

TELLING TRUTHS

A sermon given on ‘The Touchstone of Truth’

by the Rev. Dr. Kelly Murphy Mason

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The way our idioms have gotten structured in English says a lot about how we think about a given subject. We speak of telling the truth - the singular, unified, definitive truth - alongside telling lies - plural, duplicitous, indeterminate. It sounds to the fluent like we have only one opportunity to get the truth right and endless opportunities to get it wrong and miss our mark entirely. That was the model I was tutored in, at least. Am I telling the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but that truth, as I would declare in a court of law? Or am I just telling lies, untruths I invented? That was a challenge I regularly issued to myself. It hardly occurred to me that there could be multiple truths existing alongside one another.

Over the years of my seminary training and ministerial formation, I placed a premium on relentless truth-telling. It seemed an important part of my earning the trust of others as I readied to step into clerical office. Especially in the liberal tradition I claimed as my own, honesty was non-negotiable. When I was working as a student minister at a notable Unitarian church in New York, I heard a variation of a famous historic covenant repeated Sunday after Sunday: “In the love of truth... we unite for the worship of God and the service of all.” At that

same church, the Senior Minister told me that he cherished knowing that no one there would ever ask him to lie about what he believed. He considered love of truth their communal bond.

That made a deep impression on me, his gratitude and relief at being spared, as a religious professional and over the span of his lengthy career, any compulsion to lie. It mattered to him that he never asked the members of that congregation to dissemble about any matter related to their spiritual lives. He promulgated no formal doctrine. They never had to pretend to be pious with him. This same minister had in his later years made his way into a Twelve-Step recovery program that required rigorous honesty from him. Personally, he trusted that such honesty could safeguard his sanity and sobriety and serenity. Publicly, he spoke of what the recovery community taught him about the power of openly acknowledging and honoring what actually is, instead of what ought to be.

For most Unitarian Universalists, the “free and responsible search for truth and meaning” is a core religious principle. What happens, though, when those who are seeking are suddenly finding? “The right to search for truth,” scientist-philosopher Albert Einstein explained. “implies also a duty; one must not conceal any part of what one has recognized to be true.” Truth itself makes special but not exclusive claims on us. Often, our individual truths are more local and far less global than we imagine.

“Look how big the sky is,/the deep distances between stars./Little speck, that’s you;/ laughable speck, that’s me,” declares Janet Hutchinson in her poem “Of Course”. So, really - “How could we

contain The Truth,/ all that overwhelming light?/ Our truth is just a pinprick/ in mystery's velvet curtain." It's probably a particular metaphysical truth that we have to share from where we stand under the heavens, not the total and absolute truth.

The late esteemed scholar of religious studies Ronald H. Miller instructed his students that knowledge could be divided into what he called the "the three Ps", his designation that the truths we ourselves know are often: 1) partial; 2) provisional; and 3) perspectival. "What we know is only a part," Prof. Miller reminded his students, "and there are others with parts completing the picture we are trying to see.... We cannot fully escape seeing things from our own perspective..." And I suspect our desire to escape that limitation brings us out into our faith communities and Twelve-Step programs and classroom settings with some unequal combination of certitude and curiosity.

This past week was a full one here at UU Wellesley Hills, and I gave a couple of different people tours of our Sanctuary in recent days, complete with a history of the rose window high overhead. It is a 1929 replacement for stained glass that was cracked in a 1924 fire. One of the things I note is that each of the twelve petals is dedicated to a sign of the Zodiac. Look carefully and you will see the scales of Libra and the fish of Pisces and so on. Because I am not much of a believer of astrology, I feel a bit self-conscious explaining it to relative strangers. Beyond that, as someone born in the House of Aquarius, I feel like I ought to be a bigger believer than I am.

A few years ago, having a conversation with my older brother, we turned to the unlikely topic of astrology, which I expected him to reject outright and immediately. My brother is a mathematics wiz/lab sciences type, an MIT graduate whose favorite childhood bit was imitating the Vulcan Mr. Spock from the classic television series Star Trek, as he said in a characteristically flat tone: “That is most illogical.” In a twist, my brother - now the father of six children of his own - explained that all sorts of subtle forces are at work in the universe, and that we could never account for all of them, and that the alignment of the stars probably could figure in our state at birth.

Besides, as his children — my three nieces and three nephews, all marvelous — so clearly demonstrated, persons arrive in this world altogether distinct beings. Astrology, my brother suggested, was an inexact attempt to calculate our innate differences and distinct outlooks. Parenting might not have made an astrologer of him, but it certainly gave rise to a mystic. He knew what he did not know. He could not declare something untrue simply because he himself could not demonstrate it to be true, or comprehend its mechanics. “Little speck, that’s you,” I recalled. “Laughable speck, that’s me...”

At the center of our rose window here are not one, but two stargazers. Wherever two or more are gathered, there is already assuredly a difference in perspective. We can make our peace with that only if we are ready to accept the basic validity of pluralism, Prof. Miller argued. Before entering academia, he had been a Catholic priest. As he started writing, researching, and teaching religion, Prof. Miller became increasingly interested in interfaith dialogue and became a co-founder of Common Ground, a Chicago organization that fosters it.

Common Ground survived his death and today has a focus on “the world's great cultural, philosophical, religious, and spiritual traditions and their implications for every dimension of human experience.” According to recent materials, it serves “those who are... grounded in their own traditions and for those who are still searching. It is a place for all who are fascinated by the convergence of the ancient with the modern, of East with West, and of spirituality with planetary reality.” It has a broad mandate, to be sure, but I am convinced it is born of an abundant generosity of spirit.

Prof. Miller’s last speaking engagement - held the night before he died in 2011 - was at New York seminary uptown where he challenged the Islamophobic impulse behind the opposition to rebuild a mosque in lower Manhattan. Map in hand, he was actually looking for a spot where we could happily inhabit common ground. I fear such spots are increasingly rare in the the American landscape. I worry that we have no idea how quickly we are in the process of losing such precious ground. I wonder when it might be gotten back and who on earth might win it for us. I believe that those with a unique understanding of the partial, provisional, and perspectival nature of our individual truths are most likely to spot it. I hope to be counted in their number; I hope to count you all in their number, too.

Please - start telling truths, plural. Trust that as our faithful forbearers taught centuries ago, more will be revealed in the fulness of time. On your “free and responsible search for truth and meaning”, try to keep your eyes and ears, hearts and minds truly open. Consider that as astronomer Carl Sagan reminded us, “our preferences do not

determine what's true." They never will. So imagine a larger truth that is not arrived at by substitution or subtraction or any zero-sum formula, but rather through addition and multiplication, through the power of something approximating the infinite.

While "[t]he opposite of a correct statement is a false statement... the opposite of a profound truth may well be another profound truth," physicist Neils Bohr observed. With age, I'm better able to entertain this complex possibility. Could it be that our individual truths might compete with or contradict one another? Yes, because we dwell in a wide universe.

Last week, two opinion pieces ran in The New York Times, one citing the "culture of contempt" in this country, another describing our so-called "cancel culture"; they echoed each other in serious concern that we have forgotten the value of comprehending conflicting ideals. We tend to believe that our own ideology is rooted in loving feelings, while others' are rooted in hateful ones. Why should we think this? When astrophysicists determined we live in an eternally expanding universe, that marked the start of a new revolution in our consciousness. Conceivably, there is an ever-increasing spaciousness to our reality.

The very first time I heard the term "mutually exclusive truths", I heard it in the context of negation, as in - "These are not mutually exclusive truths." It nearly blew my mind. I thought that was the defining characteristic of truth - that it was always exclusionary and in fact, pitted against mendacity. Many in our current political climate are convinced of this fallacy; they work tirelessly for

the annihilation of opposing ideas. We need a wholesome respect for the cosmology of thought. Ideas appear; some burn bright, while others dim in time. We all ought to doubt whether what we know is the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help us God.

Navy chaplain and UU minister the Rev. Robert T. Weston wrote: “doubt is a testing of belief... truth, if it be truth, arises from each testing stronger, more secure.” A while ago, I fell into a group chat with friends who also happen to be ministers. This chat has continued for years now and has since become international. Over time, we have each established our verbal patterns. One of us as a reflex says yes to anything; another of us says no to almost everything. In a surprise development, I have emerged as the Maybe. It’s not purely a tic, since I use different kinds of punctuation marks. Maybe: Exclamation point! Maybe: Period. Maybe: Question mark? Maybe: Ellipses...

My personal relationship to various truths has changed into a maybe so. Today I tolerate and allow ambiguity to a degree my student self would consider suspect. There are truths I have yet to grasp in my life and truths that I no longer hold as my own. I’ve taken notes from Prof. Miller and grown more humble about the partial, provisional, and perspectival nature of my knowledge. There has been a lot of unlearning, I’m glad to report. The covenant I feel bound to keep now is one made in the love of truths, plural, mine and yours, numerous as the stars in the heavens. May that be a covenant we come to cherish together, religiously. “The truth will set you free,” author David Foster Wallace quipped. “But not until it is finished with you.” I trust it is not done with us yet, not nearly.

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