

Why does truth matter? And who cares, really? These days, everybody seems to have their own truth about all kinds of things. And there isn't any objective truth, so why bother?

I mean, it's all just opinion, or belief, right? You got yours, and I got mine, and they got theirs, and never the twain shall meet. We all crawl into our little echo chambers and live in little thought bubbles, happy as clams.

That's a pretty unsettling state of affairs for a world facing all sorts of wicked problems.

These days, truth, indeed the very idea of truth, is highly contested. Is there such a thing? How do we know what is true? Whose truth carries more weight? How do we deal with conflicting truth claims?

This is not a unique state of affairs in human history. There are periods when there's a great deal of consensus, and periods when it's all up in the air, which is where we collectively find ourselves now. And this has affected our religious tradition as well.

For those of us who do think there are such things as objective truths, and that there has to be more than just opinion and belief, the situation leaves us wondering how we find our way out of this mess.

I'd like to think that our 4th Principle can help, but I'm not so sure.

The "free" part of the principle tells us that our search is not under the control of - or in the power of - another to limit or define that search. We may seek wherever the pursuit of truth leads us, as long as we don't seek to harm others.

The “responsible” part is ambiguous, and has two meanings. Responsible means we have a duty to search, and it also means subject to being held to account. Held to account by whom or what? There’s no attempt to even define that.

But truth can be uncomfortable and hard to live with. If we uncover exploitation and bring about the demise of a corporation or a government, is it ok to ‘harm’ that corporation or government? If the truth conflicts with your deepest cherished beliefs, are you harmed or liberated?

Here’s an interesting bit of UU history for those of us who aren’t history geeks.

In the older six principles of the Unitarian Universalist Association, the search was our first principle. It went like this:

To strengthen one another in a free and disciplined search for truth as the foundation of our religious fellowship.

Wow. What a totally different statement of intent in regards to our search for truth. Meaning isn’t even mentioned.

The word ‘disciplined’ has a focus and robustness that the squishy word ‘responsible’ doesn’t. It means “intellectually rigorous”. The search seeks to make us stronger together, not divide us. And truth is plainly stated as the bedrock of our religious communities.

The truth, whatever that may end up being. Some truths are eternal, some are more contingent. There are various domains for truths – ethical, social, spiritual, scientific – and the boundaries can get pretty blurry if we aren’t rigorous in keeping them clear. Some may be our

business, some may not. Knowing which is which, and where the boundaries are, is essential to the search. That's called clarity, and it's very important.

Before I go further, I want to relate a couple of bits of history:

We've all heard the story of Galileo, who got into trouble with the Catholic Church for proposing that the Earth - and humankind - were not the center of the Universe, around which revolved the Sun and the Moon and the planets and the stars. At the time, this was heresy, punishable by imprisonment or death, sometimes preceded by torture.

Galileo's observation was part of a greater movement that led to the end of the Church's stranglehold not just on the pursuit of knowledge, but what knowledge was permissible. This was based on the narrative of biblical and papal inerrancy. That movement, which became the scientific revolution and planted the seeds of the Enlightenment, enabled a search for truth that was free from interference by the Church and the State.

A few centuries earlier in the Middle East, there flourished what has come to be called the Golden Age of Islam. Influenced by Greek thought, Islamic scholars made discoveries and advances in science, medicine, law, and mathematics that are still with us today. Algebra comes to us from this period.

And then it dies. Partly from external causes, but mostly because of a religious movement against rationality. This movement held that the Quran and God were coeval - and were inerrant and unchallengeable. The core of their metaphysics is the idea of occasionalism, a doctrine that denies natural causality. They believed that God is the only cause, so that the world is a series of discrete physical events each willed by God. God wills every single atomic event and God's will is not bound up with reason. This amounts to a denial of the coherence and comprehensibility of the natural world.

That pretty much shuts down any inquiry, and places knowledge and ways of knowing in the hands of the clerics. Who dominated the state, since Islam never really separated the two.

Two stories. Two movements. One out of the hands of the clerics and towards reason and free inquiry, the other in the opposite direction.

We are currently seeing a lot of religious, quasi-religious, and political movements against rationality and free inquiry. These movements promote the rejection of reason, logic, and fact in favor of emotions, morals, and religious and political absolutes.

In Greek mythology there is the tale of the bandit, Procrustes, who had a stronghold on Mount Korydallos at Erineus, on the sacred way between Athens and Eleusis. There he had a bed, in which he invited every passer-by to spend the night, and where he set to work on them with his smith's hammer, to stretch them to fit. In later versions, if the guest proved too tall, Procrustes would amputate the excess length; if the guest was too short Procrustes would stretch them until they died; nobody ever fit the bed exactly. Procrustes continued his reign of terror until he was captured by Theseus, travelling to Athens along the sacred way, who "fitted" Procrustes to his own bed and killed him.

So much energy these days is spent trying to fit people or events or ideas into narratives that are supposed to explain everything, and don't.

We have the MAGA narrative and the Woke narrative and thousands of competing narratives about everything from food to therapy to clutter in your house and how to fight climate change. Or not.

Different narratives claim to deliver the same results, which is confusing until you understand what narratives are all about.

Narratives try to simplify and reduce complexity by claiming truth and giving power to that particular version of it. Mostly, someone is trying to sell you something or gain power or influence.

Narratives are like the bed of Procrustes. When we try to fit the true and the real into a narrative, the truth suffers and dies. Yes, narratives may cast valuable light on some things, but in the end, narratives are the enemy of truth.

We should regard narratives with suspicion, even our own. These days, when someone pushes a narrative on me, my instinct is to say, like the historic slur of the old Western saloons, “Frak you and the narrative you rode in on.”

The dictionary tells us that truth is the property of being in accord with fact or reality, reality being that which exists independent of our minds or our opinions. The author Philip K. Dick expressed this pretty well as, “Reality is that which, when you stop believing in it, doesn't go away.”

It doesn't go away. Oh boy. There's a lot that doesn't go away these days, despite all the narratives. It would seem that the pursuit of truth would require us to constantly be questioning our assumptions and beliefs, and abandoning them when they don't correspond to the truth.

And that's hard as hell. We all really like it when things aren't constantly changing. We cling to our beliefs and traditions and politics, many times long after they've ceased to serve.

There are a lot of beliefs that can get in the way of seeking and knowing about reality. Some of those beliefs can exist side by side with reason and inquiry and not get in the way. The

geneticist Francis Collins comes to mind: An evangelical Christian, his pursuit of knowledge is not bounded by his faith, but supported by it. His God wants him to reveal the truth, not stretch it or chop it.

I think our original first principle is a better guide than our current 4th. It holds the truth up as worthy of our highest allegiance. Not some creed, not the narrative du jour, not even Unitarian Universalism itself.

The truth is our bedrock.

There is knowing the truth, and then... what to do with it. That's really the difficult bit. The truth is important, since unless we know what is true about the world and ourselves, we cannot begin to change things for the better, if that's what we desire.

But what to do with the truth is another matter.

Shall we lie about it because it doesn't serve our agenda? Shall we cover it up? Shall we spin it, like Nike spun the truth about their sweatshops in Asia, or like Purdue Pharma spun the truth about oxycodone? Shall we bludgeon people with our political or religious truth and force them to accept it, like so many before us? Shall we claim truth in the face of evidence or experience to the contrary? Those things seem very popular these days.

Almost every religion, every culture, has explicit prohibitions against lying and false witness. As we rewrite our Articles, I wonder if we should include those. But that's a question for another day.

Even so, those prohibitions come to us through multiple legal and religious sources, and they are part of the wisdom of the ages. That wisdom also includes more recent developments in

fully understanding the various cognitive and other biases that get in the way of our knowing and acting with clarity.

Some truths require us to think and act with a singular lens. Others it seems, require us to see like the bees. Bees have huge “eyes”, multifaceted lenses, each lens gathering light and information, all coming together to provide the bee with a complete picture of its surroundings, while each lens retains its singularity.

This is how the bee finds its way in the world. No one lens dominates. There’s a lesson there for us, I think, in how we work with multiple perspectives.

In closing, I want to emphasis two things:

One, letting clerics – even our own clerics - or politicians or social pressure, shut down or stifle the use of reason and free inquiry is a really bad idea. That struggle is ancient and never-ending. It’s the good fight. Don’t let up, don’t give up.

And second, our allegiance must be to the truth and the search for truth, not to the Procrustean beds of belief or creed or narrative. Like the man said, the truth will set us free.

So go forth and see like bees, with wonder filled multifaceted lenses. Bring the nectar of truth back to hive for all to share.

And enjoy all the flowers while you’re at it.

Searching for Truth
Rev. Munro Sickafoose

Unitarian Congregation of Taos
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