

**To Seek the Truth – Or Not**  
**Rev. Diane Rollert**  
**The Unitarian Church of Montreal, 17 January 2010**

Not too long ago, I told you the story of my experience of spending a week in conversation with psychologist Thomas Moore, bestselling author of *Care of the Soul*. You'll recall that it was me, Tom and 24 other Unitarian Universalist ministers sitting in a very non-sexy, windowless conference room, with no agenda. One afternoon, we ministers started to talk about what it means to be tellers of truth and the importance of being authentic.

"I don't use the word truth," Tom said to us. "Not truth, not authenticity, or even integrity." he said.

You could see the shock waves reverberate across the room. Not talk about the truth? Isn't that what we're about? At the core of our Unitarian principles is the free and responsible search for truth and meaning. We promise our communities that we will speak the truth in love. We strive to speak truth to power.

"No. Really," he said. "I never use the word truth. Why not cultivate the inauthentic?" he asked us. Be inauthentic? We couldn't imagine it. Like the Greek God Hermes (Hermes the thief, Hermes the trickster), Tom was starting to have fun with us. Did we have to be so earnest? Were we too moralistic? Did this prevent us from truly – I mean *really* – connecting with our people?

"Truth," Tom later shared, "is too loaded with hidden assumptions. It's too dangerous."

So, I decided to ask you what you thought. Is "truth" a wounded word? I was curious to see your reflections. Harvey Shepherd sent me a famous passage about truth from Sir Frances Bacon. Mark Abley sent me the words to Paul Simon's song *Tenderness*. I heard from a whole group of men – but not a word from any women. I admit, started to wonder: is this a "guy" thing?

So last week when I mentioned that I'd only heard from men and joked that perhaps women aren't interested in truth, one of our female pillars of the community yelled from the back of the sanctuary, "That's because women already know the truth!"

Not surprisingly, several women took up the challenge and sent me their thoughts this week. "I'm looking forward to what the men have to say," one of them wrote.

Hari Thakur was one of the first to send me his thoughts. He writes:

*"The subject `Truth` is likely to attract more heat than light. On the surface, it appears glaringly simple and obvious. What could be so complicated about it?"*

*"The fact of the matter is that it has caused humanity over the ages much grief depending on whose definition of truth was going to prevail. On the one side are arrayed the*

*proponents of an absolute truth, generally defined by the holders of divine wisdom with direct access to the ultimate truth. On the other hand, generally on the losing side, are the brave souls suggesting the relative nature of truth based on individual faith, circumstances and a set of beliefs. My personal sympathies lie with the second group, which, occasionally, gets me into hot water. But I console myself with the thought that by accepting the relative nature of truth, I give myself the opportunity to discover new realities and experience personal growth, reason enough to accept the accompanying occasional discomfort."*

Christine Rourke writes:

*"I am assuming that we are using "truth" in the sense of 'ultimate truth' and not the truth we all understand when we tell a lie (or perhaps I should say, "were we to tell a lie"). Truth is one of the 'intangibles'; we may discuss it at length but, I think, with little idea of finding an answer. So, our principle, 'a free and responsible search for truth and meaning,' must be interpreted by the individual. Is this not the essence of UUism?"*

Denny Meyer writes:

*"Anyone who has looked at religions with any degree of doubt or skepticism sees that truths, like opinions, abound in multitudinous colours and contexts, perhaps depending upon (among other things);*

*-- to whom one was born, in what country, what era ....  
-- further tailored by the life experiences and other teachers each one of us has encountered and learned from (or rejected, of course), and, importantly,  
-- how much exposure to trusting, honest, fearless discussion with others we have allowed ourselves to share."*

Denis Barsolo writes:

*"I wonder if the process of 'seeking the truth' benefits us more than actually ever finding it. I have moderated several workshops on sources, principles, church name and various other 'Unitaria', and it seems that, each time I did, I was told by the participants how rewarding and inspiring the "process" was. Even though in several, if not most occasions, we rarely reached any sort of consensus in our discussion. It seems that the trip is much more interesting than the destination."*

Kirstin McKeown writes:

*"The concept of The Truth is easy to use as a weapon in a society that tends to think in a very dualistic way. Truth is defined as something specific, and therefore everything that does not agree with it is false ... and since Truth is good, false must be bad. And that makes someone who promotes anything false bad, too.*

*"I was told in my old church that they had The Truth, and if you followed the*

*Truth you would get to Heaven. No one ever explicitly said that everyone who follows anything but their brand of Truth was going to Hell, but given that Truth meant Heaven, the opposite of Truth would mean the opposite of Heaven ... Hell.*

*"Some healing around this word started for me when I learned this quote, from Niels Bohr, the Nobel Prize winning physicist, 'The opposite of a correct statement is a false statement. But the opposite of a profound truth may well be another profound truth.'"*

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Like many of you, I see truth as relative, as something individual. I believe in the value of the process. I am fearful of any claims of Absolute Truth, especially when they become tests of faith that decide who will live or die, who will be loved or damned. This is part of our history. We have ancestors who were burned at the stake for rejecting the prevailing views of truth of their times. This is where we began. This is why we draw inspiration from many sources, not just one.

So, I could leave it at that. But then, David Woodbury reminded me of this new word coined by the American comedian Steven Colbert during the years of the Bush administration. `Truthiness`, the Merriam-Webster Dictionary's #1 Word of the Year for 2006:

***Truthiness*** (noun)

**1** : "truth that comes from the gut, not books" (Stephen Colbert, Comedy Central's "The Colbert Report," October 2005)

**2** : "the quality of preferring concepts or facts one wishes to be true, rather than concepts or facts known to be true" (American Dialect Society, January 2006)

This brings me to what one of our newer members wrote to me. She, too, sees truth as something we humans create based on our own biases and experience.

*"When truth is used as a platform from which to judge ... then the question at hand is more that of a person's motivation and/or belief system than 'truth'. 'Truth' may very well be intended to mean something universal and eternal in nature, and there may very well be something eternal and universal that we clumsily grapple with and call 'truth'; but, our discussions about truth are neither universal nor eternal."*

*"Ultimately," she says, "the topic of truth may best be served by discussing it within a specific context or use ... . In that vein, one example is drawn from the concept of 'error of reality'." Consider those in Hitler's Germany who have defended their actions by blaming propaganda campaigns that they say convinced them that the Jews were an imminent threat to their lives. "The 'truth' for those people, as this position statement goes, is that [they] were simply defending themselves (an error of reality)."*

*"While it is true that the German propaganda machine did seek to instill the belief of an imminent Jewish threat, it is nevertheless incumbent upon us (people in general) to use*

*our human capacity to process and evaluate the veracity (truth) of what we are told and to consider the actual or implied consequences."*

Do we follow along like sheep and accept "truthiness"? Or do we do everything we can to arrive at a fuller understanding of the bigger picture?

Absolute Truth. Truth as in "truth and lies." Truthiness. Are these concepts really that disconnected? How do we emphasize the responsible part of our "free and responsible search for truth and meaning?" What guides us, if everything is relative?

The Buddha would say that ultimate truth does not matter. What matters is the way we live our lives. He asks, "If I were struck by a poison arrow, would I first try to find out who made it before I removed it from my flesh?"

Yet I think of Martin Luther King or Gandhi who used non-violent means to speak truth to power. King had an abiding faith in a radical Jesus who taught that there could be no justice unless the poor and disenfranchised inherited the earth. King's cries for economic justice tear at my heart as I think of the devastation in Haiti today.

Gandhi saw no greater *dharma*, or cosmic duty, than truth. He believed that it was the process of searching for truth -- always in the company of others -- that made change possible. For him, Absolute Truth was Brahman, something that was ultimately unknowable. Yet the search, propelled by love, was essential.

Perhaps we cannot ascribe to, or strive toward, one Absolute Truth. Not in these days, where there are so many paths as well as so many mountains. Yet something must connect us and provide us with a compass to find our way out of the truthiness that plagues us. Call it love. Call it wisdom. Call it something universal or essential that speaks to us through the words of a poet, or the notes of a musician, or the laughter of a child. Surely something prevails that gets us back on the right path.

As we were planning today's service, Eliza Moore, our beautiful guest singer, told me that a few years back she had written these words for a song:

*"One day the truth will be revealed, and on that day we'll overcome. No man, no woman, no child has power over another."*

*"We are all one. That is pretty much the direction we need to go to find truth,"* she said to me.

We are all one, but we are many. Perhaps we do not need to throw out the word truth, but use it with caution. And always seek it – freely and responsibly -- in the company of others.

Amen. Blessed be. Namaste.

## *Readings*

[T]ruth, is a naked, and open day-light, that doth not show the masks, and mummeries, and triumphs, of the world, half so stately and daintily as candle-lights.

—Sir Francis Bacon

What can I do  
What can I do  
Much of what you say is true  
I know you see through me  
But there's no tenderness  
Beneath your honesty  
Oh, right and wrong  
Right and wrong  
Ooh, never helped us get along  
You say you care for me  
But there's no tenderness  
Beneath your honesty

— Paul Simon

You shall know the truth, and the truth will set you free.

—John 8

Arguments are full of words, and each person is sure he's the only one who knows what the words mean. Each word is a basket of eels, as far as I'm concerned. Everyone gets to grab just one eel and that's his interpretation and he'll fight to the death for it.

—From an unidentified novel

I remember a friend of mine who went to Africa working for the Canadian YMCA. He was once asked by a fellow African aid worker why there were so many paths to God, to Heaven? The worker had counted 23 Christian religious denominations that had come to provide aid and the "True" path to God. He wondered why we in the West couldn't all use the same path.

—John Pike

Truth is the end, Love a means thereto. We know what is Love..., although we find it difficult to follow the law of Love. But as for Truth we know only a fraction of it.

—Gandhi