

**Creating spaces series: Discussing health care reform August 11, 2009**

*If you don't know the kind of person I am  
and I don't know the kind of person you are  
a pattern that others made may prevail in the world  
and following the wrong god home we may miss our star.*

*William Stafford from "A Ritual to Read to One Another"*

I could argue we're seeing the fruits of the patterns we've made in the world in the current furor and *non*-discussions of health care reform taking place around the country.

I say, I could argue, but argument in excess is one of the patterns we've made---to the exclusion of other patterns of being together--which brought us to this impasse in the first place, so why not just say what is happening and drop the arguments?

What is happening within me as I watch otherwise good people following the wrong god home, (the fear god, the "what's in for me and to hell with the rest of you" god, the "winner take all" god) is a kind of sad curiosity about why we persist using means that will never connect to the ends we say we want. Curiosity about why important people want to stay on the stage long, long after they should be able to see that they've become part of the problem---

Watching Arlen Specter, for instance, in a town hall meeting in Lebanon, PA made me want to weep---and "say bad words" as my grandsons call cursing. As much as I deplore the shouting and sloganeering that is sweeping the country in these meetings, I can see why otherwise good people, are susceptible to demagogues' encouragement to "save the democracy" by wreaking havoc on the democratic process.

Our leaders seem incapable of just saying what's going on, incapable of saying "yes" "no" "I don't know" "I don't know yet." Senator Specter's unctuous, condescending clouds of fuzzy language infuriated me, and whipped the crowd to further shouting.

The man is still---as he made clear several times---running for office! He wants another term; that's why he switched to the Democratic party. That's why he won't risk being clear, being a leader, being someone who educates instead of placates. Senator Specter is eighty years old at least. Has it ever occurred to him to mentor, to rest, for goodness sake, to take stock of his own inner life, and stop *doing*?!

Language creates reality, and we have, on the one side. shouting, on the other side, tortured evasions. What kind of spaces make a different quality of language, and learning together possible? Not surely town hall meetings and television interviews such as the one Chris Matthews did with the man who carried a gun to President Obama's speech in New Hampshire. Matthews ranted at the man, humiliated him, cut him off again and again as he tried to speak, all this as a way of deploring the potential for violence in the gun-carrier's behavior. Matthews was flat-out violent in his treatment of

the man. Maybe it makes good TV (not really); maybe it makes Matthews feel powerful and righteous, but it just makes more violence to abuse your power in that way.

Pardon the cliché, but *if we can put a man on the moon*, we can design spaces in which people will learn to listen, learn to speak in a way they can be heard.

What if, for example, members of congress charged their staff with imagining ways of communicating with constituents in small group processes as well as the traditional formats of "town hall" and policy speeches. I say AS WELL AS. Both/And. This is leadership for now, and the leadership we have only seems to have the old paradigm skills of negotiation, argument, and standing before crowds.

I wish they'd sit down, and well, frankly, shut up. I wish people who are screaming slogans they learned from one demagogue or another, or one cynical misinformation ad or another, would sit down too. Sit down, read together the real reform suggestions as they emerge. Sit down, and write: what they want, what they fear, what the don't want and why. Sit down, with people on every side of the issue; hear one another's stories. No cameras, no chances to be on Olberman, on Limbaugh or any other shaper of "what's true."

Let's re-learn not-ranting, please, before we miss our star, our humanity, our kindness, our very real connectedness to one another, by which we will either survive and thrive, or decline into more violence and futile wrangling.