

Our Search for Truth and Meaning

Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Hillsborough
May 8th, 2011
Rev. Patty Hanneman

Call to Worship

We celebrate this Mother's Day,
Children all,
We come together in faith and hope,
To find what meaning life holds for us,
To laugh and celebrate with one another
And to soothe the wounds of daily life.
As we celebrate, may we also grow in wisdom and in love.

Adapted from a reading by Margorie C. Skwire

Lighting of the Chalice

We light our chalice to these words by Rachel Naomi Remen: *We are all here to grow in wisdom and learn how to love better. As we each do this in our own ways, we slowly become a blessing to those around us and a light to the world.*

Opening Hymn, #91, Mother of All

Children's Stories – The Three Blind Men and the Elephant; the magnifying glass in our toolbox

Joys and Sorrows – If you have had a joy we can celebrate with you, or a sorrow we can help you carry, I invite you to come to the microphone, share what is on your heart, and light a candle if you wish.

Let us take a few moments to be silent together, to pause and remember all that has been shared, to consider those things that have not been expressed but remain in our hearts. In this space, we offer silent thanksgiving for joys shared, and solace for broken places.

Pastoral Prayer for Mother's Day, 2011

*We call upon the ghost of Julia Ward Howe,
Dead now one hundred years,
Yet still alive in our imagination and our hearts.
We call you forth in our consciousness
To echo your cry
For a Mother's Peace Day
To end the unnecessary bloodshed*

Which we humans all-too-often employ.

*We call you, dear Ms. Howe,
To help us make sense of the death of Osama bin Laden.
You, the author of the Battle Hymn of the Republic,
Know that self-defense and war are sometimes necessary.
Yet you, as a mother,
Who lost a child herself,
Know the tragic sting of death.*

*Mindful of the chaos and destruction
And the many, many deaths
On September 11th, 2001,
And through the war-torn years since,
We honor the losses and the sacrifices
And we rejoice at this possible turning-point
In the war on terrorism.*

*We rejoice at the possibility of peace and a sense of justice,
But let us not rejoice at the loss of life.
Mother, Julia, remind us
That every life has inherent worth,
That each person has a mother somewhere.
Help us to use this moment for self-reflection,
That we might grow and evolve.
Urge us to take this opportunity
To rededicate ourselves
To justice and compassion for all:
Help us to end terrorism
By ending the injustices which fuel it.*

*Let us honor this Mother's Day
As if it were your own Mother's Peace Day.
Let us honor mothers of all kinds,
And those who serve as mothers,
And those who would be mothers,
By creating a more just and peaceful world
For all children.*

So may it be.

Rev. Chip Roush

Sermon

Our theme for this month is “truth.” That is truth with a small “t.” Rev. Roush’s prayer speaks to the fact that “truth” often depends on where we are standing. Throughout history extraordinary men and women have spent their lives searching for truth. Socrates and Darwin come to mind, as do the photojournalists who were recently killed in Libya as they sought to uncover the truth about that conflict. Karen Armstrong claims that the search for truth, the search for meaning, is such an important aspect of the human condition that we can easily fall into despair without the freedom to seek and discover it for ourselves.

The first time I walked into a Unitarian Universalist congregation about 18 years ago – the Eno River Fellowship in Durham – I was especially struck by reading our fourth Principle, “a free and responsible search for truth and meaning.” What?! A religion that actually promotes asking questions? Get out of here! We are allowed, we are free, to ask what the truth might be? Who ever heard of such a thing?

It was a time in my life when I was going through some difficult changes, asking myself a lot of questions about what I needed to do to become more authentic. This is a common struggle – the desire to be authentically who we are, and of wanting to be seen and heard by someone, acknowledged and valued as that person. There are times in our lives when this need becomes very acute, and one of these times is often referred to as the mid-life crisis. During this time, there was one aspect of my life that at first I did not want to mess with, and that was religion. I did not want to risk asking religious questions. At the time I trusted that my religious values were correct, that they were set in stone, and that as I grew toward authenticity, I had to either accept or reject religion itself, because there was no negotiating the rules of engagement.

So imagine my shock as I sat reading the 4th Principle, I felt free for the first time in a long time. When we are not allowed to search for our own authentic truth, especially religious ones, it can truly lead to despair. For many of us come-outers (folks who came from another religious tradition) this freedom to ask questions is indeed the good news of Unitarian Universalism.

Truth is a slippery thing. Just when we think we have hold of it, it slips out of our grasp. This is what happens in seminary, when you’re searching for religious truths. I read a book I listen to a lecture and I think I have a grasp of what god is about, and then someone else tells me the previous book is all spin. Or I think I’ve figured out the economics of the recent recession until I listen to another expert on the subject. What is the truth? Do you not get so weary of spin? People on both sides of an issue spin so fast that it’s impossible to know the truth sometimes. What is really the best way to create jobs? To create a sustainable earth? The truth is a slippery thing.

A few weeks ago I read a book called *Picking Cotton*, a memoir about a woman who identifies a man as her rapist, only to find years later through DNA evidence that the perpetrator was another man with similar features. I read an article a few months ago, and I’m sorry I can’t remember the source, an article that claimed that the results of most scientific experiments are in fact based more often on the results the scientist expects to find than on objective truth. The truth is slippery indeed.

Another thing I've learned about truth is that it is tightly connected with trust. Whatever we trust in we believe will deliver the truth to us. As children we trust the grownups we love to tell us the truth. It takes a lot to cause a child not to trust, a lot, and for most of us, it takes a lot too, to learn not to trust people or ideas or systems that we hold dear to our hearts. If we trust the scientific method, we believe it will deliver the truth. This is in fact one of my beliefs, even as I recognize its limitations. If we trust a religious faith, it will deliver the truth; professors will give us the truth; BBC or NPR or Fox News will give us the truth; our partner will give us the truth. We hear or we say, Trust me, I'm your friend; trust me, I've done the research; trust me, I'll invest your money safely; just trust me. If your trust has been taken advantage of often enough, it can make you doubt your ability to know what is true.

What or who do you trust to give you answers to life's most important questions? Where do we go when we get to a place where we have to reject the rules? In what or in whom can we trust when something we felt was absolutely true has failed us?

These two aspects of truth – its slipperiness and its relationship with trust – mean that truth is also complex. The Rev. Tamara Lebak writes that when she taught epistemology, which is the science of how we know, she would use the image of a prism to illustrate the complexity of truth. "Absolute truth," she writes, "or objective reality is like the light that shines into the world, but we cannot access that light directly. Our subjective experience is as a single beam of color, and there are an infinite number of colors. The prism itself is our world, our limited sensory experience, our language, our culture, our personal history, and biology. The result is a particular perspective. We see the world through the glasses of that particular shade, which, in fact, cannot be removed. We may be *influenced* by other cultures, and opinions. But ultimately we cannot remove the observer from the observed."ⁱⁱ

Think of all the lessons we learn about truth as we travel through life. First through our families, then through our "tribal" connections, our significant others, our own gut instincts, and the integrity of our rational minds. As we learn to *trust* each of these sources, their lessons become our truth. They become our selves, our ego-selves, which organize and integrate all those "truths" about our lives into comparisons, judgements, and opinions about what is going on around us. So that our truths build upon one another to develop meaning. This is what the ego is designed to do.

One of the most interesting books I've read about human nature is called *The Wisdom of the Ego* by psychologist George Vaillant. Now, we often hear the ego talked about in negative terms, as in, "geez, she's sure got a big ego" meaning she's pretty narcissistic and self-absorbed. But Vaillant reminds us that in fact the ego develops in order that we have the ability to search for truth and meaning. "The ultimate ego tasks," Vaillant writes, "are wisdom, the fusion of care and justice, and the capacity to consider the rights, needs, and past histories of others, even as we pay heed to those same facets in ourselves... the ego allows us to distinguish that which we must gather the courage to change from that which we must gain the serenity to accept."ⁱⁱⁱ

So if we had fully functioning, healthy, mature, wise egos, the search for truth and meaning would be a piece of cake. But we don't. And people and ideas that we trust fail us. There is nothing that overwhelms the ego as much as having something or someone we trust fail us. This is so painful, in fact, that the ego defends us by going into denial. Denial, repression, projection – all these ego-tricks – are our ego's immune system, keeping the real truth at bay until we can safely make the change. What happens when something we've always desired, having children perhaps, becomes an impossibility? When an ideal we've always held to be true we find to be false? When our loved one turns out to be someone other than we thought we knew? These kinds of new "truths" initially cannot be faced. Our minds are hardwired to keep them at bay until the pain of loss subsides, until we can take it in and modify our roadmaps about ourselves and the world.

When I first became a Unitarian Universalist, I was ecstatic about the *free* search for truth and meaning. It took awhile before I could appreciate the *responsible* part, the part that happens when you actually find what you're looking for. Vaillant's work helped me understand how difficult, and how courageous it can be to change your mind. Often to give up a truth means giving up trusting something or someone. The depth of your trust will determine how overwhelmed you will be in trying to accept that new truth. It may not seem freeing at all. It may seem at first like it is going to suck you under. But a responsible search requires that we face inconvenient truths as they are made known to us.

To search responsibly also means to live your conviction. The Dali Lama once said there are two things in life: to think critically and then to act on it. Even as we recognize that truth is partial and skewed by our own lens, we cannot "search" to the point of analysis paralysis. We must hold fast to what we have discovered thus far, even when those truths and principles are unpopular. While we humbly acknowledge the grey areas of life, we can't spend much time there. To paraphrase William Ellery Channing, the point of all this is not to become skillful disputants, but to live holier lives.

As Unitarian Universalists, we are privileged... privileged! to be free to search for truth and meaning, to go beyond dogmas, and to wrestle with and understand more fully, the truth of our lives as they evolve. We promote this free search because we know that mindful people, in every age, will discover new insights into the human condition. But to actively affirm a free *and* responsible search requires a community – a community that can acknowledge and value different views, which brings us **closer** to truth; a community that can hold us as we challenge ourselves to **modify** our truth; a community that holds us accountable for **living** our truth. Engaging in this quest is an act of religious devotion. When we do it well, we may find that something important, something needed, something with a capitol "T" is trying to get our attention. May it be so, and blessed be.

Closing Hymn - #318, "We Would Be One"

¹ Jennifer Thompson-Cannino and Ronald Cotton, with Erin Torneo. 2009. *Picking Cotton: Our Memoir of Injustice and Redemption*. New York: St. Martin's Press.

ⁱⁱ Rev. Tamara Lebak. As found in *Simple Gifts*, a monthly journal of All Souls Unitarian Church in Tulsa, OK. May 2010, Vol. VII, Issue IX.

ⁱⁱⁱ Vaillant, George. 1993. *The Wisdom of the Ego*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.