

REFLECTIONS ON TRUTH

From the beginnings of human history, most religions have majored in capturing the truth, selling it, then rebuking all who didn't purchase their particular package. For example, whether or not Jesus really said: "I am the way, the truth, the life..." orthodox Christianity has claimed that it contains the whole truth, nothing but the truth.

This actually holds for all brands of fundamentalism, which choose to major in Truth with a capital T. Although non-fundamentalists may be sincere, kindly folks, we remain outside the gates of pure understanding and salvation.

The religion of Unitarian Universalism has differed radically from mainline Western and Eastern traditions by claiming that truth is complex, multi-faceted, and elusive. Truth is the property of no single group, and, in fact, whereas there may be personal, pen-ultimate truths in our lives, *the* truth is inaccessible to human comprehension.

Our approach to religion invites folks to take the matter of truth seriously but not grimly, humbly rather than arrogantly, and, to paraphrase Portnoy in Philip Roth's novel *Portnoy's Complaint*, our human mission is never to exclude or harm anyone in the name of our religion.

So my sermon today is an exploration into some Unitarian Universalist angles on and approaches to truth.

First, truth arrives in various ways, and we earthlings are to honor rather than rate the range of avenues. Even in our own liberal religious tradition, there's no single

pathway to ultimacy, to God, to wisdom; rather there exist numerous, equally energizing, paths.

For example, Unitarian Joseph Priestley, the discoverer of oxygen, came by his truths via the scientific method, a thoroughgoing empiricism. William Ellery Channing claimed reason rather than revelation as the instrumental source of his Unitarianism. Margaret Fuller, as a transcendentalist, contended that intuition was her entrée to the divine. And Dorothea Dix found her religion verified in compassion, in prophetic duty. So, you can see, we have historical support as Unitarian Universalists for being scientists, rationalists, mystics, and activists or any blend thereof you might choose. I personally happen to be a happy theological hybrid.

Pluralism triumphs in our tribe—always has and always will. We’re called to live well with our own pursuit of the holy without judging the routes of our sisters and brothers...be they inside or outside our religious fold.

Secondly, “truth”, wrote our Universalist forebear, Clinton Lee Scott, “comes to earth in small installments.”

Or as another colleague once told me, “What you’re saying, Tom, may just well be a solid 100% half-truth!” So often that’s the case, isn’t it? We race off, feeling content, even smug, about some hard-earned insight, only to learn that there are many sincere views on the same issue and what we’re fiercely clutching as ultimate is but a partial truth...a 100% half-truth.

Alas, you and I are prone to fall in love with a toe, an earlobe, or an elbow. We’re captivated with parts rather than being open to the whole experience, the whole person, the whole truth.

Talking about the partial versus the larger picture, some years ago the United Nations announced a major project: the writing of a complete new history of the modern world with truth as the objective. This meant having the history of the United States written, not only by US historians, but also from the perspective and knowledge of British, Russian, Spanish, African, Chinese and other historians whose countries have played a significant role in the shaping of our history.

Understandably, the project never even got off the ground, for no government, including our own, wants its citizens and especially our school children, to know the whole—often miserable and grim—truth of our homeland. For historical truth is almost entirely antithetical to knee-jerk patriotism.

Truth then not only comes in small installments, but it's often downright confounding. Some years ago I saw a cartoon in the *New Yorker*, based upon the notion that if you could sit monkeys in front of typewriters and let them type long enough (for eons, if necessary), eventually, just by chance, one of them would type out the whole Bible, or the complete works of Shakespeare.

So in the *New Yorker*, this monkey was shown, seated in front of a typewriter, furiously clicking away; and what you read over the monkey's shoulder on the paper is: "To be or not to be, that is the Gazorninplotz!" Well, you can't have everything.

Our sincere trek after a particular truth seems flawless. Everything's perfectly set up, and lo and behold, we end up with part insight and part nonsense, just like the monkeys. We're ready to grasp the truth, and we arrive with "to be or not to be, that is the Gazorninplotz!"

We forget that the pursuit of the whole truth is a tricky, twisting endeavor not meant for brittle minds or lazy souls.

Then we remember, as Unitarian Universalists, that we're not ashamed to confess that truth comes in small installments, that our truths are partial, that our truths sometimes end up a crazy mix of enlightenment and drivel. And, furthermore, there's no shame in admitting our mistakes or even changing gears in midstream either.

Mahatma Gandhi once led a protest march in which many thousands of people left their jobs and homes to endure great hardship. As the march was well underway, Gandhi called a halt and disbanded it. His lieutenants came to him and said: "Mahatma, you can't do this, our march has been planned for a long time and there are too many people involved." Gandhi's simple retort was, "My friends, my commitment is to truth as I see it each day, not to consistency!"

So, as Unitarian Universalists we're committed neither to the *closed* mind nor to the *empty* mind but to the *open* mind which shifts according to the insights and intuitions of every fresh hour.

A third reflection upon truth. Beware, my friends, of confusing our private habits with larger truths, our ingrained prejudices with wisdom.

There's the joke about a man staying in a monastery where the monks did nothing but copy religious works. After observing this process for several days, the man approached the abbot and says: "I see that the copies are getting worse and worse; wouldn't it be a good idea to go back to the originals and copy them?"

The abbot thinks it's a great idea and disappears into the basement to get the originals. A day later he still hasn't returned, so the man decides to go look for him. In

one of the underground rooms, the abbot is sitting with a large book on his lap, crying softly. "What's wrong?" the man asks. With a grief-stricken expression, the abbot points to a passage in the book: "It says here celebrate, not celibate!" So it goes; a mix-up on one letter, and the course of an entire religion is set.

Or someone says something; it sounds reasonable, so we believe it. And before you know it, it's become the "truth." Then that truth must be defended by fire and sword. Which is strange, because no one should ever have to defend the truth. The truth can do that very well all by itself, thank you. Anyone who thinks they need to defend the truth is not living from truth but from dogma.

And the pinnacle of dogmatic thought comes from people who claim they're acting in the name of God. Their acts aren't just based on the "truth" but on the "holy truth." Because of this, they believe they harbor the right to impose their opinions on others. Some even believe they can kill in the name of God. How far removed from the truth can you be?

The damage that's been done to humans in the name of religion is staggering and abominable. A little girl and her father were talking about the some 200 denominations in this land alone, and the five year old said: "Daddy, which abomination do we belong to?"

Therefore, in our responsibly free religion, we possess no absolute standard of measuring *THE* truth. Instead we ask each person to share her and his own truths, and the only limitations we insist on are those necessary to preserve the greatest liberty and respect for us all. Conversation, not conversion, is the spiritual discipline we choose to practice as Unitarian Universalists: conversations that are honest to ourselves and caring of others. Remember our two basic guidelines in matters religious: no lies and no cruelty!

Fourth, being a truth-seeker isn't sufficient for the full religious life. This has proven to be our Achilles heel as freethinkers. There's nothing wrong with our desire to be truth-seekers as long as we don't halt with the search, as long as we don't make a terminal value out of the quest.

Of course, when we cease searching, we're spiritually dead. Discoveries in science, art, or religion should stimulate further search not discourage it. But it's foolish to deny that nothing has been found in human history.

The painter Pablo Picasso, who could hardly be accused of religious dogmatism, saw through the idolatry of searching when it's put in opposition to finding. He wrote: "In my opinion, to search means little in painting. To find, is the thing. The one who finds something, no matter what it might be, at least arouses our curiosity, if not our imagination. Therefore, when I paint, my object is to show what I've found and not merely what I'm looking for." I totally agree.

So, as religious liberals we're seekers and finders, both. Even though our findings are never final, they do furnish enough operating wisdoms to guide our lives.

We must simply learn to stake our lives on incomplete data and imperfect vision. You know what? Most every important decision I've ever made has been based on 60% conviction. Yet, often I don't act, because actions entail risk, and I'm no more courageous than anyone else. But I do know that *not* to act is to act. It's to act on behalf of that which I don't believe in. Call it the 40% solution. We do more inaction to foster the things we oppose than we do by our actions to nurture the things we support.

And there's more to this truth business. Having found some truth, we're then challenged to face the consequences of what we've found. Truth-facing is frequently

disturbing and painful, at times socially unpopular and occasionally downright dangerous. As the writer, Flannery O'Connor quipped: "Find the truth and it shall make you odd!"

Yes, there are truths we'd rather ignore: truths about our selves, about our jobs, about our inherited beliefs, about our parents or children, about our friends or lovers, about our country, and about our chosen ideologies.

As Unitarian Universalists we join together to form beloved communities precisely because facing and living the truth is often so difficult that only with the support of honest and caring companions dare we undertake the task.

Then, once we've found some truth and begun to face some truth, then we're urged to be truth-tellers. Speaking truth to power in a world where truth-telling isn't particularly valued, either privately or publicly, is no easy challenge.

Oh, most of us can share easy truth—hallmark card sentiments—but the deeper, abrasive, even dangerous, truths are hard for us to tell our friends, our associates, our political or parish leaders, and, of course, ourselves.

For telling the truth is much more complex and difficult than either telling lies or keeping silent. Nonetheless, we belong to a faith of heretics who have long-dared to challenge the orthodoxies of their day. They've spoken truth to pain, spoken truth to conflict, spoken truth to the social, political, and religious party lines of their times.

As another *New Yorker* cartoon reads: "Oh, I could never be a Unitarian; they always try to tell the truth."

That may be stretching it a bit, but to be a people of integrity, we cannot live with less than 90% truth-telling. And when we do dare to speak the truth in love, we're doing

so not only for ourselves but also in tribute to our religious forebears as well as our descendants.

The opening of the second act of Gilbert and Sullivan's *Pirates of Penzance* shows Major-General Standly ("the very model of the modern major-general...") apologizing to the "ancestors" buried in the chapel yard of his estate, for he has besmirched the family honor by lying to the pirates. He told the pirates that, like them, he's an orphan, so they wouldn't hurt him.

Another character asks the Major-General why he's apologizing to these tombstones, for they aren't his ancestors at all—he only bought the property a fortnight ago. They *are*, in fact, his ancestors, Standly replies, because they came with the property when he bought it!

Theodore Parker, Dorothea Dix, Whitney Young, Mary Livermore are our spiritual ancestors. And so are all San Dieguitans of blessed memory. They came with the property when Andy Kay bought it. They're members of our same spiritual family, and when we speak or fail to speak the truth in love, they're standing nearby in the wings: nudging, cheering, comforting us.

Finally, we seek after the truth, find some, and tell as much as we can. Then we must *do* the truth. Embodying our truths in our daily life is the real test of our religion. Truth is a verb and the Christian scriptures exhort us, above all else, "to do the truth" not just chat about it, pay homage to it, or fuss with it.

I cherish the example of Albert Schweitzer who said: "My life, my argument!" At the age of thirty, he stood at the peak of his promise...biblical scholar, organist, foremost interpreter of Bach, Professor at a great university, and lionized by the high and the

mighty. Yet Schweitzer gave it all up to serve fellow human beings in one of the most poor and disadvantaged of the world at that time—equatorial Africa.

Here was sickness, pain, and sorrow enough for a thousand doctors. Schweitzer built a hospital with his own two hands. He begged for money to supply and staff it. And when once he asked an educated, local friend to help him carry a heavy timber, the answer was, “I’m an intellectual, and I don’t carry timbers around,” to which Schweitzer replied, “You’re lucky. I too wanted to become an intellectual. But I didn’t make it.” He might equally have said, “but I outgrew it.”

You and I belong to an intelligent, reasonable faith, to be sure, but we’re not a band of intellectuals. We’re called to be truth-doers, willing to carry the necessary timbers to build a just and merciful world.

That’s why we call this, our Sunday morning gathering, a “worship service.” We worship, then we rise up and go forth to serve. Rather simple, isn’t it? Yet mighty challenging to do. We worship, then we serve. We worship, then we serve. Day after day after day...until we reenter the ground from which we came.

Tom Owen-Towle
January 11, 2009