

**Truth in a Time of Alternative Facts: a Sermon Duel**

**Sunday, October 29, 2017**

**Rev. Nathan Detering and Rev. Heather Concannon**

*What is truth? (2 min apiece)*

**Nathan:**

Heather, to quote Colonel Jessep from a movie you most likely have never seen, *Truth! You want the truth?*

*Son, you can't handle the truth!!*

And Heather, to quote Stephen Colbert from a show you probably never watched called the *Colbert Report*,

*"We don't live in an age truth; we live an age of Truthiness!*

*And what Truthiness means is that "What I say is right...and nothing anyone*

*Else says could possibly be true.*

*Because it's not only that I **FEEL** it to be true, but that I feel it to be true.*

*So, there's not only an emotional quality, but there's also a selfish quality."*

Heather, Friends of UUAC – this much is TRUE!

Truth is being caught, muzzled, squelched and squished!

Truth is being captured and contained!

Truth is under fire and on fire!

Because in age of spin and spam,

And tailored news feeds and filtered Facebook-ery,

What were once opinions and perspective are now cast as '*gospel fact.*'

and what were once outright lies are reported as '*alternative facts.*'

Amen?!

Because listen:

A person can't 'believe things' about the evidence of climate change.

A person can't 'have a point of view' about the size of inauguration crowds.

A person, not even a Pope!, can '#resist' the truth that the earth revolves around the sun (that's a Galileo reference!).

A person can't 'believe in the literal truth of the Bible' without ignoring The truth that the earth, says Science, is older than the Bible's 6000 year fake-estimate.

A person can't 'believe in a Good, All loving God' without also explaining the fact that good things happen to bad people.

And a person's tweet that says 'fake news!' doesn't make that true news fake just because it reports true things you don't like!

Truth can't described or explained or captured or relativized or tweaked.

It exists without us and it's not dependent on us.

Truth just is, Ok. It just IS!

End of story! Time for final hymn!

**Rev Heather:**

I'd like to ask you some questions about commonly held truths.

First: how many colors are in the rainbow?

Seven.

And how many primary colors of light are there?

Three. Red, green, and blue light.

Okay. Next question.

What does the big dipper constellation look like?

It's got... ? ... a cup, or ladle... and... a handle...

Do we agree that these answers are true?

Alright. Case 1.

Colors.

The human eye has three photoreceptors that each get excited by a different hue:

Red, green, or blue light, which each move at a different wavelength.

And with just those three photoreceptors

We can see every color in the spectrum. Millions of colors.

Dogs, on the other hand, have two photoreceptors, yellow and blue, making it difficult for them to differentiate green, yellow, and red objects from one another.

Mantis shrimp, however, have TWELVE photoreceptors,

Begging the question:

Are they seeing hues that we humans don't even know exist?

When they look at a rainbow, can they see ultraviolet and infrared light that we can't see?

How many colors does a rainbow have?

A dog, a human, and a mantis shrimp would all answer this differently.

Okay. Constellations. The big dipper.

I don't have a lot of time to explain this one, but I'll just say:

The big dipper only looks like a ladle if you are standing on earth.

If you were standing anywhere else in the universe, those seven stars would have a totally different arrangement.

It's a matter of perspective, not ultimate truth.

Truth, my friends, is relative.

*How do we find truth? (2 min apiece)*

**Rev Heather:**

Our fourth and 5<sup>th</sup> graders are studying the Bible this year, in Religious Education.

And why, some people, including the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> graders, ask me,  
Why are we UUs studying the bible?

Well, I tell them, in part because we came from the Christian tradition, so it's a part of our history

And in part because this is a way that humans have been making meaning for millennia.

But I don't believe any of these stories, they tell me,  
They aren't *true*.

And what I told our Bibleodeon class at the beginning of the year, was that it doesn't need to have happened to contain a piece of the truth.

I told them, I love the Harry Potter stories.

But I know they aren't true.

I know Hogwarts doesn't exist.

But I believe the stories are stories that tell some real truths about love and courage and friendship and good and evil.

And so we look to the history to find the truth,

And to ask ourselves what lasting truths—not literal truths, but lasting truths,  
We can find,

But we also look to the future

To ask ourselves what truths have yet to be revealed to us yet.  
UU theologian James Luther Adams famously said that we believe that  
“revelation is not sealed”  
Meaning, the world is continuously changing  
We are evolving, not only as a species, and our ideas are evolving,  
But truth itself is evolving with us, as the world changes in every moment.  
I think about how widening our circles  
Hearing the truths of people who have different experiences from us  
Whose truths might run counter to our truths,  
That can push us to evolve our understanding of truth.  
I think about how, in my lifetime,  
we have grown our understanding of gender to be a spectrum, not just men  
and women,  
But also to include transgender people, gender non-conforming people,  
genderqueer people, non-binary people.  
Words that didn’t even exist when I was young  
But words that describe people’s lived truths.  
Our understanding of truth informed by people living their own truths,  
Our understanding of truth evolving.  
Revelation is not sealed.

**Rev. Nathan:**

How do we find the truth?  
You’re asking: How do WE find the truth?  
Well, let me just say, per my previous fact-based sermonette,  
That truth isn’t like some lost little puppy,

Sad eyes and whimpering, hoping that we – the supposed BIG DEAL HUMANS -

Will find it and bring it back home, ok?

Because truth just IS, ok?

Say it with me, Heather: TRUTH JUST IS!

And that means it doesn't need us.

It actually thrives better without us!

But ok, let's assume you all want to find it....

Because you're tired of all those squishy words like *opinions* and *emotions*

And *context* and stomach churning phrases like '*well, the truth is relative...*'

(Gag),

And you want to get a handle and a hold on the truth.

What then?

Doug, do I have time for a quick story?

Quick story is that last Sunday I went down to Providence RI

To the First Unitarian Church of Providence to give the Charge

To the Congregation on the occasion of the installation of my friend,

Our colleague, Liz Lerner.

The pomp and the pulpit of that church is kind of ridiculous,

I mean the pulpit is so high that it has a separate door and separate

Staircase....all giving off the impression that nothing but the truth,

the whole truth so help me God truth

can ever possibly be uttered from its ornate curved high importance,  
or from the preacher that stands there.

Sitting next to the Chancellor of Brown University (impressed?),

He says – *where you from?* I say, *First Parish in Sherborn.*

He says *THE First Parish in Sherborn, where truth emanates like  
The radiant sun?*

I say: *that's the one!*

He says: *I think you're up next.*

Which I am....so while the choir is putting finishing flourish on their  
anthem,

And whole congregation is waiting for 'mwaaaaa'

I leave the Chancellor's side and proceed to go through the door

That leads to the pulpit.

Except I open the door and turn right and find myself outside

On the street behind the church.

So I go back in and check another door, which is locked.

And check another door, and it has brooms and map in there.

Until I go back the where I came,

And the chancellor is pointing to my right, to yet another door,

Which I open and begin to ascend to the pulpit.

Finding truth is like that. Wrong turns. Wrong doors. We have stay  
humble...and keep looking.

*Why does truth matter in church? (2 min apiece)*

**Rev. Nathan:**

Friends, guess what?

In June I will celebrate my 16<sup>th</sup> year of ordained

Unitarian Universalist ministry,

15 of which I have spent among you.

At my ordination I was reminded of what Episcopal priest

Barbara Brown Taylor said,

*How "our congregations listen to us with the same ears  
as they listen to politicians, salespeople, and news commentators."*

Remember that I was ordained in the year of 9/11

And the my first sermon was on the Sunday after 9/11,

And so I was reminded at that ordination,

How beginning then and maybe ever since

we have been living in the aftermath of a broken covenant between  
language and truth.

The mis-use and abuse of language is the giant hairball of our time,

Said Roger Paine, my mentor, and remember he said this *16 years ago!*

*That hairball is huge now!*

*So, said Roger to me, what I think we need from ministers is a promise  
that the words we use will mean what they say.*

*Straight talk from the pulpit - no hype, no hyperbole.*

*As Barbara Brown Taylor says, people "do not grow new ears when they  
walk into church."*

*They reserve the right to decide for themselves  
whether we look as if we live in the same world they do,  
and whether we are trying to tell the truth about that world.  
What we owe our congregations is old-fashioned honesty,  
even when it's painful -  
honesty about our own faith, what we believe and what we don't,  
and honesty about what we see going on in the world.  
And, as Rev. Taylor told her colleagues at Yale,  
we owe our congregations words we have dug up with our own hands,  
words we have brought back from our own encounters with God.  
So that's where we start.  
And then we remind our political leaders that honesty is not a left-right  
issue - we need to find it in the public square now more than ever.*

All dueling aside – every day, every sermon, every prayer, every year,  
Every pastoral meeting, every memorial – I try to live up to those  
ordination words.

Why does truth matter in church? Because we need it. We deserve it.  
We long for it.

**Rev. Heather:**

In my house growing up, we had a rule.

That before you say something,  
you should ask yourself three things.

“Is it true?”

“Is it necessary?”

and “Is it kind?”

And a good guideline is that it should meet  
two of the three of those questions with a “yes”.

Surprise, right?

But sometimes we say things that are true and kind,  
though not strictly necessary,

“the haunted house was amazing last night, it was clear that so much work  
went in to it!”

and sometimes we can say things that are true and necessary,  
though not kind.

“I know it hurts to hear this, but I’m really struggling with some things in  
our relationship”

And sometimes we say things that are kind and necessary,  
Though not 100% true.

“yes, I love this meal you cooked me.”

I don’t hold truth as the highest value, in relationship or in community.

And I believe that there is such a thing as too much honesty,

And truth being used in a mean way.

Because truth doesn’t encompass the fullness of our lives or our  
relationships.

Truth is a tool *toward* love and compassion

A tool on the road toward Beloved Community

But truth is not the end goal.

Pursuit of ultimate, capital T truth can easily become

Unfeeling dogma that loses its humanity.

Not to mention that truth is relative.

Let's take immigration, for example.

People have crossed into the United States territory without authorization when it is against US law to do so. Fact.

The border wall was purposely constructed so more people would die in the desert. Fact.

People leave home because home is the mouth of a shark. Fact.

All there are are stories, all of these stories are factual.

And facts are irrelevant unless there is meaning around them,

And that's what truth is.

Things happen in one way, only one way, but all we can do is perceive, remember, and make interpretations about the way they happen.

Truth is a process of meaning making around facts and events, and the process of making meaning is distinctly human and relative

Which is both terrifying and beautiful

And leads us back to relationship, and our covenant, which begins with love

And ask: How does this interpretation of reality serve love?

And even if we understand something to be true,

Is it also necessary and kind?

*What happens when truths collide? (2 min apiece)*

**Rev Heather:**

The first step in sorting out any argument is to figure out:

What happened?

What are the facts?

And often, this is the place where people discover

That they don't even share the same version of the story

Or the meaning that is made around it.

Sometimes, my own perception of reality can get clouded by my feelings.

What I sometimes tell myself is:

Feelings are real, but they don't always tell the truth.

The way we perceive reality doesn't mean that it is actually the way things are.

I need to remind myself of this when I'm having lots of feelings—from anger to anxiety.

Feelings are real, but they don't always tell the truth.

My truth is my truth,

But it is not THE truth,

And my truth is shaped by many things:

My perspective, the limits of the information I have,

My social location, the stories I tell myself and the stories I've grown up with,

My culture and gender and race and when I was born.

So when truths collide,

I do well to remind myself that  
My truth is my truth  
That in a free and responsible search for truth and meaning, as our UU faith  
calls us to,  
Means that we may not all end up at the same truth,  
And that's okay.  
And I try to remind myself that  
My access to truth is limited by my own humanness,  
Which is okay, because I still can work to get a greater understanding of  
truth  
By understanding other people's truths,  
And by seeking not truth, but meaning and relationship.

**Rev. Nathan:**

What happens when truths collide?  
Um, sermon duels happen!  
Trump happens!  
Fights happen!  
Salem witch trials happen!  
Labels of heretic and burning at the stake happen!  
Wars happen!  
Church schisms happen!  
Pilgrim Church breaking off from First Parish in Sherborn  
In 1842 happens!  
Unitarian Universalism happens!  
Thanksgiving family fight free-for-alls happen!

Winners and losers happen!  
Scorched earth happens.  
Take no prisoners happen.  
History written by the victors happens.

Listen Heather - Martin Luther may have been an Augustine Monk  
Before he got feisty with his hammer and nail and theses,  
But remember he's the one who said:  
*"Peace if possible; truth at all costs."*  
And remember that Jesus is said to have said:  
*I did not come to bring peace, but a sword!*  
And remember that great advice for all relationships  
You'll find on a magnet on my fridge:  
*Don't go to bed angry; stay up and fight!*

Which is to say: when truths collide, or to put it more accurately,  
When our perception of the truth collides -  
Our ability to love and listen to those we  
Collide with is lost.  
The question is this - do we care?  
Do we think that our fights with each other help us get closer to the  
truth?  
Or do we think we're already right, in which case the goal  
Of the fight is to prove just how delusional and dumb  
Our opponent is?

That second option – that has us proving just how big of a dope our  
opponent is –

Is undoubtedly more fun, and more satisfying.

But maybe it has us opening wrong doors, and getting lost

On the way to truth....

*So what does this mean?*

**Rev. Nathan:**

When Jerry Garcia died years and years ago

(Heather, know who Jerry Garcia is?),

Ken Kesey spoke at his memorial service,

In which he said:

*"You could be a sharp-tongued popper of balloons when you were so inclined.*

*You were the sworn enemy of hot air and commercials,*

*however righteous the cause or lucrative the product.*

*Nobody ever heard you use that microphone as a pulpit.... No trendy spins. No bayings of belief.*

*And if you did have any dogma, you surely kept it tied up under the back porch,*

*where a smelly old hound belongs....*

*It was the false notes you didn't play that kept the lead line so pure.*

*It was the words you didn't sing."*

That's what I want us to do in relationship to this question:

To keep our lead lines pure - tell our truth, say it simply and clearly, with humor and with heart,

And remember we've got a few dead-ends and false doors along the way.

Leave out the false notes.

And stop before we say too much.

Wise people know that when Truth is in the mix,  
it's best to leave "partly described what can only be partly described."  
Amen.

### **Rev. Heather**

I will confess, I'm not actually that good at owning my truth as my truth  
I actually really, really struggle with it.

I learned a tool a few years ago, which is, when I'm frustrated with what I  
perceive another person to be doing

To frame it to myself and to them as

"Hey, the story I'm telling about what is happening is this, can you help me  
to understand if that's what's actually happening or not?"

Which has been very helpful,

but still, because I'm not great at owning my truth as my truth,

that's why I need church,

because I need as much as anyone to practice how to do this,

how to live in a pluralistic world

One with multiple truths, multiple narratives,

A world of diversity of identities, and ideas, and personalities.

I need to be reminded

I need to be humbled,

That I'm not always right,

As much as I like to think I am,

That actually, the more people we pull into the narrative,

The closer to truth we can get.

And that being right isn't always as important

As being in relationship,

And I'm reminded again and again, in community,  
That we can choose to prioritize love, compassion, relationship, and  
meaning in our search for the truth.