Is There An Antidote to Bad Faith?
How Minds Change & Deep Canvassing
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An important part of our Unitarian Universalist heritage is our tradition of both a **"free pulpit" and a "free pew."** My *freedom of the pulpit* means that I am encouraged to preach whatever I think will be significant and meaningful for us to consider. Your *freedom of the pew* means that you are not expected to believe or do something simply because it is spoken from this or any other pulpit.

That being said, once a year, members and friends of this congregation contribute all sorts of items, events, and opportunities to our annual auction. And each year, one of my auction contributions is to preach a **sermon on a topic of the highest bidder's choice**—"whatever subject you are passionate about or think would be particularly challenging, meaningful, or provocative." So if there is a sermon topic you've been hoping to hear addressed, our current auction could be your chance. Bidding ends at 4pm today, so go for it! Last time I checked the highest bid was over $400, so just how much am I worth to you?

Last year, Bob Ladner won the auction sermon, and the topic he chose "Is There An Antidote to Bad Faith?" So, if you like this sermon, thank Bob since it was his idea, and likely wouldn't have happened otherwise. But if you don't like the specifics, blame me. The highest bidder gets to pick the *topic*, not the content of the sermon.

When selecting the topic of "Is There An Antidote to Bad Faith?" Bob said he particularly had in mind that, "Many of us would like to love our neighbors without

exception, but we know there are people who regularly deal in bad faith." And with election denial continuing as Election Day rapidly approaches on Tuesday, November 8, it can be especially consequential when anti-democratic, authoritarian politicians act in bad faith.

So let me submit for your consideration that one significant antidote to bad faith is raising people's awareness that bad faith actors exist, and that we need to adjust our strategy accordingly. To that end, let's briefly explore what "bad faith" means.

In modern parlance, bad faith typically doesn't have anything to do with heretical religious beliefs. Instead, it's about giving lip service to acting honorable and respectful—while actually behaving in deceitful, hypocritical, self-serving ways. A classic example of bad faith is waving a white flag of surrender, then firing when your enemy approaches. (If anyone is watching the TV show *House of the Dragon*, an early episode this season has a scene of just that happening.) Other classic examples of bad faith include negotiating with someone to solicit more information or advantages from them — with no actual intent of compromising your original position — or manipulating language and reasoning to deliberately mislead others (Wikipedia).

One of my favorite books about bad faith is titled The Cynic & the Fool by Tad DeLay, a philosophy professor who writes at the intersection of religion, politics, and psychoanalysis. If you find yourself disagreeing with someone, DeLay urges you to notice what is *underneath* your disagreement. To use DeLay's categories, are you dialoguing with a **"misinformed but honest *fool*"?** Or are you dealing with a **nihilistic cynic**, who does not care about the truth—only about saying or doing what it takes to spin-doctor perception and win at any cost (DeLay 3)?

It really matters—and you should proceed differently—if your interlocutor is acting in *good* faith ("with honesty and sincerity of intention") or in *bad* faith ("with an intent to deceive"). And we know there have been a lot of bad faith actors over time, because we have lots of words to describe them: **con-man, demagogue, snake-oil salesman, huckster, charlatan, cheat, fraud, sham, swindler**. I could go on (DeLay 4).

To return to our focal question ("Is there an antidote to bad faith?"), I want to be honest with you that at least in my current view, I am not particularly hopeful about the

potential to reform the worst and most prominent bad faith actors in politics today. Rather, the best strategy may be to remove bad faith actors from power — that is, to do our best to leverage power and win. That's part of what we have been doing through #UUtheVote.

It is also important to acknowledge that while we are making lots of good faith efforts to advocate for our values in the public square, many bad faith actors are busy with as many underhanded methods as they can muster: gerrymandering, propaganda, lying, and more.

So, I want to try and respond to this question ("Is there an antidote to bad faith?") in at least two ways. This Sunday, I want to focus on a more interpersonal, psychological approach of deep canvassing. Next Sunday, when we will be two days out from Election Day, I want to invite us to consider a more systemic-level of change in a sermon on "A Brief History of Equality." Then the Sunday after the election, regardless of the outcome, I want us to spend some time reflecting on what we can and can't know about what the future holds.

So, as an antidote to people being misled by bad faith actors, what actually works to change people's minds? A few years ago, when I last preached on the topic of persuasion, the main case study I used was Motivational Interviewing. That sermon, titled "Maintaining UU Principles When We Can't Agree on Facts," is available in our online sermon archive for anyone interested. For this morning, I want to invite us to explore a related technique called Deep Canvassing.

I'll be drawing from a recent book titled How Minds Change: The Surprising Science of Belief, Opinion, and Persuasion by David McRaney, a journalist who hosts a podcast with the provocative title *You Are Not So Smart: Why You Have Too Many Friends on Facebook, Why Your Memory Is Mostly Fiction, and 46 Other Ways You're Deluding Yourself*. One of his areas of interest is the ways that we human beings frequently fall into the traps of cognitive biases and logical fallacies. In other words, even when we consciously have good intentions, our unconscious biases and motivating reasoning can lead us to be less smart that we perceive ourselves to be — a sort of *unconscious* bad faith (xiii).

When his book was published about a decade ago in 2012, McRaney confesses that he was in a pretty pessimistic place regarding the hope of changing people's minds. About a year later his own mind had surprisingly changed. What happened? He watched in real-time the stunning shift in public opinion toward supporting same-sex marriage.

McRaney had spend many years as a journalist "moderating daily arguments about how same-sex marriage would ruin America" (xiv). Then around the time his book was published in 2012, we finally reached a majority of U.S. citizens supporting same-sex marriage, and a strange thing happened: **"When the majority flipped, the arguments (mostly) evaporated,"** especially compared to the vitriolic level they had been at before (*ibid*).

As he began to investigate this phenomenon more closely, it turns out that there are a number of precedents:

> Since polling began in the early twentieth century, nearly half of the significant opinion shifts in the United States have been abrupt. Opinions about abortion, the war in Vietnam, attitudes about race and women and voting rights and smoking and marijuana and many others were stable for years…. [But] when the tide of public opinion turned on these issues, it shifted so quickly that **if people could step into a time machine and go back just a few years, many would likely argue with themselves with the same fervor they argue about wedge issues today.** (xv)

There's a lot to say about all of this—including the importance of building momentum over time locally and at the state-level to help catalyze change at the national-level— and McRaney's book is fascinating and accessible if you want the full details. But in our limited time this morning, I want to invite us to focus on deep canvassing since there are some takeaways that you can experiment with in your own life.

Deep canvassing is a relatively new practice with an impressive track record: "Not every time, but often, people using this technique can get a person to give up a long-held opinion and change their position, especially about a contentious social issue, in less than twenty minutes" (15). Even more importantly, the changes have staying power over time (45).

I know some of you have done deep canvassing, and I would be interested to hear about your successes and failures. Others of you may have heard about it a few years ago when an article on deep canvassing was published in the prestigious, peer-reviewed journal *Science*. That success was then picked up by *The Atlantic* in an article titled, "No, Wait, Short Conversations Really Can Reduce Prejudice," and in *The New York Times* in an article on "How Do You Change Voters' Minds? Have a Conversation" (45). Importantly, though, not just any conversation works. Some conversational methods are far more effective than others.

In the spirit of full transparency, let me be clear about the scale we are talking about. In one recent experiment with deep canvassing,

> One in ten people opposed to transgender rights changed their views, and on average, they changed that view by 10 points on a 101-point "feelings thermometer".... If one in ten doesn't sound like much, you're neither a politician nor a political scientist. It is huge...after a single conversation.... A change of much less than that could easily rewrite laws, flip a swing state, or turn the tide of an election. More than that, a shift of 1 percent had the potential to set in motion a cascade of attuned change that could change public opinion in less than a generation." (44)

Keep in mind that these impressive results were from a crew of people with little previous experience in deep canvassing having conversations that were approximately ten minutes in length (*ibid*).

As a point of comparison, how many of you have spent countless *hours* debating with someone—only to feel like, in retrospect, nothing changed for either of you—except that perhaps you both now resent one another more than when you began? I argue with people a lot less than I used to, but I can remember many times when debating with someone felt like banging my head against a brick wall: the brick wall seemed unfazed, but my head sure did start to hurt!

If you want to be formally trained in deep canvassing, some light googling will turn up lots of opportunities, but for now, let me give you two tricks to have in your back pocket for when the timing feels right. Either of them can be effective in isolation,

but deep canvassing at its best uses both in a strategic way to shape the flow of a 10-20 minute conversation.

First, shift from what to *why*. The "what" refers to debating facts. Arguing about different interpretations of the evidence keeps people up in their head, and it tends to be both endless and ineffective. It's like battling a hydra or playing "whack a mole." No sooner have you struck down one head of your opponents argument than another has sprung up to take its place (31-32, 35).

Shifting from what to *why* means making that all important eighteen-inch journey from your head to your heart. Instead of focusing on what you respectively believe, notice *why* you feel that way.

This is where the magic can begin to happen. When we are stuck in cognitively debating facts, we tend to act like defense attorneys, charged with endlessly innovating new defense strategies. But if you ask about the why, curiosity might unexpectedly open people up as they consider: "Why *do* I feel this way?"

In the words of one deep canvassing trainer, "a newfound ambivalence washes over them." Instead of debating back and forth from entrenched positions, it can suddenly feel like "we are solving a mystery together" (36). (*"Why do I feel this way?"*) Even more fascinating is when this philosophical contemplation results in people **"producing their own counter arguments"** and persuading themselves to change their own minds far more effectively than a debating partner would have been able to (36).

Now, this doesn't always happen, but you can increase the likelihood of success with our second trick: sharing ***emotionally vulnerable stories.*** Are you willing to tell a personal story about *why* you feel this way? For instance, if you were deep canvassing around reproductive justice, you might share how you first heard about abortion or your own or a close friend's abortion story. That can open up a similar level of deep sharing on the other's part (37).

Emotionally vulnerable personal stories really are a key ingredient. We could contrast their impact with what is sometimes called the "fact checker's fallacy," which mistakenly holds that most people will change their minds based on facts alone. Social scientists have tested many different methods for deep canvassing, and the results

consistently show that if you **"Remove the non-judgmental listening and story-sharing, no effect. Put them back in and the effect returns"** (248).

Let me hasten to add that this brief overview can by no means replace actual training in deep canvassing where you go in depth and have a chance to practice. But to tie it all together, the following is a very brief distillation of the process:

1. Establish rapport. Assure the other person you aren't out to shame them, and then ask for consent to explore their reasoning.
2. Ask how strongly they feel about an issue on a scale of one to ten.
3. Share a story about someone affected by the issue.
4. Ask a second time how strongly they feel. If the number moved, ask why.
5. Once they've settled, ask, "*Why* does that number feel right to you?"
6. Once they've offered their reasons, repeat them back in your own words. Ask if you've done a good job summarizing. Repeat until they are satisfied.
7. Ask if there was a time in their life *before* they felt that way, and if so, what led to their current attitude?
8. Listen, summarize, repeat.
9. Briefly share your personal story of how you reached your position, but do not argue.
10. Ask for their rating a final time, then wrap up and wish them well. (246)

Keep in mind that it can be hugely significant to shift someone even from a "10" to even a "7" or "8" in one short conversation. I will also again readily concede that there are a lot of bad faith actors out there. But practices like deep canvassing give me hope that there are ways of changing people's minds.