**Speaking in the Light**

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The original title of this piece was supposed to be “The Art and Science of Obfuscation” in order to examine what is happening in the world of information and public conversation. Hopefully, as we explore the issue of obfuscation and the role it presently plays in communication, the media and the functioning of society at so many levels, we will be able to see more clearly the issues that confront us on the local, national and international levels of society…and the more clearly we will be able engage in “speaking in the light.”

Obfuscation serves many purposes. To obfuscate is to make unclear, to distract from what is really happening, from what is essential. To obfuscate is to cover up or to hide something. In all shapes and forms, obfuscation prevents us from seeing clearly, from understanding.

There are three key questions related to obfuscation

What is the purpose of obfuscation?

Who obfuscates and who benefits from obfuscation?

How is obfuscation done?

The purposes of obfuscation are buried within the definitions. Obfuscation is different from simply not sharing information or ideas. It is different from not speaking. To obfuscate is to speak (or write) but the purpose is to make something unclear. Obfuscatory (I really like this word!) communication is designed to do the opposite of what written or oral written communication is supposed to do. It is to provide what seems like communication when speaking or writing in such a way that the flow of words covers up what really should be spoken.

The basic purpose of obfuscation is to hide something. The source of the obfuscation (the obfuscator!) most often has something to gain by concealing information. This possible gain may take many forms: power, prestige, financial gain, avoidance of responsibility, another term in office, etc. What is key to obfuscation is the fact that communication seems to take place, when in fact the opposite is actually happening. It is not the same as simply not telling somebody about something. There is direct and specific gain to the obfuscator from seeming to be communicating while in reality doing the opposite.

A strange thing happens when obfuscation is taking place. A presentation is made. What seems to be communication is taking place. However, when the receiver of obfuscatory communication (the listener, reader or viewer) goes back and tries to examine what was contained within the communication, it often seems that he or she has not understood what was being communicated because what they have in front of them does not make any sense. The burden is placed on the receiver of information to “de-code” or unravel the many words that really cover up the fact that either nothing or nothing real has been said.

Obfuscation depends on the “obfuscatee” (sorry, I could not resist making up the word) or the listener feeling that he or she is not able, not educated enough, not intelligent enough to understand the issues before us. Obfuscation is insult because it is disrespectful of the experience, intelligence, knowledge, and accumulated wisdom that we have both as individuals and collectively as community.

Often obfuscation leads to the linking together of two pieces of what seems like information in a way that denies the real relationship between the two. A domestic example would be the linking of the supposed benefit of tax cuts and a healthy economy. An international example, of course, would be the linking of Saddam Hussein and Al-Queda, or that the best way to ensure peace is to fund a war. With obfuscation, if something is said often enough, the unfortunate result is that many come to believe it. “After all, how could it be reported in so many places if it isn’t true?”

We find obfuscation in many places and forms. These days, the most obvious place is in the media. We are hard put to find the issues that should be the heart of this campaign reported on the television, the radio or in newsprint. Instead we are greeted with a barrage of commentary on how someone stands, the use of gestures and facial expressions, the color of one’s clothes, rather than the ideas and concepts based on facts that need to be the foundation of domestic and international policy. The obsession with the past does not include what should we be learning from that past, but rather is mired in endless discussions of “he said - she said” or, probably “he said-he said.” It is all distraction.

The question we must ask ourselves is whether we want to be distracted rather than deal with some of the difficult realities facing us as persons, communities and as a nation. It is easier to laugh at the endless distraction than to do the hard work of understanding, choosing, acting, etc. It is more difficult to find the time, take the time to listen, learn, understand and then share our ideas and opinions with others. These are, nevertheless, difficult tasks in which we must be willing to engage.

As we enter into the last weeks of the presidential campaign, let us focus on the key issues before us:

1. The economy – the need for good jobs that support families and provide security and

benefits.

B. The deepening US debt as well as the worsening federal budget deficit.

C. The need for affordable, quality, universally accessible healthcare, education and housing.

And, most importantly, the need for the US to reclaim our ability to be a nation that uses the lens of the “Common Good” to measure all that we do. In doing so, we will be a nation that wages peace in all forms: social, economic and environmental.