

“The Search for Truth”
Rev. Dave Hunter
Unitarian Universalists of Gettysburg
June 7, 2015

As Unitarian Universalists we are committed to the “free and responsible search for truth” (and meaning, too).¹ But what do we have in mind by the term “truth,” and what makes the search for it “free and responsible”?

When the witness in court is asked to swear to “tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth,” she is *not* supposed to just start talking, sharing every truthful thing she can think of. Imagine what that would be like:

Today is Monday.
If today is Monday, then tomorrow is Tuesday, and yesterday was Sunday.
Barak Obama is the President of the United States.
 $7 + 5 = 12$.
I’m older than my brother Edgar.

She could go on endlessly like that. And so could I. But I won’t. She is supposed to wait for a question, probably for many questions. “Where were you on the night of Saturday, January 24?” And so on.

So when we refer to the search for truth, what questions do we have in mind? Or what *kind* of question? The use of the words “search for” is a clue, probably a quite modest clue. Some truths don’t require any searching: Today is Sunday. $9 \times 9 = 81$. On the other hand, most of us could probably not calculate 81 to the 81st power in our head. That would require a search, but a pointless one. But to even ask that question, in Athens, 2400 years ago, would have been most remarkable.

¹ “We, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, Covenant to affirm and promote: . . . [4] A free and responsible search for truth and meaning; . . .” What is the difference between *the* “free and responsible search” and *a* “free and responsible search”? Why do we pair truth and meaning together in the same principle? Why is justice included twice in our principles? For background on the Purposes and Principles, see Warren R. Ross, *The Premise & the Promise: The Story of the Unitarian Universalist Association* (2001), pp. 91-100.

The English word *truth* is a descendent of the Indo-European *deru*, to be firm, solid, steadfast. Related words are tree, truce, trust, troth, tryst, trough, tray, duress, endure, obdurate, Druid.²

In thinking of truth, a fragment of a poem by Keats comes to mind, equating truth with beauty.³

² The Greek word for truth, by the way, is *aletheia*, (al-ay'-thi-a). It comes from *lanthano* (lan-than'-o), which means hidden, ignorant of, unaware, with the prefix *a*, which negates what follows, as in a-theist. Thus the truth is that which is not hidden.

And in Latin, truth is *veritas*, which comes from the Indo-European *wéros*. Among the many related words in English are verify, verily, verdict, and very.

³ Or we could start with the Bible – just a quick look. If you're looking for the greatest concentration of references to truth, you'll find them in the New Testament's Fourth Gospel, the gospel attributed to John. These verses – I'll mention only two of them – are probably familiar:

“You will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.” (John 8:32)

Two things should be noted here. First, this statement by Jesus was not meant as a general statement to humanity. No, Jesus was talking to a group of Jewish followers and explaining the consequences, the benefits, of sticking with Jesus. Second, the idea of being liberated by truth was a new one, not to be found in the Torah. See Wes Howard-Brook, *Becoming Children of God: John's Gospel and Radical Discipleship* (1994), p. 202.

Here's the second passage:

Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” (John 14:6)

We don't usually think of a person as embodying truth, and we would naturally think of “the way, the truth, and the life” as three separate items. But here they should be treated as a unit. And perhaps even more important are the first two words, “I am”, or, in Greek, *egō eimi*. Jesus is quoting, and claiming for himself, what God said to Moses from the burning bush. Moses, you may recall, asks God, if the Israelites ask for the name of this god by whom he has been sent, who should he say? God responds, tell them “I AM has sent me to you.” *egō eimi*. (Exodus 3:13-14) To relate to this, we have to set aside “our Western, analytical mind-sets.” That does not come easily to me. (see Howard-Brook, p. 315)

When old age shall this generation waste,
 Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe
 Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou say'st,
 'Beauty is truth, truth beauty,—that is all
 Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.'

These are the concluding lines from John Keats' (1795–1821) “Ode on a Grecian Urn.” (1819) The poet here is addressing the urn. I assume this is not to be read literally. It's poetry after all.

Another phrase that comes to mind when we think of truth is “speaking truth to power,” as in “she” – referring to death penalty opponent Sister Helen Prejean – “is an example of why nuns are to be feared: They speak truth to power – in the church and in government – with faith, conviction, and commitment.”⁴

When Unitarian Universalists talk of truth, as we do in our principle committing us to the free and responsible search for truth and meaning, what do we have in mind by “truth”? I realized, when I asked myself this question, that I didn't know the answer. As a result, I undertook a not very rigorous and not very thorough research project, which involved reading through our hymnal, *Singing the Living Tradition* (1993), all the hymns and all the readings, and noting instances of the word “truth.”

Out of 415 hymns, 40 mention truth. I haven't checked the hymnals of other denominations, but my guess is that they won't give truth nearly as much attention as we do. There's a research project for someone.

In a few of our hymns, the truth in question is moral truth. For James Russell Lowell, in “Once to Every Soul – originally *Man – and Nation comes the moment to decide*” [#119] and “All Whose Boast It Is that we come of forebears brave and free,” [#150] the target is the evil of slavery.

In some other hymns, the truth in question is theological truth. Thus John Andrew Storey writes:

Down the ages we have trod
 many paths in search of God,
 seeking ever to define
 the Eternal and Divine.

⁴ David Pasinski, letter to the editor, New York Times, May 13, 2015, p. A26, concerning the sentencing of Dzhokhar Tsarnaev.

After considering various possibilities, he finally concludes, in verse 6:

Though the truth we can't perceive
 this at least we must believe,
 what we take most earnestly
 is our living Deity. [#2]

Czech Unitarian Norbert Căpek's hymn to God concludes—

Life is yours – *that is, God's* – in you I grow tall,
 seed will come to fruit I know.
 Trust that after winter's snowfall,
 walls will melt and Truth will flow. [#28]

But in most of our truth hymns, truth is an abstract, undefined concept, good in itself, without reference to a particular realm of knowledge. Edwin Henry Wilson asks, “Where is our holy church?” and answers:

Where race and class unite
 as equal persons in the search
 for beauty, truth, and right.

Then he asks, “Where is our holy writ?” and answers:

Where'er a human heart
 a sacred torch of truth has lit,
 by inspiration taught.” [#113]

More recently, Alicia Carpenter wrote:

Just as long as vision lasts,
 I must answer, “Yes,” to truth . . .
 If they ask what I did well,
 tell them I said, “Yes,” to truth.” [#6]

Our hymnal has one hymn from Buddhist tradition, and it speaks of truth:

Be ye lamps unto yourselves,
 be your own confidence;
 hold to the truth within yourselves
 as to the only lamp [#184]

We value truth generally, without regard to the realm of inquiry. Keep in mind, however, that if you're looking for someone who's good at understanding and interpreting poetry – and hymns are a form of poetry – I'm the last person you'd come to. So please look at the truth hymns yourself, and see what you think.

The interest in truth stands out even more in the readings in the back of the hymnal. Consider these excerpts:

sign of our quest for truth and meaning [#448, Christine Robinson, see also #454]
 symbol of truth and freedom [# 451, Leslie Pohl-Kosbau]
 we extinguish this flame but not the light of truth [#456, Elizabeth Selle-Jones] – *that should be familiar to you*
 The quest of truth is its sacrament [#471, L. Griswold Williams] – *this one, with revision, was in our new member ceremony*
 In the freedom of the truth [#472, Charles Gordon Ames]
 To seek the truth in love [#473, James Vila Blake]
 Which seeks truth in freedom [#474, John Haynes Holmes]

So we're in favor of truth, we Unitarian Universalists. What's the big deal? Is the competition in favor of falsehood? That doesn't seem likely.

In her recent essay in the New York Times, anthropologist T.M. Lührman suggested that “religious belief and factual belief are indeed different kinds of mental creatures.”⁵ She explains that religious believers say things like “I believe that Jesus Christ is alive,” while they would hardly say “I believe that my dog is alive.” They just talk about the dog in a way that makes it obvious that their dog is alive.

Here, I think, is where Unitarian Universalists may differ from more traditional religious adherents. We would tend to evaluate factual claims relating to religious doctrinal matters the same way we would other factual claims. “On the third day Jesus rose again from the dead.” How do you know? Do we have contemporary accounts? Are there other examples of this sort of thing? How does such an occurrence fit in with what we know of how bodies behave after they've been dead for 40 hours?

I referred earlier to moral truth and theological truth. And I've offered examples from several other different realms: history, mathematics, logic, the every day. We can add to the list science, aesthetics, and, I'm sure, other realms as well. One can ask, what is the nature of truth – or of knowledge – in each of these areas? Is it the same in different areas? Does it exist in each of the various arenas of inquiry? This could get very boring very quickly, but please bear with me for just a minute or two.

⁵ “Faith vs. Facts,” New York Times, April 19, 2015, page SR4.

In some areas – I’m thinking of mathematics and logic – there are statements for which we can say with complete confidence that they are true. As I said earlier, $7 + 5 = 12$. Once you’ve defined your terms, there can be no doubt about it.

With science, we recognize that we have to leave open the possibility of further refinement. The theory of evolution isn’t the same today as it was when Darwin first explained it, and biologists still find new challenges. Occasionally, what once was accepted truth in science must be left behind. You might say, for example, that the sun no longer travels around the earth, now it’s the other way around, but that wouldn’t be quite right.⁶

Can we make any undeniably true statements in aesthetics, or is it all just a matter of taste, or fashion? I think we can say with no hesitation that Beethoven was a better composer than Clementi.

But let’s move on to a more relevant, more contentious topic, in our hit-and-run inquiry into truth: Do moral statements have truth value? That is, is a statement like “stealing is wrong” or “rescuing a drowning person is a good thing to do” – are such statements similar in nature to “the earth travels around the sun, and not vice versa” or “the ratio of the diameter to the circumference of one circle is the same as that ratio for any other circle”? Or, alternatively, are moral statements simply expressions of feelings?⁷

Here’s a moral statement that I believe is a true statement, not just an expression of feeling, a true statement that stands on its own, where there’s no need to appeal to a higher level moral premise or moral authority, but where the facts of the situation lead directly to the conclusion:

It is wrong to torture young kittens for the amusement of bored six-year olds – it is always wrong, and it always has been, and it ever will be.

If you were to ask me, “why is it wrong?”, or if you were to suggest that it’s wrong for me but not necessarily wrong for someone else, that it’s my personal truth, I would have to wonder whether you understand the English language, or whether some relevant part of your brain is missing.

⁶ For further discussion see Adam Frank & Marcelo Gleiser, “A Crisis at the Edge of Physics,” *New York Times*, June 7, 2016, Sunday Review p. 5.

⁷ See, e.g., Timothy Williamson, *Tetralogue: I’m Right, You’re Wrong* (Oxford University Press), reviewed by Martin Kusch, *Times Literary Supplement*, May 8, 2015, p. 7.

What if the torturer believes that animals don't feel pain? If you watch the kitten being tortured such a belief is impossible. You have to realize that they do feel pain. Should we balance the interest of the child against the interest of the kitten? – Let's say it's a very important child, the daughter of a billionaire, or of a king or president, and a very unimportant cat, an unwanted stray, destined for the pound, if it survives that long. Or suppose that there are a dozen bored six-year-olds, but still just the one poor kitten. In all of these situations, I would submit, it remains wrong, absolutely wrong, to torture the kitten.

What if the torturer is delusional and doesn't understand that he's torturing a kitten, but believes that he is simply, well, peeling a potato. Then it's the duty of anyone who sees him to stop him immediately.

Let me assure you that no kittens, or potatoes, were harmed in the preparation of this sermon.

I could move on from innocent kittens to steers, pigs, and chickens destined for our dining table and explore how they are treated, but I will stay off that slippery slope today. That's a different topic.⁸

And that brings me to a statement I heard in April, at the annual assembly of the Joseph Priestley District. "It's OK for you to have a truth that's different from mine." That was from a prepared lecture; it wasn't an off-hand remark. That statement, "It's OK for you to have a truth that's different from mine," reflects a tension, a polarity, within Unitarian Universalism. We are committed to the responsible search for truth, but we also defend the freedom of belief. One of our bumper stickers proclaims that you don't have to think alike to love alike. While we deny that UUs can believe whatever they want, we acknowledge that UUs can believe whatever their conscience leads them to believe. But conscience can sometimes be an unreliable guide.

If you tell me that women are superior to men because God created Eve second (Genesis 2:22) and learned from the mistakes He made the first time, I won't tell you that you're no longer welcome here, but I may suggest that we need further discussion.

If you tell me that when you die you expect reincarnation, and that the next time you will be even more beautiful, intelligent, talented, and humble than this time, I may ask you a few questions. However, if the setting for this discussion is a hospital room, and you are expected to die within the next couple of days, I will be on my best pastoral behavior.

⁸ See also "No Face, but Plants Like Life Too," New York Times, March 15, 2011, p. D4; New York Times website, Opinionator | The Stone "Peter Singer: On Racism, Animal Rights and Human Rights," by George Yancy & Peter Singer, May 28, 2015.

If you tell me that π , the ratio of a circle's circumference to its diameter, is really an even 3, and not 3.14159 . . . , I may not bother to ask you how you came to that conclusion, but don't expect me to write a letter of recommendation in support of your application to engineering school.

And if *I* say something that's mistaken, that's wrong, I hope you won't just say to yourself, "it's OK for Dave to have a truth that's different from mine."

Now for something quite serious. If you deny global warming, or if you say it doesn't matter, I will do my best to convince you of the error of your view and of the need for you to rethink the matter, to repent.

If you refuse to have your children vaccinated, again, I will give you a very hard time.

If you don't bother to make sure that children who ride in your car have their seat belts fastened, I will intervene to protect the safety of the children.

What about the "free and responsible" part of this principle? Certainly a good idea. No government or other power should restrict free inquiry, and in conducting research we should do it in a way that does not harm participants in experiments, or the environment.⁹ But I do find it curious that we don't say, for example, the "free and responsible use of the democratic process." The democratic process is not free when the very rich can subvert it. The democratic process would not be used responsibly if we allowed six-year-olds to vote.

In any event, if I had been involved in the drafting of our UU principles, I might have suggested the "free and responsible search" not simply for "truth and meaning," but for "wisdom, truth, understanding, and meaning."

In his essay on the truth and meaning principle, in a book of essays on the seven principles, the Rev. Fred Muir, the longtime minister at our church in Annapolis, takes a different approach from mine, a complementary approach, I would hope.¹⁰

⁹ For example, Prof. Todd Gitlin wrote recently, "Universities are not any old investors. If they are not exemplars of moral sense, they defy their commitment to truth. For universities to legitimize fossil fuel corporations that obstruct truth (through their underwriting of public deception) and ward off sustainable alternatives to fossil fuels by lobbying for and exploiting public subsidies is counterproductive and indeed shameful." New York Times, Sunday Dialogue: Divestment Campaigns, May 3, 2015, Review p.10.

¹⁰ Fredric Muir, "We Affirm and Promote A Free and Responsible Search for Truth and Meaning," pp. 53-68, in Edward A. Frost, ed., *With Purpose and Principle: Essays About the Seven Principles of Unitarian Universalism* (1998).

While I have detached truth from truth and meaning this morning, and ignored the meaning half of the dyad, Muir considers them as a unit. To put it crudely, since UUs are made uncomfortable by God talk, we search for truth and meaning when we're really searching for what others might call God. We feel a need; we sense a void in our lives, a gap.

Is this all there is? What am I here for? Why does the world, the universe exist? Is there a purpose? Will it end? – for me? – for the whole? How shall I live, realizing that there is so much that I will never understand? How shall I live, realizing that my time is short, and getting shorter every day? What is this “something somewhere”¹¹ that we sense, but cannot grasp or describe?

For some, God provides an answer, perhaps *the* answer. For others, God just raises more questions. It's thoughts like these, questions like these, that draw people to a religious search.

Our truth and meaning principle refers to “*a* search” rather than *the* search,¹² because it is a search that each of us must do for ourselves – but in the context, I hope, of a supportive religious community.

Muir concludes that the search is the important thing, more important than what one finds in that search. “. . . Unitarian Universalism affirms,” Muir says, “not only a search for truth and meaning, but also that the search is ‘where it’s at,’ the journey is ‘what it’s all about,’ to search *is* an answer.”¹³ Still, I wonder, if the object of the search is relatively unimportant, how important can the search be?

Muir uses the metaphor of the restaurant with the long, amazing menu. “Even after you ordered your food, you still wanted to read the menu – often, the menu became the dinner conversation! In other words, you went to this restaurant for the menu! And you brought people there because you couldn’t describe it – you had to be there!”¹⁴

In conclusion, let me try to sum up my various thoughts on Unitarian Universalism and truth:

¹¹ Muir, p. 56.

¹² Muir, pp. 64, 67.

¹³ Muir, pp. 61-62.

¹⁴ Muir, p. 60. It is curious that in his subsequent book, *Heretics’ Faith: Vocabulary for Religious Liberals* (2001), which includes short essays on 53 different terms, neither “truth” nor “search” is included, although “meaning” is.

- First, religion is not one of the sciences, but to the extent that a religion relies on empirical claims or asserts empirical claims, it should play by the same rules as apply when empirical claims are made in a nonreligious context.
- Second, while there are many areas in which people can legitimately and quite properly have different views, that does not make truth relative. We cannot say – or at least we should not say – “this is true for me; it may not be true for you.”
- Third, freedom of belief is not license to believe any crazy idea you like. Or, more charitably, you can believe any crazy idea you like, but do not assume that you will be permitted to act on that crazy idea or to teach it to others.
- Fourth, and finally, it is my impression that Unitarian Universalist thinking about the concept of truth or the nature of truth or the search for truth remains a work in progress.¹⁵

¹⁵ A Google search quickly revealed that this principle has been the subject of numerous sermons by UU ministers. If I were to read them, which I do not plan to do, my conclusion might be more charitable. To go deeper into this topic, see Galen Guengerich, *God Revised: How Religion Must Evolve in a Scientific Age* (2013), ch. 2, “How We Know: The Quest for Certainty.”