

VOICES IN THE WILDERNESS
Sermon presented to the Wildflower Unitarian Church of Austin
Sunday, May 25, 2003

I want you to know, this is a topic that is near and dear to me, and I could talk about it for hours. I won't, but I could.

I used the term "voice in the wilderness" in a recent e-mail to several Texas legislators to whom I was protesting the redrawing of the voting districts that would have eliminated Democratic representation in most of the state. As you know, Austin, this liberal bastion that gnaws at the craw of the Republican Party, would have been divided into four voting districts, thereby robbing us of a voice and ending the career of Congressman Lloyd Doggett, a liberal Democrat. I closed my e-mail to the legislators with something like, "the enlightened voice of Austin has traditionally been merely a voice in the wilderness. With this redistricting map, there will be only wilderness."

The phrase "voice in the wilderness" creates a vivid and touching picture in my mind. Think first of wilderness: desolation, isolation, vast expanses of uncivilized wasteland, a wind that howls through the shadows, yet no air seems to move. Then, imagine a voice, a thin, lone voice crying out from the desolation, hoping to connect, to be heard by someone else. There's a lyric I recall from a musical; a man sings plaintively, "Is anybody there? Can anybody hear?" It's quite sad.

There's a Chicago-based organization called Voices in the Wilderness that has been in the news quite a bit lately because some of their members volunteered to be human shields in Iraq. I heard one of their representatives

speak at a forum on Iraq months ago. He was very eloquent and reasonable (my definition of a liberal) as he explained that Voices in the Wilderness was formed when the sanctions against Iraq took effect. There were apparently two kinds of sanctions: those levied by the UN and those created by the Daddy Bush administration which were designed to cause such misery among the Iraqi people that they would rise up and overthrow Saddam Hussein. They were only half successful in reaching those two goals; they did cause tremendous misery. One of the US-sanctioned commodities was medications. Voices in the Wilderness members made countless trips to Iraq, smuggling in medications that they would deliver directly to hospitals. In spite of their efforts, half a million Iraqi children died, many of whom might have lived if they'd had clean water and proper medical treatment.

I looked up on Google to see what other information I could find on the phrase "voice in the wilderness," and discovered there are quite a few organizations that have adopted that moniker, including a rock group, a Canadian group that answers questions about Christian customs such as is it ok for women to wear men's clothes and should a woman be allowed to attend church if she's menstruating and therefore unclean; also a fundamentalist group that proudly proclaims that recent inexplicable photos taken by the Hubble telescope prove that the cosmos was indeed created by God.

The *earliest* reference I found for the phrase was in the Bible. According to the Gospels, it was foretold by Esaias, the prophet, that there would be one whose voice would cry out from the wilderness, preparing the way for the savior

who would come later, and John the Baptist identified himself in that way, “I am only a voice in the wilderness, preparing the way for He Who Is To Come.” John lost his head for being a voice in the wilderness, which illustrates a point: *voices in the wilderness are not always well received*. Hmm!

We know many other people from history who could be categorized as being VIPs among the VIW: certainly Copernicus and Galileo would be in that pantheon, having had the courage and the unfortunate timing to announce that science had indicated that the world was round and that it was not the center of the universe, respectively. Winston Churchill was a VIW before the Second World War, trying to alert the unsuspecting British population about the suspicious buildup of the German navy. There was Rachel Carson with her battle against DDT and the powerful chemical companies that made it, and Dorothy Dix who fought to improve treatment of the mentally ill. The epitome today of a voice in the wilderness might be Aung San Suu Kyi, the brave advocate for human rights and unity in Burma, what is now Myanmar. Her role as focal point for the opposition to the despotic military rulers has kept her often under house arrest and separated from her children and her husband, who was not allowed to see his wife before his recent death. Only her Nobel Peace Prize, which she was not allowed to collect, and her worldwide notoriety have kept her alive.

As both a Unitarian Universalist and a political liberal, I’m sort of a double-dipper in the voices-in-the-wilderness category, as are some of you. We don’t do much crying in the wilderness on behalf of Unitarianism. We don’t proselytize, or

witness, or make people come to the front of the church to declare their allegiance to our beliefs. Everybody pretty much just blazes his own trail through life, creating a belief system that works for them . . . and they talk about it a lot.

Politically, however, we really can't afford to be quiet. If we don't speak out, others assume we agree with them and with the way things are.

For my part in the political voice-in-the-wilderness campaign, I send e-mails, I make phone calls opposing redistricting, I voice my opinion on other political issues, I march in protest rallies, send money to political organizations, I've written hundreds of letters supporting my opinions, I proudly show where I stand politically by placing a sign in my front yard, and of course I vote. But, I have felt often throughout my life and especially the last three years, as if mine too is just a voice in the wilderness. Is anything I do making a difference? Is anybody there? Can anybody hear?

Before I hurt myself, patting myself on the back, let me say that I am acutely aware of how easy it is for me to do all those things today in the United States. Ours is unquestionably a wonderful country, filled with beauty, opportunity, generosity, and personal freedom. I don't believe ours is the *only* great country in the world. Canada, Switzerland, the Scandinavian countries, Japan, the Netherlands, and plenty of others are also quite nice, but it's true that it's generally easy, allowed, and even encouraged to speak one's mind in the United States. It's quite another thing to voice an opinion that could lead to death or torture or to place one's family in danger, to literally place oneself in front of the tank. Aung San Suu Kyi's father was murdered for his enlightened political

views, she risked torture and death by opposing the brutal, drug-financed military regime in Burma. She chose service to her people above even her own family. Would I be able to make such a courageous choice? I doubt it. But the little I do is something, and it's important to do *something*.

I'm a not-very-good member of Amnesty International because I think the work they do is so vitally important. [Are any of you members?] In their mail-outs, they frequently tell about individuals who have been imprisoned, often it seems on a whim or for speaking out against injustice. They quote these people as saying things like, *"I lost count of the number of days, months, years I had been locked up, with nothing to interrupt the emptiness of my life except intermittent torture. I frantically tried to remember details about the faces of those I loved. I was forgetting them, as I was sure, they were forgetting me. I prayed for death. Then, I received a card from an American member of Amnesty International that read, 'We know who you are and where you are, and we reach out to you in our thoughts and prayers. You are not alone.' That card became my greatest treasure and my hold on life."*

The knowledge that one is not alone does not win the war, but it makes it so much easier to keep on fighting. Look at the war on Iraq. If England had not supported the war, would it have happened? If the U. S. had stood totally alone against the rest of the world? Who knows? Maybe not.

I moved to Austin a few years ago from a small city in a very conservative part of Texas where coming out in favor of a liberal cause could generate a great deal of hostility, cause loss of employment, and exclusion from some organizations. I

have tremendous admiration for the small congregation of Unitarians there who risk quite a bit in speaking out on political issues.

Since moving to Austin, adhering to my point of view has become easier. But, I still find myself in trouble and at odds with some of my clients, co-workers, and even some family members who disagree with my views. I forget that not EVERYBODY in Austin is a liberal. In fact, there are thousands of people here who are firmly planted in the conservative camp. Again, I'm grateful for Unitarians. It's interesting to consider the many ways that politics and religion intertwine. We are currently in the midst of what some people call a *holy war*, an incongruous pairing to be sure. Another mixing of religious and political terms is the presidency as being a *bully pulpit*. Ministers from Unitarians to Baptists have been known to *preach their politics* on Sunday mornings. *Jesse Jackson and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.* both began their political lives at the lectern in their respective churches. And Chris Hedges, the Pulitzer Prize winning journalist who was recently booed off the stage as he tried to make a commencement speech at Rockford College in Illinois because his speech was a condemnation of the current administration and its policies, was the graduate of a divinity school.

The Chris Hedges event was a startling reminder that these are very scary days. Every issue seems to instantly polarize, and we look to see who is for us and who is against us. Free speech is hanging by a thread. Even fame is no protection. Look at the Dixie Chicks. When I heard that conservatives were destroying their Chicks CDs, firing deejays who play Chicks music, and

vandalizing the homes of the Chicks and their families, I e-mailed them words of support and bought all the Chicks CDs that I didn't already have, just to firmly position myself on the side of free speech.

Those of you who have heard me speak before know that I often use Dr Seuss stories as illustrations for my presentations. They always seem to fit so well. I think next time I'm asked my religion, I'll say I'm a Seussian. So, it will come as no surprise that the good doctor has a story that beautifully illustrates the "voice in the wilderness-worth of the individual" concept in Horton Hears a Who.

Initially, as you heard, there was one Who who realized the danger that threatened the entire population. His was the lone voice in the wilderness. He convinced others. They started clamoring for help, adding more and more residents to their campaign. It wasn't enough until the Mayor found a child who was unaware of the situation. When that small voice was added to the throng, it proved to be the tipping point. It was loud enough for the kangaroos to hear despite their poor hearing.

The idea of a tipping point is an interesting concept. There's a book by Malcolm Gladwell called, The Tipping Point, How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference that discusses the phenomenon, citing anecdotal examples from history, law enforcement, business, education, sales, and more. When does a virus become an outbreak? When does an outbreak become an epidemic? When does a fad become a trend? When does an idea become a policy and a policy become the law of the land? When is enough enough? Which one will be

the camel's back-breaking straw? The answer shifts. With some tipping points, it's an obvious numbers game: more people spoke out against the Vietnam War than were for it, so it stopped. With some, it's a single influential person who can start a trend, like the Jackie Kennedy look in hairstyles and clothes. The Keep Austin Weird campaign created a tipping point. The books and records chain store that was planning on building at Sixth and Lamar has backed out because of a grassroots effort that included t-shirts, bumper stickers, letter writing, and hundreds of Austinites who stood by their local businesses. It can work.

How many people does it take to tip the scales in favor of an idea? That too seems to vary dramatically. All along during the pre-war months, as I saw more and more influential people speaking out for peace, I thought surely we would prevail. Representatives of every major religion, including every major Protestant religion with the possible exception of Baptists, and including even the President's own Methodists spoke out strongly against the war. Former presidents, respected journalists, almost every country on the planet including many of our closest allies, millions of demonstrators in hundreds of cities around the world, several of the administration's own ambassadors, Walter Cronkite, and even George Sr. questioned the wisdom, legitimacy, legality, and even the basic ethics of a pre-emptive attack on another country supposedly because of a potential threat that could not be substantiated. Yet, none of that seemed to matter. All were just voices in the wilderness, hoping that the one ear they wished to reach was actually listening. It was not.

I heard a radio interview the day after the 600-city anti-war protest during which some administration guru was asked what it would take to stop the war. He said the President's approval rating would have to be in the 30's before he would listen to the opposition. I'd call that a tipping over point.

The volatile combination of fear and nationalism spawned Hitler and the Nazi Party. It also gave rise to Joseph McCarthy and the House Unamerican Activities investigation. Fifty years later, it has created yet another leader and another movement that cause many of us to be afraid.

Since there are similarities between today's collective fear of terrorists and the national fear of Communists that preceded McCarthyism, I decided to look up the McCarthy Era on the Internet and see if I could find information as to how the tipping point was reached that placed the twisted Senator on the wrong side of the scale. It's quite startling to note the similarities.

Fearing enemy infiltration prior to World War II, Congress created the House Un-American Activities Committee in 1938 to investigate people suspected of unpatriotic behavior, assuming such behavior to be a possible precursor to an attempt to overthrow the government.

The Alien Registration Act, passed by Congress in June, 1940, required all alien residents in the US over 14 years of age to file a comprehensive statement of their personal and occupational status and a record of their political beliefs. Within four months, a total of nearly 5 million aliens had been registered.

In 1947, fearing a possible Communist take-over, the House Un-American Activities Committee began an investigation of the motion picture industry,

interviewing 41 people who subsequently accused 19 people of holding left-wing views. Ten of the 19 refused to answer the Committee's questions, claiming protection under the First Amendment. This was denied, and they were sent to prison for contempt of Congress. Lee J. Cobb was one of those who was originally blacklisted; he eventually agreed to do a deal with the HUAC. He said, *"When the facilities of the government of the United States are drawn on an individual, it can be terrifying. The blacklist is just the opening gambit—being deprived of work. Your passport is confiscated; that's minor. But not being able to move without being tailed is something else. After a certain point, it grows to implied as well as articulated threats, and people succumb. My wife did, and she was institutionalized. By 1953, when I agreed to talk with the HUAC, I was pretty much worn down. I had no money. I couldn't borrow. I had the expenses of taking care of my children. I thought, 'Why am I subjecting my loved ones to this?' I asked myself if this was worth dying for and decided it wasn't. If talking to the HUAC was the way to get out of the penitentiary and go to work again, I'd do it."*

In 1950, McCarthy claimed he had a list of 205 people in the State Department known to be members of the Communist Party. He targeted Democrats associated with the policies of the New Deal. He accused Harry Truman, George Marshall, and Dean Acheson of being soft on Communism. Truman was portrayed as being a dangerous liberal. The smear helped propel Dwight Eisenhower to the presidency.

McCarthy's researchers discovered 30,000 book titles written supposedly by communists, pro-communists, former communists, and anti-anti-communists that were on the shelves of American libraries. They were removed.

What finally stopped the madness was a series of events: In 1952, an article appeared in the paper citing evidence of McCarthy's homosexuality. In 1953, McCarthy began investigating communist infiltration into the military, targeting the Secretary of the Army. Eisenhower was furious and determined to bring McCarthy down. The administration leaked negative information to journalists about the Senator. Vice-President Richard Nixon was directed to publicly criticize McCarthy. Political cartoonists began ridiculing him; Edward R. Murrow lambasted the Senator, newspaper columnists Walter Lippmann and Jack Anderson continued the attacks. He was finally censured by the Senate in December, 1954, more than a decade since he started his fear and hate campaign.

I came away with three questions in my mind after I'd read all that: why didn't people speak out sooner, why did it take so long to stop him, and why have we forgotten the lesson of that relatively recent piece of our history?

Fortunately, today, people are continuing to speak out about things that concern them in our government's policies, ignoring the (there's no other word for it) stupid charge that to do so is unpatriotic. Even though 60% of Americans support this administration. Even if it seems as though ours is only a voice in the wilderness, it is vitally important that we keep crying out against the injustice, intolerance, prejudice, hate, and fear of others that incapacitates us. We must all

voice our opinions even if it appears that no one is listening. If what you do best is write, send a letter to the editor; if it's organizing, put together a concert or rally; if it's talking, call every single elected representative, state your opinion, and tell him/her to make sure it goes into the record; if you have more money than time, make a contribution to the cause of your choice; if you don't want to do anything I've mentioned, sign a petition or put a sign in your yard stating your opinion; and if you write songs, write a song. This can work if no one shirks. Your efforts may be the "yop" that is the tipping point. I'm going to end with a song by a man named Chris Buhalis. He also mentions a connection between religion and politics.

Lyrics to "Talkin' Sounds Just Like Joe McCarthy Blues" by Chris Buhalis

Well, I had me a dream trying to write this song
 'N' I got stuck, turned the TV on.
 Well, there's war on 7, war on 5
 Checked to make sure I was still alive
 Felt OK, nothing about it on CNN

Well, they had this guy on the TV news
 He painted his dog red, white, and blue
 When he drives his car, 'sgot 18 flags
 4 miles a gallon cuz of the wind drag.
 Got each flag free with the purchase of 8 gallons or more, made in China.

Well, on the game show channel, some plastic guy
 Read off some topics, one caught my eye.
 Well, I read the question and I read it slow
 Said if I get it right, I could win some dough.
 "If you're not for me, you're against me."
 I believe Joseph Stalin said that.
 And I'll take Misguided Quotes for \$300, please.

Well, there's John Ashcroft on channel 9
 Said he talks to God on a private line.

Well, I asked him, "John, now what's God say?
Said "He asked my advice just the other day.
I'd tell you more, but you know . . . prophet-savior confidentiality.
Besides, all these questions are just un-American."

I said, "Come on John, now what's the deal?
Is all this un-American stuff for real?
You know, McCarthy tried it as you might know.
Just how far you willing to go?
He said, "Is that falahfel I smell on your breath?"

He said, "You better watch it, now, little man
We got ears out there, understand."
I said, "Hold up now, Attorney G, last time I checked, you work for me.
It's called a democracy. Ever hear of 'Give me liberty or give me death.?'"
He said, "Don't tempt me."

Well, I woke just then with a muffled scream from this slightly un-American
dream.
Well, I washed my face and I decided, friends,
I'd best go down and turn myself in.
Didn't really want to, but it seemed like the only American thing to do.

Well, I can't tell you what to do,
Maybe all these lies he says are true,
But if we all start watching what we say,
Then who's gonna count the price we pay?
Maybe Arthur Andersen, but that's a different song altogether.

There ain't a man alive today gonna make me watch what I say.
When I get them sounds-like-Joe-McCarthy blues.

POST SCRIPT

David Burnette, Wildflower Church member, told me a touching story following
the service. I apologize if I miss some details in the retelling. There was a
Russian who hated the Nazis with a passion. He fought them in his native land,
was twice thrown into Nazi prisoner-of-war camps, and twice escaped.
Eventually, he made his way to the U. S. where he volunteered for the U. S.
Army and at the soonest possible moment, became a U. S. citizen. He was

-serving in the Army along with David's father in Korea, battling Communism, during the time that McCarthyism began to grow more powerful back in the States. It was mandated that everyone serving in the Armed Forces sign a loyalty oath swearing that he/she had never been a member of the Communist Party. David's father refused to sign as a matter of principle. No punishment was levied against him. His friend, however, had a dilemma. He certainly had no problem signing a statement swearing loyalty to the United States, but he could not honestly say he'd never been a Communist. Since he didn't sign it, he was imprisoned for 17 years.