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## **Beyond the Comma**

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The theme of this year's annual gathering of the Rocky Mountain Conference—Celebrating What's Right With God's World—contains an extraordinary challenge. In the midst of all the bad news flowing out of Washington, DC and the nation's media centers, it is easy to be deceived into believing that there is **nothing** right in today's world. But the challenge, to celebrate what is right, implies that we discern what is gentle, and loving, and uplifting and embracing, and enduring, and beautiful and true, and then proclaim the existence of these things in the midst a world seemingly gone mad.

Muriel Rukeyser reminds us that “the universe is made of stories, not atoms” and so tonight, I'd like to share some stories—stories that reveal the significance of your theme at this particular moment in the life of the United Church of Christ and the world around us. It is not to imply that our reality is all rosy or that our future is without uncertainty. Rather, it is to say that the stillspeaking God has called us into a complex world—a world we must engage with passion and imagination. So let's start by setting a context for our exploration: let's start with science.

We learned recently that the human genome contains about 30,000 genes; but in the whole vast array of human diversity only 60 genes – two tenths of one percent – differentiate us one from another. And while we all know that there are tremendous differences between us, from a purely scientific, genomic perspective, we are remarkably alike.

Similarly, if we in this room were to introduce ourselves as members of the UCC to someone from Mars, it would be very hard for them to tell the difference between us and other human beings, let alone other North American Protestants. But we know there *are* differences and some of us are passionate about the uniqueness which we claim as members of the UCC. It is in those subtle differences that we emphasize about ourselves that make us distinct. So our *emphasis* is important.

Part of my circuitous path to this place includes a stint as a director of live theatre. One of the common acting exercises we used to establish motivation had to do with scooter pies. Who remembers scooter pies? They are those chocolate covered desserts, with graham cracker inside and a marshmallow center. Some people know them as “s’ mores,” in the south, they’re called moon pies. The phrase we used, “I like scooter pies,” can be said with different emphases to change motivation. **I** like scooter pies. **I like** scooter pies. I like **scooter** pies. I like scooter **pies**.

Who likes scooter pies? **I** like scooter pies.

How do you feel about scooter pies? **I like** scooter pies.

What kind of pie do you like best? I like **scooter** pies.

What do you like most when you’re hungry? I like scooter **pies**.

Be clear about your emphasis. In a complex world, it establishes your identity and proclaims who you are.

Back in the sixties I was at a peace rally in Washington, DC – actually, it was a counter demonstration to a pro-Vietnam War, bomb the hell out of Hanoi gathering. One dear soul, an older woman, engaged me on the street trying to tell me how it was my duty as a Christian to bomb the heathen Viet Cong into oblivion. She became increasingly agitated and when she finally realized that she would not be able to convert me, she exploded with fiery venom in her voice: Well, God bless you! Her words were gentle; her tone was brutal. Be clear about your emphasis. It establishes who you are.

When the networks refused to let us air our commercial a year ago December—and then refused again this year—we were given a gift. Through a controversy not of our choosing, the UCC was suddenly catapulted into the limelight in ways that we never could have imagined—or paid for. Since the campaign began, we’ve had more than 2,000 stories written about the UCC in major periodicals around the country, and even overseas. Before the campaign, we had 80,000 unique visits per month on our web sites. Now we have 700,000, almost a ten-fold increase. We’ve had ¾ of a million people visit our find a church function. We’ve had people in prison and people on death’s door

contact our pastors because of this exposure. We've had thousands of e-mails in our offices in Cleveland, saying thank you for your welcoming message. I had more than one person tell me that they wept when the ad came on.

My pastor, Laurie Hafner, tells the story of how her mom was one of the first to buy and wear a God Is Still Speaking T-shirt—long before the commercial controversy. When she wore her shirt to the Mall, people would come up to her and say, “oh, what an interesting T-shirt.” After the controversy, people would point to her T-shirt and exclaim, “Oh, UCC!” Said Laurie's mom, “I have been waiting my whole life for this.”

It is not just UCC members or those who feel rejected who have responded to our message. On Easter Sunday, Blythe and I were visiting my parents in New Holland, PA. We went to a nearby Moravian Church where the newly installed pastor was a childhood friend of our family. As Rev. Jurgen concluded his excellent Easter Sunday sermon, in the midst of illustrations about Catherine Marshall and Winston Churchill he said, “Easter is God's comma, where we would put a period.” Yes, the notion that “God is still speaking,” has taken root, but the emphasis may be different in different settings. So, let's draw on your thespian skills and be clear about our emphases:

Who is still speaking to us? **God** is still speaking,  
Is God really still speaking? God **is** still speaking,  
When did God last speak? God is **still** speaking,  
How is God communicating? God is still **speaking**,  
Yes, be clear about your emphasis and celebrate what's right.

You all know that the comma has become the symbol of the God is Still Speaking effort. Commas separate what has come before from what is to follow, and it might be argued that right now we are in a comma time regarding our campaign. Perhaps you've heard that the stillspeaking initiative is winding down. After all, in April the Executive Council voted to reduce the level of funding over the next 18 months. If you've visited the news portal on ucc.org in the last two days, you've read the announcement of Ron Buford assuming a new role with stillspeaking, resigning as its director.

So we might be tempted to sigh and say, “it's been a great run, but the best

is over. Where can we go from here?” Remember those memorable words at the conclusion of the classic movie, *The Candidate*, when Robert Redford unexpectedly wins, and turns to campaign manager Peter Boyle and asks, “So, what do we do now?”

When confronted with such cosmic questions, I often find it helpful to look to scripture for an answer. I see the beginning of an answer to that question in the 12<sup>th</sup> Chapter of Genesis:

Now the Lord said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. I will make you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth will be blessed. So Abram went, as the Lord had told him,

The Exodus writer offers a good three point sermon. The first point is God’s command “to go.” Dr. Ephraim Agosto from Hartford Theological Seminary speaks of an intense study undertaken around the Hebrew word that has been translated here. Experts from across the country gathered and offered papers and perspectives. After significant scholarly input and intellectual deliberation, the conclusion was that the Hebrew word translated as “go” actually means “GO.”

Simple. Direct. Don’t just sit there. Go.

The second point is that God does not say where to go—“to a place that I will show you.” At the time of departure, there is no land of milk and honey, but there *is* a “promised land” because God says that God WILL show Abram where to go...just not yet.

The third point is that God offers Abram greatness, a blessing, if he goes. He will not be able to hide in the shadows but his light will shine on the hill.

The implications for the ministry that lies ahead of us seem obvious. Because, as Genesis says—Abram went. No hesitation, no elaboration. He just WENT. (and if you read the scriptural passage I just read, it ends not with a period but with a comma). If we are to be faithful, we too are called to go forward boldly and creatively into our complex world, even though we cannot predict our final destination. Like Abram, we’re in a comma time, not a time of winding down stillspeaking, but a “folding into” the way we

think and act as a church. It's a movement, not a program. Be clear about your emphasis. Celebrate what's right.

And before I write any obituary for God is Still Speaking, I'll remind myself of a story told by a clergy friend of mine who was always exhorting his congregation to make funeral plans in advance. One day, this dear elderly woman came to his office and handed him a list of items that she wanted for her funeral. As he scanned the list, that otherwise seemed normal—singing “How Great Thou Art,” having a simple casket, and the like—there appeared one rather odd item. She wanted to be buried with a fork in her hand. A fork? So my friend confronted her and asked if this request was correct. “Absolutely,” came the response. “Why a fork?” With a twinkle in her eye, she said, “because growing up, at the end of every meal, mama would say, ‘Hold your fork—dessert’s coming!’”

We're in a comma time. The best is yet to be. Be clear about your emphasis.

But the question persists: how do we respond to the stillspeaking God in this new day? Once again, let's look to science.

Scientists say that human beings became a distinct species *40,000 years ago*; yet Alexander Graham Bell didn't patent the telephone until 132 years ago. And it was about 55 years ago that Remington Rand delivered the first commercial computer to the US Census Bureau. Today, PDAs, cell phones and ipods abound. Changes are so rapid that Shakespear's quote, “We know what we are, but know not what we may become” has never been more relevant.

In 1899, Charles Duell, director of the US Patent Office, said, “Everything that can be invented has already been invented.” Since 1990, well over a million patents have been granted and the number of applications grows every year.

In 1943, Thomas Watson Chair of the Board of IBM, said, “I think there is a world market for about five computers.” Today, there are hundreds of millions of computers in consumers' hands.

In 2004 there were more computer chips produced than grains of rice.

The cost of computing has fallen 100 million times since 1951. If the automobile industry had made as much progress, a car today would cost one hundredth of a cent and

travel faster than the speed of light.

To which the auto industry released a rejoinder, saying, “If cars were like computers...

For no reason at all, your car would crash twice a day;  
Every time they repainted the lines on the road, you would have to buy a new car;  
Occasionally, executing a maneuver such as a left-turn would cause your car to shut down and refuse to restart, and you would have to reinstall the engine;  
When your car died on the freeway for no reason, you would just accept this, restart and drive on;  
The air bag would say ‘Are you sure?’ before inflating;  
You would press the ‘start’ button to shut of the engine.

In 1981—25 years ago—Bill Gates said, “640 kilobytes ought to be enough memory for anyone.” This memory stick holds a gigabyte of memory 2,000 times Gates’s proposed maximum of only 25 years ago.

As Woody Allen said, “What if everything is an illusion and nothing exists. In that case, I definitely overpaid for my carpet.”

We must be aware of what it means to do ministry in a time when the ability to compute new information is accelerating so rapidly. Just read Ray Kurzweil’s book, *The Singularity is Near*. This book maps the rate of technological advancement since time began and finds that the rate of change is not linear but exponential. The concept of the singularity predicts the liberation of consciousness from the confines of human biology, allowing us to interact directly with computer networks. We will become one with machines.

Neural implants—that already exist—will enhance memory, correct personality disorders. Nanobots, robots designed on a molecular level, such as respirocytes—mechanical red-blood cells—will have myriad roles within the human body, including reversing human aging. Billions of nanobots in the capillaries of the human brain will create virtual reality from within the nervous system. You will be able to be a different person both physically and emotionally. Other people—such as your romantic partner—

will be able to select a different body for you than you might select for yourself.

The ethical implications of all this are overwhelming. And while we quibble over restrictions on stem cell research, these changes are already occurring *at an exponential pace*. Kurzweil predicts that many of these realities will occur within the first half of this century.

To understand the impact of this, we need to remember the Chinese tale about the emperor and the inventor of chess. In response to the emperor's offer of a reward for his new beloved game, the inventor asked for a single grain of rice placed on the first square of the chess board. “Surely, the emperor said, “you must want more than that.” “Very well,” said the inventor, I would like two grains of rice on the second square, four on the third, and so on.

The Emperor quickly granted this seemingly benign and humble request. As the emperor and the inventor went through the first half of the chess board, things were fairly uneventful. The inventor was given spoonfuls of rice, then bowls of rice, then barrels. By the end of the first half of the chess board, the inventor had accumulated one large field's worth (4 billion grains) and the emperor began to take notice. The second half of the board, 63 doublings, ultimately totaled 18 million trillion grains of rice. At ten grains of rice per square inch, this requires rice fields covering twice the surface area of the Earth, oceans included. It is in dispute whether the emperor went bankrupt or the inventor lost his head.

But as Kurzweil points out, with regard to the doublings of computation, we currently stand about ½ way through the chess board: there have been slightly more than 32 doublings of performance since the first programmable computers were invented during World War II.

“So what?” you may ask. “What has this to do with me?”

Well, let's take my Dad. I love my Dad; I've known him all my life. A few years ago his hearing began to fail and he started wearing a hearing aid. No one would doubt that he is still my Dad—just, my Dad with a hearing aid. But then he needed a hip replacement. He's still my dad—now with a hearing aid and an artificial hip. Recently, he had a pacemaker put in to monitor his heartbeat. So, now he's my dad with a hearing aid,

an artificial hip and a pacemaker. But, what if he has a neural implant to enhance his memory or change his personality? Or what if he has ten neural implants? Or a hundred, or a million? When does he cease being my dad—and who or what does he become? Be clear about your emphasis.

God is speaking to us in the midst of these conflicting realities. And why not? Remember Pentecost that we celebrated on Sunday? In the midst of many voices, the church was born. Remember the creation narrative? Out of CHAOS God created the heavens and the earth. Six times in the first chapter of Genesis does God see the world and call it good. Six times. The seventh time, God calls it very good. But nowhere, does God say it's perfect and nowhere does God say it's finished. Celebrate what's right.

Tolkien says, “It does not do you good to leave a dragon out of your calculations, if you live near him.” And the dragons are many in our world. We in the UCC are called, claimed and challenged by the Gospel of Jesus Christ to boldly engage this world around us. In his 1994 inaugural address, Nelson Mandela proclaimed, “Our worst fear is not that we are inadequate; our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure... We ask ourselves, ‘who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented?’ Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God, your playing small does not serve the world.”

Be clear about your emphasis. Celebrate what's right.

So, what do we do? If we are to be faithful, we are called to go forward boldly and creatively into a world where we will be unable to escape from advances in science and technology nor hide from media exposure. We must proclaim who we are and offer Jesus' extravagant welcome all along the way. We must engage the society that surrounds us. We must speak truth to power. The time is *now*. The task is *ours*.

Why? Because the moral values debate in this country has been hijacked by a relative few, who would lead us to believe that they speak for Christians everywhere. They have set the parameters of the debate and we have not been invited to the table.

We did a study recently on the Sunday morning talk shows. Over the past eight year, we discovered that Gary Bauer, Richard Land, Pat Robertson, Gerry Falwell and

James Dobson had more than 40 appearances among them. How many appearances were there among the leaders of the 35 mainline Protestant churches that comprise the NCC, representing 100,000 congregations and 45 million members? NONE! These religious voices that dominate the media landscape don't represent people like you—faithful members of the UCC, living day by day in the trenches of real ministry. It is time your faith story is told, because the hijackers of the moral values debate don't want the things *you* believe in to get an airing.

Forty-five million people don't have health care and are led to believe that somehow it is their fault. Is that what you believe in?

Black and brown kids that are assaulted with images on TV of super-predators that are—black and brown—characters carefully crafted by media execs driven only by the bottom line. Is that what you believe in?

Between 1990 and 2002, for every additional dollar earned by taxpayers in the bottom 90% of the population, those in the top one-one hundredth of a percent made an additional \$18,000. Is that what you believe in?

Thousands have died and the hundreds of billions dollars have been spent on a war in Iraq based on sloppy intelligence, a first-strike philosophy and an intimidated press. Is that what you believe in? One study showed that of the 393 interviews on the nightly news of ABC, CBS, NBC and PBS in the run up to the War in Iraq—*three* were by peace activists.

[Don't even get me going about prison reform or public education or the minimum wage or about building a 2,000 mile fence along our southern border! I know these things are complicated, but two months ago I was in the Middle East and I tell you walls are not the answer for people on either side of the divide.]

In an era when politicians are quick to point out their evangelical roots, and use the Bible as justification for all kinds of political agendas, how much of our federal budget is devoted to development aid? Not ten percent—the standard of generosity in the Bible, not five percent, not even one percent. But sixteen one hundredths of one percent of the federal budget is devoted to foreign development aid!

We must engage the media in an era of exponentially expanding technology. We must infuse our rediscovered credibility in the public square with sensitivity, welcome,

justice and hope. We must be stewards of this unexpected gift of recognition, invoking all the wisdom, all the compassion, all the talents, all the resources, all the energy, all the imagination at our disposal for this task. We can do no less, because lives are at stake.

And while our ministry may be waged on media battlefields and internet superhighways, we can never forget that at its heart, it is about people. And what comes next in the stillspeaking effort is not just about web statistics, edgy commercials or getting John Thomas a gig on Meet the Press. If you doubt this, you need to hear Karen's story.

A new program that has grown out of our stillspeaking campaign is **i.ucc**. This is a virtual community that seeks to reach two audiences: those who have seen our commercials but who do not yet have the emotional strength to cross the threshold of a church; and those who have heard the UCC's message of extravagant welcome but find no UCC congregation nearby. These folks gather "virtually," on-line, led by trusted UCC members—many of them ordained—who are called i.guides. (Seekers are not comfortable with pastors or counselors.)

About a month ago, **i.ucc** received this e-mail from Karen: "I am thinking of leaving this world soon but for some reason I seen a commercial on your site and made me stop and check this out. Don't know why but I am here. Maybe it was a last source of information that maybe I am wrong. I don't know. I am confused, hurt, upset and a zillion other things. I don't like talking to people on the phone or in person. This is my way of dealing."

One of our i.guides, Andy, began—gently—entering into dialogue with this woman, steering her toward forums and study materials on i.ucc. About ten days later, Andy received the following e-mail from Karen:

"Andy, I know I say this all the time but honestly, thank you. I know I had reached a low low point in my life to even think of ending it all, but to me God works in ways we don't understand. I was writing notes to my family when I seen the commercial which led me to this site and after posting my story and reading others...I started praying again, something I hadn't done in a long time...I had this job interview over a month ago for a job I really would like to have but due to a communication problem I

missed the interview and was too embarrassed to call. Well, they called yesterday and I prayed all night about what to do and for the courage to make the call to them. I did call and they are giving me another interview... Thank you for letting me find myself again.”

What Karen was experiencing just before she saw our web site was on one side of the comma. Where she is now, perhaps, is beyond the comma—looking forward to sentences and paragraphs and chapters still to be. Of all the things for which the human spirit yearns, it most needs hope, the possibility that there is a future beyond the endings of today, that there is a healing beyond the pain of the present, that there is something beyond the tears and darkness of a broken world.

We in the United Church of Christ must continue to walk that harrowing journey with Karen and her peers, that they understand beyond question that no matter who they are or where they are on life’s journey, they are welcome here. Celebrate what’s right.

In honor of the comma, I conclude with a word about punctuation. The purpose of punctuation is to separate words, to give meaning and cohesion to language and to give expression and emphasis in writing. The poet e.e.cummings is perhaps the best ever to capture the possibilities of punctuation as a window into new paradigms and images. His use of spacing, capitalization, verb tenses, spelling and punctuation challenge the senses as his poems cascade across the page in unusual ways. But one poem in particular underscores the power of such imagery:

since feeling is first  
who pays any attention  
to the syntax of things  
will never wholly kiss you;

wholly to be a fool  
while Spring is in the world

my blood approves,

and kisses are a better fate  
than wisdom  
lady I swear by all the flowers. Don't cry  
-- the best gesture of my brain is less than  
your eyelids' flutter which says

we are for each other:then  
laugh,leaning back in my arms  
for life's not a paragraph

And death I think is no parenthesis

Life is not a paragraph, and death, I think, is no parenthesis. As Oscar Wilde once said, "we are all lying in the gutter, but some of us are gazing at the stars." Listen carefully to the stillspeaking God, for what we experience today is different than what we experienced just a few months ago. Be bold. Be joyful. Be creative. Be transcendent. *Share* the hope set before us, so that all will understand that no matter who they are or where they are on life's journey, they are welcome here.