Responsible Speech

Free speech is a right guaranteed in the U.S. Constitution. It is also foundational to the UU practice of freedom of the pulpit. Should there, however, be limits to the freedom? If so, who would determine whether given words comply with what is acceptable?

As a society, there are limits to free speech through mechanisms such as slander and libel. Yelling “Fire” in a crowded theater is considered unlawful. Movies carry censorship ratings to protect children and there are child pornography laws punishing language of child exploitation.

The current political discourse is one where disinformation campaigns are explicit, where misleading statements about one’s opponent are almost expected, and where artificial intelligence programs enable putting words into a person’s mouth. At the same time, bullying is rampant in schools and in cyberspace sometimes leading to mental health issues and even suicide. “Political correctness” language is under assault while college Presidents are excoriated by Congress and forced to resign when they do not adequately police negative statements on campus. Many of us struggle with broken relationships because of political differences. How do we engage with others when we cannot even agree on what is true? Can we love those who hate and fear us as monsters and murderers?

As UUs, we are called on to use inclusive language that respects our diversity and connotes equity. As an example, gender pronouns such as they/them and Ze/Zem are new terms for some UUs. No one is perfect in the use of language. Should we point out microaggressions or hurts when they occur? How do we do that while centered in love?

How do we respond to speech that is intentionally hateful and inflammatory? What if we do not speak up when we hear such language?

Who decides what is inappropriate? Do different rules apply for children than for adults? What about consequences for speech deemed inappropriate?

We have struggled with these questions both as citizens and as members of UU congregations where we do not always agree with one another. Recently, our faith movement has wrestled with redefining our basic tenets and what we have in common. Not everyone agreed. Some have felt attacked and dismissed. Have we always been able to disagree respectfully and in love? How do we handle disagreements and even disruptive behavior in our congregations?