

TRUTH BE TOLD

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Our fourth Unitarian Universalist principle states that we “affirm and promote a free and responsible search for truth and meaning.”

A free and responsible search for truth and meaning.

Truth be told, right at the start, I have a confession to make. I confess that I am humbled this morning. Humbled by the words of Chief Joseph of the Nez Perces Tribe, also known as the Nimípuu tribe of the Northwest, whose wisdom I came upon after writing *several* pages for this reflection. Only then did I discover Chief Joseph saying - “It does not require many words to speak the truth.”

And so there is a part of me that is inclined to just say AMEN! right here and lets go have coffee!

But that is only a part of me. The rest of me is thoroughly Unitarian Universalist. Which means I tend to love words. By the ream! But even more, I love the search for truth and meaning those words can represent. So while I can agree with Chief Joseph that *speaking* the truth does not require many words, in my experience the *search* for truth sometimes does. Because the search for truth is never easy. At least if we're honest with ourselves about it. As our forefather Theodore Parker said, “Truth stood on one side and Ease on the other.” Often it has been so.

Yes, truth can be tough – and truth can be beautiful. But today, it is not the nature of truth itself we will consider, but rather our part in the *search* for it. For ours, we have declared, is a free and *responsible* search for truth and meaning.

All seven of our principles hold particular powers in our faith, from our first principle that dares to affirm the worth and dignity of all persons no matter who they are and what they believe, all the way through to our deepening understanding of our place in the interconnected web of all being through our seventh principle.

But this fourth one – affirming a free and responsible search for truth and meaning – this is where our liberal faith *was born*. It is for the free and responsible search for truth and meaning that our foremothers and fathers gave their very lives – freeing us to continue our own search for truth and meaning down through history by prying belief apart from creed, and liberating faith from doctrine and dogma -- men and women who gave us freedom of both pulpit and pew. That means I am at liberty to share with you what I perceive to be true – and you are at liberty to agree - or not. Thus we live the wisdom given to us by our beloved forefather Francis David – who said that we need not think alike to love alike.

Indeed we need not think alike to affirm the search for truth and meaning. You are free to undertake your own search and I am free to make mine -- and – look! – here we are! Your search and my search have led us each *here!* To *this* room on *this* morning in this *moment!* And I find that amazing!

We are here not because anyone, human or holy, said we *have* to be – but because we *want* to be!

Perhaps your experience is a little like mine. When I discovered Unitarian Universalism I declared, “yes, THIS is what I was looking for!” Even though at that time I really didn’t know, until that moment, that I had even been looking.

You see, I had been quite a seeker in my life, but had come to a place I had worked out some truth for myself, and my intellect didn’t think I needed a religious community – but my heart still knew I did – and my heart knew you when I found you.

In fact I was at the Clearwater Unitarian Universalists as a guest musician when in the midst of Abhi Jansamanchi’s preaching my heart flew open and I *knew* I was a Unitarian Universalist. Granted I didn’t really know what that meant yet -- nor did I know what I was going to do with it. But there it was – and here we are.

So yes, the *free* search for truth and meaning is what brought so many of us through these doors – especially those of us who grew up in religious traditions that proclaimed they already *possessed* the truth, the whole truth and the *only* truth -- to which we were expected to proscribe without question. What an astounding notion it is to us then, what a dawning of hope, what an awakening is this idea of a free and responsible search for truth and meaning that actually begs, nay *demand*s, that we question – and then dares us have courage enough to face the possibility of answers.

For you see my friends, the awful and awesome thing about the search for truth is that sometimes ... you find it!

Then what?!

Then – we get to the second part of this wonderful, terrible, phrase – “a free -- and *responsible* – search for truth and meaning.” The “free” part we love. The “free” part we’ve got down pretty well. The “free” part we guard with all our might, protecting the right for each and every one of us to live free, love free, think free and speak free. The “truth and meaning” part we crave, even if not consciously, because we yearn to make sense of our lives somehow someday. The “truth and meaning” part is at the core of our very existence, as we long to understand what our lives are for.

But truth be told, too often in our free and responsible search for truth and meaning, we skip right over the “responsible” part – making of our lives of a merely “free” search for truth and meaning.

But that’s not what our fourth principle says. And that’s not what those who came before us gave their lives for that we might be free to continue searching. No, theirs was not only a free search – but a *responsible* one. And that is what our world desperately needs right now.

Now sure, there is more than one way to parse the word “responsible” in of this principle. Perhaps the most common way means for each of us to “take responsibility” for our own search – to do our best to be certain our search does not harm others, or impede other seekers in their own search. That’s taking responsibility *for* our search – and we do well to take care to ensure this responsibility.

However -- this morning I want to focus on a different aspect of responsibility in our free and responsible search for truth and meaning. That being our responsibility *to* the truth and meaning we find.

Let us consider this: In a speech given by Vaclav Havel, the first president of the Czech Republic, he offered an interesting perspective on what constitutes truth. By the way, Mr. Havel seems like our kind of guy – poet, philosopher and dissident whose fight for democracy in Czechoslovakia landed him in prison several times and earned him the US Presidential Medal of Freedom and the international Ambassador of Conscience award. Here's what when he said about truth -- "truth is information supported by responsibility." *Truth is information supported by responsibility.*

My friends, our *free* search for truth and meaning is not enough. Ours must be a free and *responsible* search. To seek, to gather, to learn, to discover, to discern and debate information is not enough. Even when we're fortunate to find something we can believe in – no matter where we find it. Whether we find truth in Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, Hinduism, Paganism, Humanism, Atheism, Agnosticism – the *finding* of it is still not enough.

For we must take responsibility for what we find!

Else we may easily render our free search *not* a quest for a better world, but an exercise in self-satisfaction. *Not* an answer to the soul's deepest longings, but a mere information-gathering hobby. *Not* a practice toward making justice and peace in a fractured world -- but a mere matter of comfortable privilege.

Preacher, what in the world are you talking about?! We believe everybody has the right to the free and responsible search for truth and meaning, and oh, yes we do -- but lets think about this for a minute.

People who are hungry or scared or in pain generally do not have the wherewithal for contemplating truth. People who don't know how they are going to feed their children today are worried about food, not the meaning of life. People who are working 3 jobs just to stay above water in this chaotic economy don't have time or energy for any kind of free search, or those who have *no* jobs tend to be using all their brain and body and spirit power trying find ways to keep their lives and/or their families together. People who are trying to survive abuse are not free to search out truth and meaning. People suffering under despotic governments, people under threat of gunfire in their own neighborhoods, people who dare not leave their own homes after dark, or fear sending their children to the school bus stop alone – people who must give all their energy, all their time, all their mental capacities to just trying to survive find it near impossible to engage in a free and responsible search for truth and meaning. Desperation is binging and blinding.

But truth be told, it's just as troublesome for some on the other end of the spectrum – those whose primary concern is amassing more and more and more material wealth and worldly comfort by any means necessary and no matter who gets hurt. *Greed is as blinding as desperation* – and with greed on the one hand and desperation on the other, where are we?

Where do you and I find ourselves as Unitarian Universalists at a moment in history where the very vision of a free society is at risk – not so much at the hands of those in power as at the hands of those who, for fear or confusion or malaise or boredom or sheer lack of personal threat, remain content to just watch it all happen on cable news, never knowing who they really are and why they are here.

So now what are we Unitarian Universalists to do in this moment with our free and responsible search for truth and meaning?

My beloved brothers and sisters of the River of Grass Unitarian Universalist Congregation, I dare say, if our lives are to *remain* free and *have* meaning, *we are called to take responsibility for the truth we find*. The truth that none should starve or wonder how they will feed their families - the truth that none should suffer – the truth that none should live in fear.

In the words of our great Universalist forefather, Hosea Ballou, “let us be ordained of a passion for truth without regard to rank or class or station in life!” Let us have courage look truth in the face, however hard that truth might be, and resolve to be responsible for it, however demanding that responsibility is.

At a time in the history of the world where our very foundations seem shaken, our arms must not be only for those within our reach, but those on the margins, who are always the ones whose lives fall over the edge when our principles of humanity, decency and charity are abandoned in the headlong rush of the I-me-mine society in which we find ourselves.

But truth be told – there’s yet another side to taking responsibility for the truth we find – not just for the wrongs that need righting – but also for the *rightness* we find – the beautiful, the just and peaceful, the welcoming, the joyous, the fruitful and hopeful, the sacred – the loving. The truth you and I have found *for* ourselves and *with* each other – in this room. In this faith. In Unitarian Universalism. In his letter to the Phillipians in the Christian scriptures, the apostle Paul says – “*whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things.*” How wonderful that your free search and mine led us both here. How marvelous is the truth alive in this very moment. But it is not enough that we have *found* it here! We are responsible *to* its good news!

We are responsible to the good news of Unitarian Universalism. We are responsible for telling it – and for living it. Now I know this sounds like evangelism and we UU’s get a little queasy with the notion of evangelism, and to some degree we should, given how the history of religion as we know is more than a little spotty on this subject. *But please hear me now.*

The only thing the word evangelism means is “tell good news.” Let me say that again, the word “evangelism” only means “tell good news.” And isn’t Unitarian Universalism good news!?

When we freely spread good news about books we read and movies we see and sports we follow and restaurants we enjoy, can we do no less for our faith community?! Why wait for a “Friendship Sunday” to invite our friends and loved ones to come gather with us? Let every Sunday be Friendship Sunday! Why wait to tell our friends and family and co-workers what it is that’s so good about our lives in this beloved community!

And we are responsible to this beloved community itself, with our resources as well. Sure, we are responsible for the electricity that keeps the lights on and the workers who change the light bulbs. But more than that – we are responsible for the kind word, the open heart, the listening ear, the helping hand – joining with those who weep and with those who rejoice – we are responsible *to* one another. And that takes a depth of compassion and commitment rarely seen in our 21st century me-first, facebook-friend society.

And at this time in history we need this commitment more than ever. This commitment to finding and sharing truth. This responsibility to ourselves and to the world around us. Our commitment must not be only to search until we find truth and meaning for ourselves, but must also be the courage enough to say out loud, with our words and our lives, what we have found!

Our forefathers and mothers gave their lives for this free faith not only because the truth they found was so radical that the powers of the status quo tried to silence it, but because the men and women who gave birth to Unitarian Universalism would not be silenced!

Vaclav Havel said, "Truth is information supported by responsibility,"

Another wise proverb says, "Truth is violated by falsehood but *outraged* by silence."

I say, once we have seen truth, there is no turning back – only turning away. *(PAUSE)*
Let us not turn away, but know courage enough to fully live our fourth principle – a free *and responsible* search for truth and meaning. May we know courage enough to see truth when we find it, and integrity enough to take responsibility for the truth we find -- be it wounding or wondrous. When the truth is wounding, it is ours to heal. When the truth is wondrous, it is ours to hold up as a light to the darkest corners of our confused and chaotic world.

"Oh, ye laborers in truth, be ye not idle," Hosea Ballou said, "let us be ordained of truth!"

If we are to follow the principles we declare, if we are to live the faith we profess, if we are to build the world we dream of – let our search for truth and meaning be both free – and responsible.

May truth be told. Amen.

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