

Truth – Or Truths? -- The Rev. Suzelle Lynch, Unitarian Universalist Church West, Brookfield, WI 06-10-07. All rights reserved.

READING -- from Anne Lamott's "Grace, (Eventually)," pp, 1-11, excerpted

There is not much truth being told in the world. There never was. This has proven to be a major disappointment to some of us. When I was a child, I thought grown-ups and teachers knew the truth, because they told me they did. It took years for me to discover that the first step in finding out the truth is to begin unlearning almost everything adults had taught me, and to start doing all the things they'd told me not to do....

At twenty-one, I still believed that if you could only get to see sunrise at Stonehenge, or full moon at the Taj Mahal, you would be nabbed by truth. And then you would be well, and able to relax and feel fully alive. But I actually knew a few true things (by then): I had figured out that truth and freedom were pretty much the same. And that almost everyone was struggling to wake up, to be loved, and not feel so afraid all the time. ...

By the time I had dropped out of college ... I'd acquired a basic and wildly ecumenical faith cobbled together from shards I'd gathered in reading various wisdom traditions – Native American, Hindu, feminist, Buddhist, even Christian, in a heart-stopping, kick-starting encounter with Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*. My best teachers were mess, failure, death, mistakes, and the people I hated, including myself.

Drugs often helped. ...

(One day) I pecked a hole out of the cocoon (I was in) and saw the sky of ingredients that would constitute my spiritual path ... love, poetry, prayer, meditation, community. I knew that sex could be as sacred as taking care of the poor. I knew that no one (is) holier than anyone else, that nowhere is better than anywhere else. I knew that the resurrection of the mind was possible. (And) I knew that no matter how absurd and ironic it was, acknowledging death and the finite was what gave you life and presence.

SERMON -- Truth – Or Truths? – The Rev. Suzelle Lynch

When we first moved to Bremerton, Washington, where I served my first congregation, Young and I had an interesting next-door neighbor. His name was Dave, and he was a lively retired gentleman, and an active member of the local Church of Latter-Day Saints. Dave was friendly to us, perhaps even a bit nosy about us. And as it happened, his house and ours were juxtaposed in such a way that we were his view, and therefore, it seemed, we were a nice source of entertainment for him – especially when we were out in our yard.

One day, as I was out in the back doing some yardwork, Dave came over to chat. Apparently he'd heard that I was the minister – he'd thought it was my husband -- and he wanted to know what kind of church it was that I was the minister of. He seemed especially interested in knowing how many Unitarian Universalists there were – and when I told him that we are a fairly small group, with around 250,000 members world-wide, he took great satisfaction in telling me that there are nearly ten million Mormons in the world. He even offered to give me a copy of the book of Mormon to further my education about his faith. “After all,” he seemed to be saying, “if ten million people believe in it, surely it must be true.”

The truth. If ten million people believe something, does that make it true? Does that make it more true than something only two hundred and fifty thousand people might believe? In a democratic society, it's easy to get drawn into this way of thinking. Majority rules, right?

But truth – that simplest and most self-evident of concepts, is not quite so easy to nail down. As the philosopher Goethe said, “It is much easier to recognize error than to find truth; for error lies on the surface and may be overcome; but truth lies in the depths, and to search for it is not given to every one.”

The search for truth, if not given to us, is at least earnestly taken up by us as Unitarian Universalists. The fourth principle of our larger religious association, states that we covenant to affirm and promote a free and responsible search for truth and meaning. By that sacred commitment to one another, we declare that we are seekers after truth, and we affirm that all persons have the right and the responsibility to seek it as well. The search for truth is basic to who we Unitarian Universalists are as individuals and as a religious movement. We follow the logic of philosopher Martin Heidegger, when he said the question of truth is a meditation on thinking, and Plato, who said that thinking is the talking of the soul with itself, and we find that our search for truth becomes a meditation on the soul. Our free and responsible search for truth and meaning is the way we Unitarian Universalists grow and nurture our souls.

Really, though, isn't the search for truth just part of being human? It seems hard-wired into us, and probably serves an evolutionary purpose. Something like keeping us safe from danger. We need to be able to discern between the real threat of physical harm from a wolf we encounter on a hiking trail and the non-threatening appearance of the spirit wolf who stalks us in our dreams. We need to be able to discern whom we can and cannot trust in our daily dealings with the practical world of investments, auto repairs, child care, and so on as well.

And so we each have developed our own ways of determining truth. For some things, we tend to rely on the scientific method, or on fact-finding – including seeking the opinions and recommendations of people we trust.

But there is another way. Listen to Walt Whitman's words:

When I heard the learn'd astronomer,
 When the proofs, the figures, were ranged in columns before me,
 When I was shown the charts and the diagrams, to add, divide, and measure
 them,
 When I, sitting, heard the astronomer where he lectured with much applause in
 the lecture-room,
 How soon, unaccountable, I became tired and sick,
 'Till rising and gliding out I wander'd off by myself
 In the mystical moist night-air, and from time to time,
 Look'd up in perfect silence at the stars.

Whitman reminds us that facts and figures are not the only carriers of truth. Indeed, in some matters, we may need to lean more heavily on the longings of our hearts, on our intuition or imagination to seek truth. Sometimes the best way to know the truth about the stars is to simply walk out into the moist night-air and look up!

Matters of intimacy and ultimacy, in particular, call for a different way of truth-seeking. For the human condition is paradoxical – we are alive, but conscious, as no other animal we know of is conscious, that one day we will die.

This is the ultimate truth of our existence, and the foundational question upon which all theology is based. We are so infinite, so beautiful, so full of potential to grow and change and impact the world, yet death is our ultimate destination. How can this be so, and given that it is true, how shall we live?

Most theologies turn to revelation – to the scriptures and traditions held to have been revealed by God or authorized by those whom God has anointed – most theologies turn to revelation to answer these questions. God's truths are authoritative, and many religions focus on living those revealed truths.

This is a fine and honorable enterprise, for the truths the world's religions invite us to live out are beautiful. "Love your neighbor as yourself." "Harm no living thing." "Do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God." Trouble arrives only when we become like the disciples in the tale of the ashram cat.

Now, according to the story, when the guru of the ashram sat down to worship each evening, the ashram's resident cat would get in the way and distract the worshipers. So the guru ordered that the cat be tied up during evening worship.

After the guru died the cat continued to be tied during evening worship. And when that cat died, another cat was brought to the ashram so that it too could be duly tied during evening worship.

Centuries later learned treatises were written by the guru's scholarly disciples and descendents on the liturgical significance of tying up a cat while worship is performed. (*Adapted from Soul Food, Kornfield and Feldman, p. 226*)

As Unitarian Universalists, we do not vest authority in any particular text or tradition, choosing instead to encourage each individual to form and frame his or her beliefs as he or she chooses. Our religion does not ask you to conform your thinking and desires to someone else's concepts, no matter how powerful or lyrical those concepts may be. Our religion says, "Your own original wisdom and the longings of your own heart can help you plumb the mystery of your existence, and navigate your days with hope and integrity. If some other religions may be construed as saying, "God has revealed these truths, our work is to live them," our religion may be viewed as saying, "God – or perhaps the beauty of the evolutionary process – gave us the capacity to discern truth, and our work is to grow as we seek to know it."

For we know that there are many sources where truth may be discovered: scripture, literature, science, nature, relationships, and even ourselves.

What does your lived experience tell you about this world? Are there truths you know, but perhaps have had no safe place to speak? What do you believe in? What gives you peace or brings you joy? What is it that disturbs you to your very roots, and makes you turn away? What is your life being lived for? Searching ourselves for our own deep truths is no easy process.

In a way, it reminds me of a game we used to play when I was about eleven or twelve – Truth or Dare. Anybody remember that one? In Truth or Dare, you either had to answer an intensely personal question, sure to embarrass any adolescent, or be willing to take a "dare" and do something risky or perhaps equally embarrassing as answering the question might have been. In Truth or Dare, you were always stuck between a rock and a hard place. Truth-seeking and truth-telling in our adult lives is just like this: confronting our fears, owning and daring to speak from our experience, challenging ourselves to name and live by what we believe – these things can tap into a deep reservoir of pain and fear that we would prefer to ignore. But the withering of soul that comes from not seeking our depths is equally painful. And without our voices, without our truth and authenticity, our world cannot be whole.

But how do we know what is true? Martin Heidegger writes "...we are seeking more (here) than mere particular instructions for correct action.... The true means ... that for which we live and die. (*In the book, "The Basic Questions of Philosophy," p. 27*)

In other words, truth is the ground of our being – that unnamable power or principle in which our life and consciousness are based. That for which we live and die is the true. It is this which we are constantly seeking and struggling to name.

And sometimes we succeed. A child is born, and in awe and wonder we name the unnamable “birth” or “new life.” We find ourselves drawn to a certain career and do well, or feel called to be in a particular place at a particular time and something marvelous occurs there, and we name the unnamable “miracle,” or “destiny.” Our hearts leap up when we read a psalm, a poem by the Sufi master Rumi, or even the Book of Mormon, and we’re moved to name the unnamable “God.” We work with the team which discovers a gene linked to a certain kind of cancer, opening the door to a cure, and we name the unnamable “science.”

And all of these names are correct. All of them are right. And all of them hold a hidden danger. Listen to this story from Buddhist tradition:

One day, Mara, the Buddhist lord of ignorance and evil, was traveling through the villages of India with his attendants. He saw a man doing walking meditation whose face was lit up in wonder. The man had just discovered something on the ground in front of him. Mara’s attendants asked what it was the man had found and Mara replied, “He has found a piece of truth.” “Why, Mara, O evil one, doesn’t this bother you when someone finds a piece of the truth?” his attendants asked.

“Not at all,” Mara replied. “Because right after they find it, they usually make a belief out of it.” (*Buddhist story from “Soul Food,” Kornfield and Feldman, p. 227, adapted.*)

All truth is partial. What we hope to avoid is tying truth down like the ashram cat. For when we do, truth becomes fundamentalism – and we succumb to idolatry. When truths related to the ultimate questions of existence are not lived, or questioned, when they are frozen into belief – they are no longer fuel for the fire of life, but become a poor substitute for the fire itself. As John Milton put it in our responsive reading, “If the waters of truth flow not in a perpetual progression, they sicken into a muddy pool of conformity and tradition.”

In saying this, I don’t mean that we should fling away every truth the instant we find it. Even if that practice were useful, it’s one we probably couldn’t follow anyway. Because deep in our very human bones is the longing for security, the yearning for an answer, the desire for truth with a capital “T.” Just like the man who found a piece of truth on the ground, we cannot stop ourselves from picking up truths like smooth stones on a beach and tucking them into our pocket of beliefs. We must simply do as the French philosopher Voltaire advises: Love the truth, but pardon error – only in this way can we empty our pockets of their stony weight and take up our search again.

A loving community that welcomes us just as we are helps us do this. A free and responsible search for meaning isn’t meant to be undertaken alone. Gently held by a covenant that asks us to treat each other with care and respect, this community invites us to reality-check the truths we have found with one another – to be responsible to one another. Here we embrace the idea of

spirituality as a journey. Here, we find companions on the path; we become responsible not only to what is within us, but also to those who are around us. Knowing that this community and this faith is open to our questions, our confusion, and our grief -- as well as to the wisdom we bring and the insights we long to share -- means we are invited to fully be ourselves here.

Our community also is a place that knows our truths will change with time.

I think of Anne Lamott's journey from the trusting place of childhood, through the 20-something longing to be nabbed by moonlit truth at the Taj Mahal, followed by a long sojourn fueled by wisdom literature and drugs. When she pecked a hole out of her cocoon, she discovered that community was one of the most important elements that would sustain her on her spiritual journey -- a journey that understood death and the finite as giving life and presence. This year, I have had conversations with so many of you about the changing truths of your lives: births and deaths, relationships blooming -- or fading, jobs lost and found, bodies betraying you and bodies healing as well... Each of these changes -- even the delightful ones -- is like a little death; inviting us to release our grip on the truth we know and open our hearts and hands to the search, again. Like yours, my own truths are changing, too -- standing here in early mid-life, my perspective is shifting without my permission, accompanied by a profound exhilaration and despair. What a gift it is that our community gives us permission -- encouragement, really -- to hold our truths lightly, to share them generously, to listen to one another, and always, to seek and to learn and to grow more whole. What a gift it is to be awakened and inspired in this place, to comfort and companion and challenge one another.

So let us be seekers of truth, whether there are ten of us or ten million. Ultimately, our search will help evolve consciousness itself toward an ever-greater lived interdependence and a healing of our planet, for there must be forces more powerful than individual human soul-building at work in our longings. Truth is calling us to step forward on a path paved with fear and wonder, pain and joy, with awe and delight. Let us answer the call, here, stepping forward here: in this moment, in this place, with this community.

Amen.