

THE SOWER

CENTER FOR CLERGY EXCELLENCE, OCTOBER 2016

DEBATES, DEBUNKERS AND DEADBUGS

What brings real change? by John W Nupp

On a flight home from Dallas to Philly, my sister was trapped next to the window seat by a man who introduced himself as a "Debunker." She was already weary from travel, so she let down her guard just long enough to take the bait. "What is a 'Debunker'?" she asked. The man proceeded to explain that it was his self-appointed role in life to debunk the Bible. Then, proceeding with Adam and Eve,

he went through most of the Hebrew scriptures and into the New Testament, poking holes in the veracity of

the Bible. My sister wished she could phone me up or, better yet, switch places with me. She was so tired, and knew how much more I would have enjoyed the challenge of the conversation with a Debunker.

Of course, the main problem was that it was not a conversation at all. It was a

barrage, a verbal assault. Beyond expressing that she was a life-long United Methodist, Janet was able to say little else. Really, what point was there in seeking to engage this person in conversation? His mind was set; he was fixed on his world-view and was seeking only to win one more convert to the cause.

I thought about the Debunkers out there when I

reluctantly tuned in to the first Presidential debate. I had already faced a long day, and so was not particularly

interested in subjecting myself to the jaw-clenching agony of watching the face-off. After all, what was to be gained by the verbal jousting, where two people are talking but no one is listening? After the first forty minutes, I could feel a familiar pain cinching up inside, as the tension of that stage took

"THE WORD IS RIGHT HERE
AND NOW - AS NEAR AS THE
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AS NEAR AS THE HEART IN
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DEUTERONOMY 30:14, THE
MESSAGE

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residence inside my lower back. I knew it was time to hit the floor and do some stretches.

You see, I've had to add "chiropractor" to my list of medical experiences. What with moving appointments at the same time our oldest daughter made the move out of college to home and then to a third-floor apartment, my back has taken a toll. Over a series of weeks, through a combination of office visits and daily exercises at home, I've had to strengthen my "core." I've had to unlearn things I have taken for granted for forty-plus years, then re-learn how to tackle the challenges of sitting, bending, and even breathing. Many of the home exercises are simple, yet effective. They have silly names such as the "Bird-dog," the "Cat-camel," or my favorite, the "Deadbug." Over time, these stretches have had the desired effect of relieving pain, returning my stomach to its rightful place as an internal organ, and lending strength to my lower back. It has taken this repetition of stretching day-in and day-out for weeks to adjust to a proper alignment of my posture.

I wonder if there is some hope for us in this example. In a world of Debaters and Debunkers, you and I know how simple it can be, yet how effective, to humble ourselves before God. Day-in

and day-out, every morning and every evening, week after week, we can avail ourselves of that living Word of God which is never far away. God has placed this word in our mouths, in our hearts, ready for us to listen and be transformed. Through this holy word, God calls us to **unlearn** those things we have taken for granted for years. Then, through the alchemy of grace, God grants us ways to **relearn** how to sit in the presence of Christ, how to bend in service, how to breath in the Spirit.

For those of us serving as Spiritual Leaders, the challenge is two-fold: to daily submit to realigning ourselves to God's ways, and also to lead others in doing the same. We are called to be both patients and practitioners! We must learn to submit ourselves to the process of being changed, even as we create communities where this change happens in the lives of others.

How can we hope to change the world by bending over our Bible to read a few verses, or to simply sit at your computer and quietly nod your assent? What must we unlearn and relearn about bending before God's word and sitting in the presence of Christ? If we are truly going to allow God to stretch us and reshape us at to our core, then

the words we read, especially the Living Word, must move us into action. This is what it means to breathe, to "be inspired." God sets us free from the traps of those who seek to convert us or draw us into the conflict of debate. We are made to rise to life, strengthened at the very core of who we are by the Spirit of the Living God!

How do we do this? How do we practice this kind of breathing that leads to life? Change happens through community; but not only through the kind of community that comes when we bring a bunch of people into the same room to listen to a sermon. Sanctuary settings make it too easy to listen and to leave, unchanged. We must wrestle with the Spirit of God in the context of communities where language gets fleshed out in action.

We already know how real change happens – through small groups of people, gathered in the Word, prepared by the wisdom of God's Spirit to transform the world. Our Wesleyan heritage compels us not to settle for inactivity. The world is waiting for the life-giving Word our God is speaking (and so are we)! The time has come for us as spiritual leaders to reclaim our spiritual roots, to stretch out and lead the way.