him. They literally hate him. And they have created websites to that effect. On those websites are quotes from his books or talks where he makes some strong statements that some believe are antithetical to Christian beliefs. But if a person would look at the very next sentence in the book or the speech, the context and meaning of the earlier statement is provided, making exactly the opposite point from the haters. Verification could make a pearl out of an irritant.

We can **Be Skeptical**. This is related to verification. Saying "I wonder..." could lead us to finding out what is actually true. It could start a search for truth. Assuming that the loud voices must be right because they're so loud is no different from believing the world is about to end because the newsboys are shouting it with such fervor.

We can also **Offer an Alternative**. What if all the energy spent on attacking something was directed toward actually creating something better? Instead of going to all this effort to show why someone's message must be stopped, what if that same effort was put into making a more loving and beautiful message?

We can **Confront**. Jesus tells us in Matthew 18:15 that if we have a concern with our brother, we should go to him in person. My version actually says "You can't hide behind the internet." Okay – I wrote that in the margin. The prophets went directly to the kings. They were living under God's agenda, not their own. But they communicated face to face.

Finally, we can **Fear Not**. One of the most common themes of scripture is to not be afraid, but to see God at work all around us. This is my litmus test of whether something is speaking the truth in love: is it creating fear? Then it's not coming from love. And if it's not coming from love, then it's probably not true.

There's nothing wrong with conflict. It's what makes life interesting. But it's interesting only if it's in contrast to what else is going on. Otherwise, it's just noise.

Anyone out there feel like making some pearls?