

Quarterly Yoke Letter

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Renewing The Spirit...Renewing The Mind...

Trueblood Yokefellow Academy
Tel: 952-473-8877, Ext. 239

125 E. Wayzata Blvd., Wayzata, MN 55391
Email: jnewby2915@aol.com

Dear Friends,

My father thought that Hubert Humphrey was one of the greatest men who ever lived. He had worked with then Mayor Humphrey back in the 1950's, serving with him on the Human Relations Council in Minneapolis. Ever since, he had followed Humphrey's political career with much interest. I did not know the Hubert Humphrey prior to his time as Vice-President under Lyndon Johnson, and so I only knew him as a man who supported President Johnson's Viet Nam War policy. I was in college in 1968 when Humphrey decided to run for the presidency.

Also running for president was a man by the name of Eugene McCarthy. I liked him. He opposed the war in Southeast Asia, and based his presidential run on this opposition. As both of these men debated back and forth on the war and various other issues, they also set the stage for a debate in the Newby household. To make things more interesting, my grandmother was living with us during this time, and she was an ardent supporter of Richard Nixon. After all, he was a Quaker, and my grandmother felt that we should support "one of our own." Our home was not a pleasant place to eat dinner during those days. The subject of politics would inevitably be raised each time we sat down at the table together.

...*And for this food, we give Thee thanks. Amen.* "Dad, did you hear what McCarthy said today?!" "I heard that Richard Nixon has a secret plan to end the War in Viet Nam." "If we just let Hubert run his own show, he will be a terrific president!" I am not sure of the order of such comments, but they were all there. From the moment the thanksgiving prayer ended, until the last bite of dessert, politics occupied our meal conversation. My dear mother would quietly go about the business of making sure that we were all getting enough to eat, periodically asking if we would like more potatoes or peas.

As I reflect on those meals together, I can't help but smile. There we were, one middle-class family carrying the weight of the world's problems on our shoulders. We really did love one another beyond our differing political beliefs, and I suppose that it was during such times together that I learned how to differ with someone politically, while at the same time respecting and loving the person behind the belief. It would be many years before I would read the words of Robert Owen on a wall in New Harmony, Indiana, and reflect back on those dinner time discussions... "If we cannot reconcile all opinions, let us endeavor to unite all hearts." This is not to say that our verbal exchanges did not skirt the boundary of human respect. They did. In the end, however, we knew that we were still family, and that we loved one another.

I thought of these dinner discussions during a seminar I attended last week on America's deteriorating state of civility. This loss of civility is especially evident in our society's discussion of faith and political issues. We have reached the point where we no longer listen to one another, but, instead, see who can debate his or her point of view the loudest. Talk radio is famous for this kind of screeching and lack of civility, but it has infiltrated all segments of our lives. Our problems are beyond being Republican or Democrat, Baptist or Roman Catholic. *They are spiritual.* We care more about winning our point of view in the discussion and/or argument, than caring for the person with a different view point.

It is easy to de-humanize someone or some group or race when we do not know them. Throughout this seminar on civility, we interacted with one another, telling each other our stories. We talked about the major faith events of our lives that were nodal. We discussed the major political events that have shaped us. Instead of asking, "*What* do you believe?," we asked, "*Why* do you believe?" In the two days we were together we came to understand each other in a way that facilitated discussion of the issues of faith and politics, rather than hurling our points of view toward one another.

To share with one another in a civil way, there must first be certain elements underlying our life together. First is *trust*. I am reminded of several episodes of the comic strip *Peanuts*, featuring Charlie Brown, Lucy and

a football. In one episode, Charlie is quite certain about the fact that an offer from Lucy to hold the ball for him will end as all the other attempts have. She'll pull the ball away just as he is ready to kick it and he'll end up flat on his back.

He says to her: "You must think I am crazy. You say you'll hold the ball, but you won't. You'll pull it away and I'll break my neck." With the look of an angel, Lucy responds: "Why Charlie Brown, how you talk!" I wouldn't think of such a thing. I'm a changed person. Look, isn't this a face you can trust?" Since Charlie Brown is Charlie Brown, he accepts Lucy at her word. "All right, you hold the ball and I'll come running up and kick it." Sure enough, the expected happens, and as he flies through the air to smash to the ground, he can only shout, "She did it again!" In the last scene, Lucy leans over Charlie to say, "I admire you, Charlie Brown. You have such faith in human nature."

In a sense, our whole society is built on the trust of Charlie Brown. If we are going to be civil with one another, trust must be present.

A second element that should be present in civil discourse is *humility*. This is a spiritual quality that we could use much more of these days. As people become increasingly sure of their beliefs and opinions, with precious little room in their minds and conversation for doubt, civility is bound to suffer. Raising questions, looking at possible exceptions, maintaining a healthy level of doubt in all of one's assumptions is a healthy and humble way to have discourse. I am reminded again of the black theologian, Howard Thurman. As he would conclude his sermons, he would say, "I don't know...I don't know...It may be." If we could conclude all of our discourse with these words, and the humility they express, we would go a long way toward the recovery of civility in our society.

A third element necessary for civil discussion is the art of *listening*. When was the last time that you really listened to someone who has a differing opinion than your own? I mean, *really* listened? If we are going to recover civility in our society, *listening* must become a central part of our relationships. During the seminar I attended, two or three of us would sit together and listen to one another. Each person had three minutes to speak, and the rule was that no one could interrupt. This is not as easy as it sounds! Uncomfortable as it is at times, we all need to learn how to listen more intently.

A fourth element that is helpful in the recovery of civility is *vulnerability*. It is a condition that takes on more and more spiritual meaning as we mature. To be open and vulnerable, allowing our defenses to be let down as we interact with others, will not only help us to be more civil, it will help us to grow spiritually. To be vulnerable to new friendships and new experiences that challenge old ways and well-ordered patterns of living, is to know about discomfort and pain. It is also an important way that we come to know God...A God who is continuously taking risks becoming vulnerable in staying connected to us. In vulnerable discomfort, God opens our hearts and challenges our sense of control and protection. The more open and vulnerable we become, and the more authentic we can be with others, the closer we will feel to God, and the more intimate will be our relationships. In the words of Madeleine L'Engle, "To be alive is to be vulnerable."

When I left Plymouth Church in Des Moines, Iowa and moved to the Twin Cities of Minnesota, the Plymouth Staff gave me their church motto, framed and written in beautiful calligraphy. It now prominently hangs on one of the walls in my office. The words are these: "We agree to differ. We resolve to love. We unite to serve." As far as I can research, these are a part of a larger saying that hung over the Ashram in India of the great United Methodist Missionary, E. Stanley Jones. The complete saying is this: "Here we enter a fellowship. Sometimes we will agree to differ, but always we will resolve to love and unite to serve." If we are to maintain such a practice of civility in our life together, the elements of *trust*, *humility*, *listening* and *vulnerability* need to be present in our discourse. At times we will fail, but we must begin again. Our life together as a civilized society depends upon it.

Faithfully,

James R. Newby

