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Lectures, Sales Pitches, and Dialogues

Blurb:

WES members feel that we have something important to offer to the larger society in which we live, yet we are often hesitant to speak about our beliefs outside of our own community. Part of this hesitancy stems from our past experiences with “the missionary position” (no, not *that* missionary position!). We are reluctant to emulate those who assume a position of moral certainty and impose their beliefs on others without regard for the other person’s beliefs and values. How can we share our approach to life without assuming the “missionary position?”

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This is a talk about talking. Me talking to you, no multimedia, no special effects, no PowerPoint slides. You talking to people out in the real world, without even a laptop or an iPhone. Just our own minds, eyes, ears, and mouths. Us talking to each other, in chance encounters, or deep conversations. I don’t have a lot of theories to offer you, but this isn’t that kind of a talk anyway. I’m more concerned with practicalities, drawing on stories from my own life and the lives of people I know.

For many of us, when we think about how we would talk about Ethical Culture to our friends, family, and co-workers, the first image that comes to mind is the over-zealous missionary, the cultural imperialist, the high-pressure sales pitch. We recoil, deciding that it might be better to keep our beliefs to ourselves. After all, who am I to go around influencing other peoples’ beliefs?

But over the last several years, we watched as outspoken right-wingers took center stage and declared that their beliefs were the only position available for decent, moral people. They were countered by equally strident voices on the left, who condemned all religions as havens for the ignorant and superstitious.

“But wait!” we wanted to say. “We have another way. We believe in the human potential for good. We hold ideals, but we don’t require a supernatural being to help us achieve our ideals. We offer a community to those who don’t feel at home in other religions. We offer a moral compass based on the quality of our human relationships.” We got a few articles and letters to the editor into the newspaper. But we were unwilling to shout or

bully our way into the arena of public opinion. Ours was a small, quiet voice on the sidelines.

We're still here, we still believe that have something relevant to offer. But how do we let people know? Here come the stories.

I grew up in southeastern New Mexico, in a medium-sized town where Christianity was the only game in town. Whenever you met someone new, one of the first questions you would ask was, "What church do you go to?"

I came of age during the Christian Renewal Movement of the 1970s, which was very big on getting people to kindle the personal passion that would allow the light of Christ to shine forth in their lives. This boundless enthusiasm was supposed to come naturally to anyone who had truly dedicated their lives to Christ. The desire to share that light would be as natural and irrepressible as the desire to breathe. So they said.

I should have fit right into that community. My grandfather was a Methodist minister. My parents were mainstays of their church. I went to Sunday School and sang in the children's choir. I did all the right things, but somehow that unbridled joy never welled up in me quite the way it was supposed to. I knew that something must be wrong with me, because no matter how hard I tried, that special feeling never really took hold in me. I was reluctant to "witness" to others, because I couldn't quite immerse myself in the script enough to recite the lines convincingly. It didn't occur to me until much later that not only was I trying out for the wrong part--I was in the wrong theater. If someone had come up to me back then and told me that I belonged in a humanist community, I would not have been able to process the thought. The idea of leaving the only faith I had ever known would have been incomprehensible.

But whether we felt like it or not, we were told to go out to others and persuade them to join us. This never struck me as odd, because everyone else I knew accepted the idea. The bible told to go out into all the world and preach the gospel to the unconverted. We didn't know much about those unconverted people, and many of us assumed that there wasn't all that much to know. The bible was full of stories of people who heard the word, realized the error of their ways, and happily changed their entire lives, seemingly at a moment's notice.

It was against this backdrop that my cousin and his wife went on a missionary trip to Kenya. They talked about their months of preparation, raising funds and collecting school supplies, toys, books, and boxes of bibles. They talked about all the fees and paperwork and government requirements on both sides of the ocean. They were excited about preaching the gospel to these faraway people, offering them a chance of salvation. I don't remember any mention of language lessons and studying the culture and history of the people they were going to visit.

They sent letters from Kenya, mentioning their warm welcome, learning to eat bush meat without questioning the source, setting up the school, the bureaucratic hurdles they had to clear. Then, after only a few months, they were home again. They had run out of funds. They had underestimated the amount of money they would need for fees, "gifts", all the palms they had to grease in order to get anything done. Their Kenyan hosts thanked them for their generous donation of toys and school supplies, but insisted that they take their bibles back home with them. They had seen many missionaries come and go. They had no intention of adopting this foreign religion, but they welcomed the donations they left behind.

The approach that my cousin and his wife had used was a type of sales pitch, and their intended audience had accepted the free samples, but hadn't bought the product. This type of sales pitch relies on the passionate enthusiasm of the person making the pitch rather than the interests and needs of the audience.

On the other hand, sometimes it's the customer who requests the passionate sales pitch. A former boss of mine wanted people in his group to pitch new ideas to him with all the passion and conviction we could muster. He gauged the value of an idea by how fiercely we were willing to fight for it--even if we were wrong. There was no room for uncertainty or asking for additional input. I never did master that style, and I didn't stay in that job very long.

Clearly, not all of us are cut out to be sales people.

Going back to my growing-up years in the church, I remember that those of us who weren't especially keen on active outreach were encouraged to live our lives in such a

way that the “light of Christ” would shine through us. The idea was that our friends and neighbors would be so impressed by our shining presence that they would ask us what gave us such joy and peace. Then, we could tell them, and they would invite Christ into their lives, and they would be happy too.

Of course, most of the people I encountered every day were already at least nominally Christian, and they were busy trying to shine as much as I was. I wasn’t an especially shiny person to begin with, so I didn’t get many takers. Ironically, several years after I became a humanist, one of my co-workers at the office commented that the light of Christ was shining through me. I was having a pretty good day that day, and I must have been smiling. He obviously meant his comment as a complement, and I thanked him. I explained that I was a humanist, and when he asked me what that meant, I told him that I had faith in the human potential for good, and I just believed in being the best person I could be. My co-worker was taken aback, and he muttered something about having a nice day, and went on about his business, presumably because he realized that a government agency was no place to get into a religious debate. I was surprised as well to realize that even here in Washington DC, some people assumed that theirs was the only game in town.

Missionaries seem to run in my family, and another missionary cousin of mine has mastered this light-shining business. For many years, she lived in Somaliland, the relatively stable northern region of Somalia. She and her colleagues ran an orphanage and a school. They taught reading, sewing, and other practical skills. English is commonly spoken in this former British protectorate, but the missionaries learned the Somali language through contact with the people with whom they lived. They kept their bibles and crosses to themselves in this Muslim country, preferring to let their actions speak for them. They didn’t hide their identities as Christians, but they held their religious observances in the privacy of their homes. They remained in Somalia until the political situation became too violent and they had to leave. When this cousin sent letters home, she spoke of individual people with faces and names, and her affection for them was obvious. Even after she left Somalia, my cousin worked with Somali refugees in Toronto, and later the northern African Republic of Djibouti. She has since moved on to other work, but Africa is her permanent home.

Different approaches, different results.

Very few of us would be willing to pull up stakes and spend the rest of our lives preaching the words of Felix Adler to people halfway around the world. On the other hand, we don't want WES to remain the best-kept secret in our own town. As we so often do, we look for a middle way. Here are a few of the ways we have used to get the word out about WES:

The Billboard Method (ads, websites, bumper stickers): put the message out there but you aren't there to take feedback or questions
benefits -- reaching people you might not have thought to contact, you didn't know existed, it's there all the time

WES website is one major way people find out about WES, works well for people who know more or less what they are looking for, already interested (self selecting)
drawbacks-- hard to know if you are reaching anyone or what their reaction is

Getting slightly more involved, we have the

Drive-by or Parachute drop -- press conference, protest march, exhibit tables

Come in, deliver your message, maybe some brief Q&A, leave again

what venue? audience already interested? hostile? on the fence?

how well do you know your audience in advance?

how many other people are there delivering their own messages? (e.g., exhibit tables at fairs and festivals)

addressing one specific issue, or general "we're here"

Limited One-on-one

Takoma Park Folk Festival -- with strangers or acquaintances, in an official capacity, usually limited contact time, might never see these people again

you also have this kind of contact in the casual conversations you have every day

what did you do this weekend?

invitation to visit WES

data -- word of mouth is the most effective way of getting people to visit WES

If the situation is right for wading in a little deeper, you can have an extended, in-depth conversation:

explaining your beliefs
 listening to the other person's beliefs
 finding common ground
 show a willingness to be influenced

So many approaches! Which one should I use? That all depends:
 When I work on a communications project in my job,
 My two favorite questions are "who cares?" and "so what?"

Who cares?

I do: I want you to know I'm here,
 I want you to know what I think,
 I want to spend some time with you, go to an event with you
 I would like to help you
 I want you to help me / support my cause
 I want you to stop doing something /start doing something

You do: You've asked me for info -- where can I find [fill in the blank]? What's WES?
 You want to tell me what you think
 You want me to share an experience with you, or come along with me
 You've asked for or offered help
 You want me to support your cause
 You want me to stop / start doing something

We both care, but my way is right:

Do it my way or else
 Assume my way is better (for whom?)
 My way will get me something
 Am I accounting for the effects on you?
 Have I thought about how my ideas fit in with your framework of thoughts and beliefs?
 Will I have to live with the consequences of what I'm telling you to do?
 (missionaries: make natives wear wool clothing, plow their land, adopt a religion that
 has no place in their social structure)
 Am I assuming that my world view is universally accepted? How much do I know about
 other cultures?

Before we get too smug about all this, let's look at ourselves:

progressive community sometimes tends to assume that everyone would prefer reason-based religion if only they were well enough informed,

assume that everyone who really matters places a high value on objective facts, tolerance for all, the potential of all people to achieve a higher good

point out how unreasonable and unsuccessful the other guys are

sit back and wait for the new members to come pouring in

But others may place their highest priority on loyalty to religious and cultural groups, belief in holding firm to the faith, mistrust of what is perceived as the amorality of secularism

The short story writer Flannery O'Connor, who was a devout Roman Catholic, put it this way:

"...the novelist with Christian concerns will find in modern life distortions which are repugnant to him, and his problem will be to make these appear as distortions to an audience which is used to seeing them as natural."

It's not just Christians who face this challenge:

it wasn't that long ago when many people thought that having a Hummer and a McMansion was a "natural" reward for their success

and convincing them otherwise required moving them far outside their comfort zone

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It's not too much of a stretch to assume that the other person is rational and well adapted to their environment -- how did they reach their point of view?

Influence, but be willing to be influenced

you wind up with more information at your disposal

a more nuanced understanding

you may have some of your misperceptions corrected

even if you don't agree with the other person, at least you see where she is coming from, why she thinks the way she does, where you might start looking for common ground

Who cares? Ideally, we both care, and it's a two-way engagement

What “language” are you using (story-telling and metaphor, logic and facts, heart, head, tradition, past experiences)

Are you on the defensive?

Are you certain that you are right?

Have you always been surrounded by like-minded people?

What are your assumptions?

Are there areas where we disagree? Can we find some common ground?

Are you doing me a favor by listening to me?

If so, I need to meet you more than halfway -- I need to use your language, address your concerns, show you how you might benefit

If I’m telling you something that is hard for you to hear,

I should allow you time to absorb it

I won’t dump on you more than you can process

If necessary, I need to be patient enough to extend the dialogue over a long term

Did you ask me for my opinion?

How much detail do you want?

Do you really want my opinion, or were you just being polite?

How receptive will you be if I disagree with you?

How well do we know and trust each other?

Moving on to the So what? part --

You have your info now, the next step is up to you

You have a different insight that you want to put into the mix

so we can make a more informed decision

so we are less resistant to each other’s point of view

so we can be candid about what we are really after

You’re intrigued

you want to know me better personally

you want to know more about my point of view

you want to know more about my community

You’re motivated

our interaction has shown you the importance of making a change or preserving something against a change

you want to take an active role in a community or effort

It's fairly safe to assume that most of the people we encounter are motivated by purposes other than insanity or evil. We can understand their motives, even if we don't agree with them. They might be acting rationally, or following tradition or clan loyalty, or maybe they are just making decisions based on inertia. Maybe they are acting out of greed, fear, or anger.

Even when other people are acting in ways that they perceive as rational or good, their actions might seem undesirable to us because we are dealing with a different set of assumptions. If you were raised in a free-thinking community, the thought of encouraging other people to adopt your beliefs might seem pushy or intrusive. On the other hand, if everyone in your community agreed that preaching to the unconverted was similar to warning people to get out of a burning building, then not going out and preaching would make you complicit in their inevitable downfall.

It's easy to avoid people who think very differently from us, on the assumption that we will never understand them, and trying to bring them around to our point of view is useless. However, if we don't make that contact, we risk becoming provincial and narrow-minded, even if we live in a cosmopolitan area. We lose the opportunity to refine and develop our view of the world by challenging our assumptions and exposing ourselves to other perspectives. We lose touch with the reality that is our big, complex, messy world.

If we are going to take seriously this business of attributing worth to every person, then we must assume that every person has something worthwhile to teach us. We can only really learn from them if we hear them speaking in their own terms.

I'm not very good at this, but I have made some imperfect first steps:

War commemoration event, counter-protesters

tried to engage pro-war guy in a conversation -- how do you see this issue?

he came prepared with lots of facts to throw at me, I wanted him to share his thoughts

we were almost to the point of having a conversation when an anti-war guy came along on his bike and started throwing insults, he didn't even bother to find out what we were talking about, he assumed he already knew

the conversation was over, the pro-war guy was back to hurling facts and arguments at the guy on the bike -- this was obviously more what he had come prepared to do

and that was the end of *that* little experiment
but I'm not sorry I tried it and I might do it again sometime

Actually, I was trying out something that I had heard about from two people who have mastered the art of bringing people together in emotionally loaded situations.

Greg Barton was a member of WES several years ago. His work was in labor/management negotiations and contract negotiations. He routinely dealt with towering egos, high stakes, and professional negotiators who were being paid large sums of money to get as much as possible while giving as little as possible. These people were in it to win, but they also needed to come out of it with everyone's signatures on a legally binding agreement.

Greg's key piece of strategy was: first, you listen.

even if you are sure that the other side is wrong, even if what they are saying is distasteful to listen to, you listen

you don't have to agree, just the act of listening and acknowledging their statement takes the edge off, calms things down, makes the other person more receptive to what you have to say

you may have to grit your teeth the whole time, but you have to really be listening

when it's your turn, you state your case in terms of the rational and philosophical background behind your point of view -- the how the issue looks from where you stand, no judgment pro or con on the other person's point of view -- and ideally, they listen in return

and you go on from there

I heard the “first you listen” strategy again when Darryl Davis came to speak at WES. Darryl is a professional musician, but his avocation is reaching out to the members of the Ku Klux Klan. Which would be a bold step for anyone, but for Darryl, it’s absolutely mind blowing. Because, you see, Darryl is a very dark-skinned black man.

meets KKK members on neutral turf, asks them why they think the way they do, “why do you hate me?”

when you put it in one-on-one terms like that, it’s hard to come back with a stock answer

invites KKK people to cookouts at his place, see him as a person, but in safe terms in large group of people in a friendly setting

gets them to see him as an individual, know his family and friends

when one man punched him and was convicted for assault and battery, Davis drove the man’s wife to the prison for a visit because she didn’t have a ride

lots of showing mixed in with the telling

results -- several of the KKK members he has gotten to know have left the KKK, and one of them has an African American son in law now

I might not be as assertive as Darryl or as experienced as Greg, but I can reach out to others in my own way, using a few basic questions to get things started:

How do you see the world?

How were you brought up, what did your family and community teach you?

Are you satisfied with that?

What do you want/need?

Is there something in particular that works or doesn’t work for you?

Something that you wish were better?

How can I help?

Here’s what I have to offer, will that help?

Should I send it to you, come over to you, build it for you, or just be a good listener while you work things out for yourself? Should I engage you in a debate?

What ideas of yours can I take home with me?

What can you tell me that might change my point of view?

Both sides give and receive, both benefit -- a network, not a hierarchy

Are you listening too?

We can have a dialogue when we set the lecture aside
Understand without necessarily agreeing

Find common ground, Influence and inform each other
with the purpose of Eliciting the best in others, and in ourselves ++++++

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“those people” are MY people
 what do you say yes to
 embracing change when it leads to something better
 telling my own story is easier than saying what someone tells me to say

Story:

In the run-up to the invasion of Iraq, we were promised that our troops would be greeted as liberators, that the operation would be a cake walk, and that the prosperity that would be unleashed as a result would pay for the costs of the invasion. The Iraqis were just like us, we were told. The only thing holding them back was Saddam Hussein. Once he was out of the picture, a new society would blossom forth, like the scene in the Wizard of Oz where the wicked witch is killed and the movie goes from black and white to colored.

Instead, we learned about Sunnis, Shiites, and Kurds. We learned that this nation had been cobbled together by the British after the end of the ***first??*** World War. We learned that Saddam Hussein had been a despot, but he had kept out the militant Islamic political groups, including Al Qaeda and Hamas. We got a crash course in the intricate interplay of factions and agendas that had been kept in check, and were suddenly unleashed by our actions. We may not have been familiar with all of this before, but there were plenty of people who could have told us had we been willing to listen.

Those who felt called would go abroad to spread the word to the unconverted, but the rest of us would stay behind encourage each other, keep one another from straying, and bring our children up in the common faith that we all shared--or at least claimed to. If you had any doubts, if that bubbling enthusiasm wasn't there, you kept that to yourself, put on a cheery face, and made another casserole for the church potluck dinner.

How well do you know the person? Have you made an effort to know them?

How receptive will they be to what you have to say?

Casual exchange or formal presentation?

Are there emotional hot buttons involved?

Friends, family, neighbors

casual mention -- here's what I did this weekend, here's an event you might like, come to my party (and I've invited some of my WES friends)

this issue really bugs me / makes me glad, what do you think?

here' an interest I'm pursuing, and my community is supporting me (Artist's Way)

I'm so glad that my community supported me through a difficult time

Social networking -- broader but more indirect

In another example of this mindset, an entrepreneur in my sister's town worked for more than two years on an online marketplace website where the other businesses in town could put up digital storefronts, a one-stop shopping experience that would imitate a real-life stroll down Main Street. He spent all of his money on the idea, eventually had to lay off all of his employees, and put himself deeply into debt. When he finally had the product ready to roll out, he advertised it on his website using a video clip of himself explaining the time, effort, and expense he had invested in the idea. He went into great detail about his passion for the idea, how much it had cost him, and the sacrifices that an entrepreneur must make in the pursuit of a great idea. He never did get around to explaining what his idea was, how it worked, or why it would be of interest to a potential customer.