

Right Speech
Rev. David A. Morris
UU Congregation of the Outer Banks
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During the 2016 elections and since, it was not unusual to hear people, including the man who was elected President of the United States, say that “political correctness” was ruining the country. One component of the American population was often portrayed in news accounts as being attracted to the current President because they were tired of political correctness, and they were glad finally to have a leader who encouraged them to speak their minds, like he did.

In the public discourse of the news media about “political correctness,” there’s a pretty consistent narrative that many people feel they have been silenced in our country for too long, and that finally they have been given the power to speak their minds freely once again.

The words of Emma Gonzalez, one of the young people who survived America’s latest slaughter of innocents at Marjorie Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, remind us of who has really been silenced in our country.

A few months ago I was privileged to stand with a few hundred other people of faith from all over the country in front of the headquarters of the National Rifle Association in Fairfax, Virginia, bearing witness to the fifth anniversary of the slaughter of toddlers and teachers at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut. One of the speakers was my colleague the Rev. Chris Buice, minister of the Tennessee Valley Unitarian Universalist Church in Knoxville, Tennessee, where ten years ago this July a gunman walked into church on a Sunday morning during a children’s play, killing two people and wounding six before being subdued by church members.

Rev. Chris updated his remarks from that day in Fairfax at a recent vigil for the Parkland victims and survivors, when he said: “The scripture tells us, ‘Speak out for those who cannot speak for themselves.’ The 17 people massacred in a Broward County high school in Florida last week cannot speak for themselves. We must speak for them. The children massacred at the Sandy Hook Elementary school cannot speak either, nor can the teenagers gunned down at Columbine High School or the college students slaughtered at Virginia Tech or the young adults murdered at the Pulse Night Club or the concertgoers in Las Vegas or the martyrs at Mother Emanuel AME Church or Zaevion Dobson or JaJuan Latham or many others who never make the headlines in a society where we have become numbed to gun violence. We must speak for them.”

We must speak for them.

The ethical teachings of Buddhism are distilled into eight precepts called the Noble Eightfold Path, including principles such as Right Livelihood, Right Action, Right Mindfulness, and Right Speech.

According to the most ancient writings, the way to right speech is through four “Abstentions”: Abstaining from lying, from divisive speech, from abusive speech, and from idle chatter. (Most

people find that last one the hardest.) Some teachers, especially some contemporary teachers, prefer to formulate the abstentions as positive guidance: Speak the truth, speak in such a way as to bring people together, speak kindly or at least politely, and speak purposefully about what is important. Some Buddhist teachers, ancient and modern, also emphasize that there is an aspect of timeliness to right speech: Speak when the time or the circumstances are right, whether the words are welcome or not.

These are important precepts, and not just for Buddhists. The power of speech, the power of language to destroy or to build, to harm or to heal, can't be overestimated, and we all need guidance.

I had not expected to be speaking about a school massacre today, when I planned to explore “political correctness” and the principle of Right Speech. But the aspect of timeliness calls me: Suddenly, the right time to talk about gun violence is *now*. Of course, the truth is that the time was *now* before Parkland. As Rev. Chris went on to say, “After a violent massacre we are told it is “too soon” to talk about responsible public policy, when in fact it is too late.”

Right speech is the necessary speech, the words that are called for in this time, by the circumstances that we are in now. We must speak for those who have been silenced.

Those who complain about “political correctness” have never actually been silenced. When someone says, “I know this isn't politically correct, but. . .” they are warning you that they are about to say something derogatory, hateful, mocking, cruel, or dishonest about another human being or group of human beings. They are not seeking the freedom to speak; they are trying to ensure that *you* remain silent, so that they can speak without consequences.

“What are people really longing for when they lament, ‘political correctness has been the downfall of our country?’ writes Huffington Post commentator Martie Sirois. “Are they pining for a period - not too long ago - when it was universally acceptable to use language that was racist, sexist, homophobic, or prejudiced against someone or a group of people, without any repercussion?” What had been lost until recently was not the ability to say hateful or harmful things; it was the ability to do so without being challenged or condemned. That's what people thought our current President would give back to them, and we must not accept it.

Complaining about “political correctness” is a strategy, just like arguing that Black Lives Matter activists protesting police violence are “too angry” or using the “wrong methods,” just like claiming that it's “not the right time” to talk about sensible gun policies when a mass shooting has just happened. All of these arguments are strategies meant to silence those who would insist on the dignity and equality of all people, or who would insist on an end to the killing of young black and brown men and women, or who would insist that people should not have to die because of the stranglehold of the NRA on American politics.

What the young activists of Marjorie Stoneman Douglas High have done is insist that the time is *now* to talk about real solutions to gun violence in our communities. No one can tell them they should be quietly mourning instead of speaking—because they have made it clear that speaking is the shape their mourning takes. No one can tell them they don't have the authority to speak

and demand to be heard—because they are the true experts on school shootings, the ones who know what it is like to hide in a closet while you hear and see your friends die. They refuse to be silenced by politicians or others who have the utter gall to call them arrogant or disrespectful or naïve or immature, because they are prepared to call BS on phony arguments against sensible gun restrictions. And they are calling on us to do the same.

The young leaders from Parkland have inspired other young leaders in schools across the country to stand up and demand that adults step up to our adult responsibilities, and act like we value our children's lives more than we value anyone's so-called "right" to own a military weapon, more than we value comfortable conversations around the dinner table, more than we value some friendships. At their call, on March 24th, students across the country will gather in mass demonstrations to call in the name of the dead for common-sense gun policies and other reforms to begin to put an end to the scourge of mass violence in our country.

As you can see in your Order of Service, one of those demonstrations will be held here in the Outer Banks, at Dowdy Park. It's my own hope that every single adult who can possibly get free will be there. It is time for us all to follow the leadership of our children and youth, to stand in support of them and of their lives, and to make a firm commitment of our own to use every power we have to ensure that our elected leaders do not dare refuse to take real action—not the appalling stupidity of trying to turn teachers into paramilitary guards and schools into fortresses—but real action to address the fundamental policy framework that supports our country's addiction to the tools of mass death. It is time for us to break the power of an organization that represents the interests and values of gun manufacturers and sellers, not gun owners, and not our children.

I'm a little embarrassed to say that the students from Stoneman Douglas probably know more about gun policies and the statistics about mass shootings in our country than I do—but only a little embarrassed. It turns out that many of those remarkably articulate, poised, knowledgeable young people have been studying gun policy and mass shootings in their AP government class this year. They have been debating gun policy in the public-speaking classes that are part of their school's curriculum for all students. They were, as Slate Magazine journalist Dahlia Lithwick reports, uniquely prepared for this moment. I'm not.

But here's a challenge I can accept: I can learn, and I can prepare myself for knowledgeable conversations in this moment. And because I'm in a special position of my own, I can help to make opportunities for other people to learn, and to speak out in turn.

What about you?

Because the young leaders from Parkland have shown us all something else: they have shown that we have underestimated our power. As young people did in the Civil Rights Movement, as young people did in the Vietnam War resistance, as young people so often do for those of us who are older, they have reminded us that we have given up too easily, that we have become reconciled to something unacceptable, that we have lost hope, and that we have no right to lose hope. We have no right to reluctantly reconcile ourselves to gun violence. We have no right to give up.

There are many issues of grave concern in our world today, issues that are directly related to the religious principles that we hold sacred in this spiritual community. Right Speech does not require that we all speak about all the same things, or in the same way. It does call for us each to consider what truth we are able to speak, and how we are best able to speak it. Right Speech does not require that we all attach the same level of urgency to any particular concern. It does call for each of us to identify what truth needs our skill, our courage, and our commitment to make it real and visible in the world—and to speak and act, as and when we can.

Each of us has to decide when it is time for us to speak, about this or any other matter; there's no universal standard or measure. What does Right Speech ask of you in this time? If it is true that we must speak for those who cannot speak for themselves, for whom would you choose to speak?

My faith, my Unitarian Universalist faith, teaches me that life is sacred and that love is the power that drives and guides the moral universe. Every single day offers me some opportunity to put that faith into action. On March 24th, I know where my faith will be calling me to be. I'll be there if I possibly can. I hope you'll be there if you can.

May we be the ones to make it so.