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Use Your Words, Lester

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USE YOUR WORDS, LESTER

Perhaps it’s the tragicomedy of our times. We were talking about backyard poultry. My sister has chickens; I’m slated to get ducks. It’s legal in her community; it’s not legal in mine. *It’s not legal in all of Michigan*, chimes in an in-law from Texas, to which my sister says, *They should get the NRA involved.*

Oh Lord, here we go.

This is how political issues come up in my family, as non-sequiturs. My role, as I see it, is to defuse the situation by in effect saying, “Look over there!”

I’m going to steer around the law, I say, by getting permission from my neighbors and hopefully keeping my ducks on the down low—this is a nice place. And the conversation passes on to another topic.

I would like to pat myself on the back, say something like, “Blessed are the peacemakers,” except, of course, what I’ve done in safely steering us back to the common ground of banality isn’t exactly peacemaking.

In fact, it’s just avoidance, it may even be cowardice, and it feels symptomatic of where I am.

In literature, you don’t have to go far to find examples of spineless middle-aged men. By the end of his “Love Song,” J. Alfred Prufrock can’t bring himself to eat a peach, much less declare his love to a woman. Within ten years of that poem, W. B. Yeats would lament, “The best lack all conviction, while the worst/ are full of passionate intensity.”

Now, almost exactly a century later, history seems to be repeating itself. The brash and offensive get the headlines, and rather than leveler heads countering them, many in the middle seem either fooled, or, what’s worse, frightened into resignation or inaction. Is this what happened in the Brexit?

For a moment, I’d like to call out my generation, Gen X, which was supposedly pretty anti-establishment. We felt stupid and contagious waiting around to be entertained, hanging down with the freaks and ghouls, and could supposedly see through the acquisitive games and phallic showdown of the arms race of the ‘80s. But cynicism as a posture easily translates to inaction and, when it passes forty, stumbles into bumbling uncertainty.

A better contemporary example of J. Alfred Prufrock is Lester Nygaard, the cowardly protagonist—stock character?—of the first season of the *Coen brothers’ Fargo*. Because Lester is a bumbler, terrible with his words, he leaves room for Lorne Malvo to twist those words and kill his rival. Because, like Prufrock, it’s impossible for Lester to say just what he means, he can’t counter his wife’s accusation that he’s a loser, but instead stumbles into—yes, stumbles into—the cowardly act of bludgeoning her with a hammer. J. A. Prufrock was perhaps an object of pity; Lester Nygaard shows the relationship of cowardice and evil. In his bumbling, Lester is a vehicle for the malevolent.

For me, personally, in all kinds of conversations like the one that began this post, it’s a word issue. It’s hard to the point of nigh on impossible to find a way through the no-man’s-land of so many conversations today.

But it’s more dangerous not to try.

So, today, I’ll wade into that Facebook conversation about whether or not we can “know Donald Trump’s heart” as it applies to his conversion. I’ll ask that we stop pretending that the heart is unknowable and therefore un-judge-able. It will be a risk, but I will move beyond the cynicism that
doubts whether either side can be changed and not sit by idly waiting for the history that is bearing down on all of us.

It’s this work, the hard wrestling through ongoing and tangled conversations with friends and neighbors with differing opinions, all the while keeping a level head and the relationship door open, that is closer to the work of peacemaking to which Christ calls us.

For a Gen-Xer like me, it doesn’t come naturally.

“Don’t just do something, talk,” begged a Slavoj Zizek editorial about the financial crisis.

Lester, it’s time we used our words.