

The Language of Reverence

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UU Small Group Ministry Network Quarterly, Spring 2006

“Sticks and stone will break my bones But names will never hurt me...”

Most of us are familiar with this children’s ditty and many of us, I expect, have engaged this bit of doggerel defensively in the hustle of the playground. On the one hand, it is a useful admonition that we can rise above taunts, slurs and name calling. On the other hand, it strikes me that the opposite is also true: words are powerful, and they do, in fact, have the power to wound. I think this is a useful reminder when we turn our attention to what has come to be referred to as “the language of reverence.”

Our congregations are made up of a wide mix of people, some born into our faith, and the majority who arrive from a wide variety of other traditions. Some just wander in, looking for a religious community. But many fall into our arms (I am speaking figuratively here) with great relief, finding in our company salvation, in the very broadest sense, from repressive and hurtful religious upbringings. For many, we are a religious haven in a hostile religious landscape. Not surprisingly, many among us are sensitive to language that evokes religious perspectives that make us uncomfortable, or simply, religious language that does not reflect who they now find themselves to be.

I have noticed a shift in our demographics. Fewer of those new to our congregations are refugees from other religious traditions. More newcomers grew up unchurched, and are now looking to explore the religious dimensions of their lives. For others, religious language is simply that, language, a tool for exploring the world.

So, it probably is no surprise that covenant groups from time to time encounter conflict over language. The point of small groups is to create conditions in which participants are able to share what is in their hearts and to talk about the real questions of meaning in our lives. We need language to do that, and some language is hot. Words are powerful, words like God, Goddess, Jesus, divinity, sacred, prayer, heaven, church, spirit, eternal, salvation, theology. Even words

like hymn or prelude can feel too “churchy” for some. These are words that may make some uncomfortable, but this is the vocabulary of spiritual discussion and exploration.

What to do? Well, it probably won’t surprise anyone to hear that I think that Covenant Groups are the perfect place to explore these tensions and to uncover common ground. As a UU Small Group Ministry true believer, I see nothing but opportunity here! It will require thoughtfulness and intention. If the language were a problem in a group in which I was involved, here is the approach I would take:

1. Help the group to understand that there is a difference of perspective, and invite the group to take time to explore the differences.
2. Review the group’s covenant to work respectfully, to listen and to learn. And if necessary, help the group forge a special covenant for this period of exploration.
3. Spend a session with the UUA Principles and Purposes document, and help the group see that a religious group encompassing different perspectives is exactly who we are. What holds us together is the practice of respect and tolerance.
4. Then, identify the words that are contentious and create sessions to explore, with extra attention to respect and tolerance, what these words mean to people and how we can find common ground together.

The tensions in our groups and in our movement over the language of reverence is fertile ground for the spiritual growth. I invite you to participate in this meaningful work in your congregation. Over time, SGM members may want to engage the whole congregation in exploring this tension and looking for common ground. The tension over words, the language of reverence, the vocabulary of spiritual exploration, runs through our movement. We make progress by working together to uncover the common ground, to find the place where we can all stand together.