



Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

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“Psst. Did you hear...?”

© by **The Reverend Alison Wilbur Eskildsen**

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Centering Thoughts

Strong minds discuss ideas, average minds discuss events, weak minds discuss people. Socrates

What is told in the ear of a man is often heard 100 miles away. Chinese Proverb

*If you reveal your secrets to the wind, you should not blame the wind
for revealing them to the trees.* Kahlil Gibran

*All these words whispered in my ear, tell a story that I cannot bear to hear.
Just 'cause I said it, don't mean I meant it.* Adele, ‘Rumour Has It’

Together Time

An adapted telling of *A Sack Full of Feathers*, from an old Jewish tale published by Debby Waldman. This story is also found in *Spinning Tales, Weaving Hope: Stories, Storytelling, and Activities for Peace, Justice and the Environment*, titled “The Gossip,” a midrash retold by Marcia Lane.

Sermon

One early afternoon the church gossip drove past the local bar and saw the truck owned by a member of her church parked out in front. Several hours later when she returned home the man’s truck was still there. She was appalled to think that someone in her church would begin drinking so early in the day and spend all day at it.

She couldn’t keep this to herself. She whispered it to the bridge group. She whispered it to the pastoral care committee. She whispered it to everyone, and everyone was equally shocked at the man’s behavior.

In due time, the owner of the truck heard the tale of his supposed drinking problem and discovered its source. The next day he drove his truck to the gossip’s house, parked in her driveway, and walked away with a smile, leaving his truck at her house overnight.

Would that we could all get back at a gossip—someone who speaks about us when we aren’t present, without our permission, who judges us, and may not even be telling the truth. If we sought such revenge, we’d all be its victims for we all gossip.

I’m sure you’ve talked about someone’s drinking problem or serial dating within the congregation or workplace. Or for someone shirking their duties on a committee, or for always showing up late to an

event. Of course you have. I have. We moan and groan about other people because it makes us feel good about ourselves – in spite of the fact that most philosophies and religions tell us not to gossip.

‘Right speech,’ part of the Buddhist Eightfold Path, includes gossip. The commandment “Thou shall not bear false witness,” includes gossip. Jewish midrash goes even further and directs people to not engage even in nice talk about other people, because once you get started talking, your compliments will lead to criticism. Our Unitarian Universalist First Principle doesn’t name gossip directly, but it affirms that our behavior should be guided by respect for others. Gossip challenges that respect.

Everybody knows gossip is bad news. It frequently harms reputations, destroys lives, topples the powerful, breaks friendships, and has even divided religious communities. Spreading secrets and stories can even be a form of bullying. Bad-mouthing and back-stabbing are fitting violent terms for vicious talk.

More frequently, and fortunately, our intent is not to harm. We just gossip. And we no longer keep gossip behind closed doors or at the weekday coffee klatsch. What was once limited to check-out counter tabloids has morphed into evening entertainment and news shows. Serious broadcast, print, and cyber news now include the goings on of today’s celebrities. For several nights after Obama’s second inauguration, we were teased by whether or not Beyonce lip-synched the national anthem, or whether a Notre Dame football player participated in the hoax of a fake girlfriend who then died of leukemia. Is this news? Do we really care?

Why does trivial stuff about people we don’t know command so much attention? And why do we persist in talking about people we do know behind their backs?

It simply serves a purpose and it benefits us, otherwise we’d stop. Anthropologist Robin Dunbar in his book, *Gossip, Grooming, and the Evolution of Language*, posits that we come by gossip naturally. He believes language developed in response to our need to communicate. And the content of that communication was, and remains, gossip. Studies show gossip accounts for over 80% of our conversation, and this gossip-talk contains information we need. In primitive times and in small groups, verbal communication was unnecessary. Touch, as in grooming, and sight, as in body language, conveyed information. But as groups grew larger, better communication tools were required to transmit what the community needed to know. Who’s sleeping with who, who’s angry at who, who just gave birth or died, who had a successful hunt, all this and more was the stuff of gossip then, and remains with us now.

Additionally, when we talk about someone else’s trials and tribulations, by comparison we feel less sad and worried about our own difficulties. Other people’s activities also provide an escape for us when we can’t bear to hear another word on terrorism, genocide, climate change, poverty, or hate. Maybe we feel like a little of the celebrity’s glitz rubs off on us when we know about their deep secrets. Maybe we’re just bored with our own lives and find other people’s lives more interesting.

Psychologists and sociologists say we gossip to enhance our own status. We feel special when we know someone’s news or secret. And when I tell you, it makes you special, too. As insiders, we form an emotional, intimate bond with each other. We also tell gossip to be the center of attention – all eyes and ears focus on us. We tell gossip to communicate our group’s moral standards, thus promoting social cohesion. The church lady made it clear drinking in daytime was not acceptable behavior. The best gossip includes salacious talk about someone who has broken the moral code: infidelity, gambling, addictions, and such. Gossip warns, “Don’t do this behavior or you’ll be talked about, too.”

Gossip, like other speech, can be a brutal weapon. It can tarnish a reputation or inflict some other harm. The gossip who holds special information carries an advantage that can be used to control another person, as with blackmail. We especially enjoy telling gossip that reveals the hypocrisy of those professing extreme virtue, such as the politician or priest who cries out against homosexuality while privately engaging in a same-sex relationship. The ‘holier than thou’ better *be* holier than thou—but few are.

Gossip can be true or false. We don’t know why the truck owner parked in front of the bar all day. He may, or may not have been, drinking. The church lady leapt to her own conclusions and started talking

about him to others. She could have remained silent, respecting his privacy. She could have approached him and asked if he needed help. Instead, she gossiped.

Although the entertainment industry, most notably the gossip columnists and paparazzi, proudly engage in such gossip, you and I don't particularly want to be labeled a gossip. Not because we think it a sin, but because the label might prevent us from being trusted with some really good gossip! Am I right?

Gossip is so tantalizing, some have suggested it should become the 8th Deadly Sin. Sometimes it feels like a devil inside us is forcing us to break confidences when we don't really intend to.

I am the keeper of many confidences in this community so I have to keep a tight reign on my internal devil. If I told others what you tell me privately, you'd have every right to toss me out!

I believe it is a special privilege for me to share your lives, to share your pain and sorrow, though I much prefer the joy we share. I do not take lightly the trust you place in me. My integrity, honesty and trustworthiness are the most valuable qualities I have as a minister. I will not jeopardize that. I have experienced a minister who violated someone's confidence and was forced to leave his ministry.

Long before I became a minister, I learned firsthand what it's like to have a confidence betrayed. When I was a senior in college I was engaged. I didn't have a ring, but we planned to look for jobs and stay together after graduation. Our families and friends knew this. But as graduation neared, I realized I couldn't go through with it. I felt too insecure about my own future and I didn't want any attachments, at least not to him. I told a friend I was going to break it off. What I told to her in confidence, in part to help me think through my difficulty, she carried right to him. But it was her version, not mine. He was hurt. I was stunned and hurt. Telling on me must have made her feel important, but she made me realize our friendship wasn't very important to her. She taught me a lesson all e-mail users should know. Once you say, write, or photograph something and post it, it's no longer yours to control. It can go viral.

But gossip isn't just about telling secrets. I imagine that each and every one of you can recall a similar time when someone talked about you and this hurt you. I imagine you've received an e-mail that wasn't meant for you to see. I also imagine you've revealed someone else's secret. Maybe without permission you shared that their child was arrested, their marriage was falling apart, or they had an illness they wanted kept quiet. Or maybe you just shared a stupid story about how someone accidentally wore one brown sock and one blue sock one day. We can laugh at human foibles. We don't mean to cause harm. Like many moral issues, the sinfulness of gossip depends on context and motive.

If you're maliciously trying to harm someone's reputation or hurt someone's feelings or stir up trouble, I can't condone that. If you're keeping a confidence that has serious consequences, like someone's suicidal feelings or that they're in danger from abuse, I can't condone your silence. But what about the non-trivial, gray gossip that falls in between these extremes? Experts call this *pro-social* communication.

For example, you or I might suggest different people to participate in a particular committee in order to balance people's strengths and weaknesses. Is it gossip to say organization isn't Phoebe's strength, but she's really good at creative thinking? Or that Jorge is really shy and shouldn't be asked to interview someone, but Loretta loves to meet new people? If you or I suggest a need to create incremental deadlines for a project in order to keep Cindy on task, is that gossip? Sure, we're talking about someone who isn't present and perhaps finding faults with them, but there is no malicious intent. No one has every talent needed for every job or activity. Recognizing strengths and weaknesses makes sense, though we want to be careful not to hurt people's feelings. Pro-social gossip provides information the community needs. That's the evolutionary connection, again. Gossip can be altruistic—we need to know the gossip.

Because gossip appears more in shades of gray, not black, and since we're a caring community that desires treating everyone with respect and dignity, our best practice should be to think twice before we speak. We should give ourselves time to consider what we might hope to gain by speaking and what we and/or the community might lose by our speaking. We might ask, "What hole am I trying to fill in my own life by speaking about another?" "Am I making myself more important, better somehow? Is this really about me?"

Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hahn suggests we should consider our own speech as a gift to another. Before we give it, we should judge its quality. He asks, “Will it promote harmony and good will? Will it harm or abuse? Will it reduce anger or ease tension? Or is it just to hear ourselves talk?” Depending on our answers, we might be better off remaining silent.

If you find someone wanting to share dirt on someone else and if it is information you don't need to know, try to redirect the conversation. Or tell the person you don't need to know what they seem compelled to share. You can thank them for wanting to share, but decline to listen.

If humans are the animal that gossips, we simply must learn to manage our gossip well. For feathers once tossed cannot easily be returned to the pillow. Therefore, keep your pillows sewn tight, letting only the occasional, trivial feathers to fly out. You'll sleep better.

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