“Fibs, Lies, Half-Truths, and the Whole Truth!”

A sermon delivered by Rev. Bruce Southworth, Senior Minister
of The Community Church of New York Unitarian Universalist on September 23, 2012

I begin with a cartoon that appeared in the New Yorker magazine. It shows two individuals talking, and one declares, “Well, that’s where I part company from the Unitarians. They have too much trouble telling lies!”

None of us is perfect by any means, but we Unitarian Universalists do insist in our heart of hearts, in our souls, on two things:

1. First, integrity, honesty, and truth-telling are essential to living with honor.
2. And second, we cannot tell ourselves lies about matters of faith and belief. When ancient creeds and religious superstitions trump reason, and sometimes deny common sense, we often look elsewhere for sustenance along the paths toward hope and courage.

While we honor everyone’s right to think for themselves about religious matters, some beliefs – I believe – are damaging. To be sure some theologically motivated political efforts, for example so-called creation science denying evolution, or efforts against marriage equality, or others, are hurtful. But, beyond that, some doctrines, I believe, also damage us spiritually and psychologically in terms of damaging self-esteem, for example.

The Truth Shall Make You Free… and Odd

On the positive side, our liberal religious tradition, along with so many, affirms those words of Christian tradition, “You shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free.” However, our perspective on religious truth is an ongoing pilgrim faith, and it is very different from the 1st century Greek “Logos” theology of the Christian Book of John.

As I like to observe, the writer Flannery O’Connor of Catholic background put it this way, “You shall know the truth and the truth shall make you … odd.”

This morning it is not the “truthiness”, rampant disregard of facts, in our particular political climate that is my focus. Rather, I am pondering some of the Big Lies of Faith, rather than in politics… the fibs (!?) that are embedded in various religious dogmas and creeds, that infect our culture.
Fibs… that is perhaps more nicely put than lies, and we could stretch and call some of them superstitions, or half-truths. Or fibs, or lies… some harmless, some not. Beyond these, this morning I really want to focus on some of the really, really, really true Big Truths that we embrace religiously, and that we embrace in our own unique ways. I say that, especially for newcomers, to note that we have shared values, but no required creeds.

One truly distinctive value of Unitarian Universalism is our embrace of the “free and responsible search for truth and meaning.” In theological terms, we believe in continuous revelation, not one Scripture or a singular definitive revelation, through e.g., a Moses, Jesus, Mohammad, Buddha or Joseph Smith.

And returning to the story from our reading, beyond all appearances, Truth is always beautiful, even when it may seem coarse, poorly phrased, or even angrily offered without respect for kindness toward others.

To which I add a truth about kindness. Samuel Johnson, the grand English literary figure of the 1700s offered these words: “Kindness is in our power, even when fondness is not.”

The Dalai Lama from Tibetan Buddhist tradition in our time has also counseled, “Be kind whenever possible.” Then he says, “It is always possible.”

But back to two of my themes: We Unitarian Universalists engage in the free and responsible search for truth, and Truth is always beautiful.

**Big Lies**

On the cultural front some of the Big Lies of our society, and perhaps the world, are exactly that – Big Lies, more than fibs, and sometimes not really even half-truths. Some of those that come to mind are notions like the

- The false god of individualism over interdependence;
- Happiness as a goal rather than a by-product of caring, sharing, and giving something back;
- Myths of equal opportunity in a nation where privileges of all kinds discriminate constantly;
- The myth of trickle-down economics, and the list goes on and on… of wrong-headed and sometimes self-serving fibs, lies.
For many of us, our values and convictions drive us in counter-cultural ways to resist these ideas, to reframe them, and to affirm more inclusive, egalitarian norms and narratives, even if we don’t always know the next steps, whether political or personal. They are part of life’s challenges in our society.

Moving on to the religious distortions, or superstitions, or fibs, or half-truths, I want to be clear that I don’t believe our path is the ultimate, or the only one, as good as I happen to think it is, in terms of offering Spirit, wholeness, comfort, and so much more.

What we do know, in a community such as this, is that we do offer affirmations that set us free.

People are Precious.

In the early 1800s in Rhode Island, a boy named William Ellery Channing, was taken

one day by his father to hear a "famous preacher," [where] he was introduced to the Calvinist vision of human depravity, of lost souls in ... (an abysmal) universe, in desperate need of "sovereign grace." The somber terror of the sermon struck the sensitive boy deeply, and when his father later pronounced it "sound doctrine," young Channing was crushed: "It is all true then." But as the boy's anguish grew during the silent (wagon) drive home, he was jarred when his father began to whistle (happily enjoying the beauty and extravagance of Nature and the day around him.) And when his father reached home and proceeded calmly to read his newspaper, the boy realized something: "No! His father did not believe it; people did not believe it! It was not true!" (D. Robinson, WILLIAM ELLERY CHANNING, SELECTED WRITINGS, p. 6)

In the early 1800s, as Minister of the Federal Street Church in Boston, Channing and others rejected Calvinism's belief in the utter depravity of humankind and Calvin’s teaching about original sin, AND a mighty healing spirit was being unleashed. In 1819, here and in New England, the name Unitarian was embraced, leading to the founding of our church in 1825.

The First really, really true Big Truth is our affirmation of the worth and dignity of every person. People are precious, with potential for good or evil, with exceptional possibilities. The teachings about original sin and a punishing God, for me, these are blasphemy. Or as some have called it, this is a very peculiar Christian heresy that found a special home in our nation. (Emerson: The Mind on Fire, H. D. Richardson)

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We are among those who recall Jesus’ declaration, “You, me, each of us is the light of the world.” Precious, sacred.

**Reason guides us to Truth.**

William Ellery Channing emphasized another Big Truth for our faith. In 1826, at the dedication of our first building, he spoke about the “signatures of truth” found in a rational view of Christianity that affirmed Jesus’ ethic of Love. Channing

1. advocated the use of reason,
2. rejected many of the so-called miracles of Jesus, and
3. rejected the early church’s doctrines of Jesus’ divinity and of the so-called Trinity.

He also reasonably argued against the virgin birth, which Thomas Jefferson had ridiculed a generation earlier. In the context of ancient supernatural belief systems, perhaps those myths made sense, but they came to be taken literally and were now inexplicable to a rational mind.

Unitarian Ralph Waldo Emerson followed in the 1830s. He was inviting us to “honor the integrity” of one’s mind and personal experience, seeing the sacred as fully in Nature as in Jesus.

The Second really Big Truth counters superstition and ancient mythology: the use of the divine gift of Reason in religious pilgrimage. As we have come to speak of it, we often invoke Channing’s language of the Principle of the Free Mind, and also the free and disciplined search for truth.

He was directly challenging the blasphemy of those priests, ministers, or rabbis, who declared we should not ask certain questions, and many of us experienced that in growing up. Quit asking questions!? Dishonor the godly gift of Reason? We cannot, cannot, help but think for ourselves.

As my colleague Virginia Safford notes,

Evil is the capacity, within us and among us, to break sacred bonds with our own souls, with one another, and with the holy. Further, it is the willingness to excuse or justify this damage, to deny it, or to call it virtue. The soil in which it flourishes is a rich compost of ignorance, arrogance, fear, and delusion – mostly self-delusion – all mingled with the sparkling dust of our original, human being.
She goes on to emphasize, “Sunlight beats it back. Truth-telling, truth seeking, truth speaking, secret-breaking, brave naming, bearing witness – all weaken” evil, and address “ignorance, arrogance, fear and delusion.” (In “Quest,” Church of the Larger Fellowship, March, 2012, p. 5)

Two big Truths: (1) Human worth and dignity… over against Original Sin. And (2) The use of reason and the search for truth itself… over against superstition and irrationality.

**Creative Freedom challenges us and calls us to act.**

All this brings me to Malvina Reynolds, the Unitarian Universalist activist and folk-singer, and to one of her songs, “Somewhere Between.” With enormous honesty, she writes,

On Monday I think I’m a sinner;  
On Tuesday I think I’m a saint;  
On Wednesday, I don’t know what I am, but I know a saint, I ain’t.  
On Monday I’d steal from a baby;  
On Tuesday I’d give you my shirt;  
On Wednesday I lie on my couch and moan ‘cause my conscience is doing me dirt…  
Somewhere between the good and the evil;  
Somewhere between the right and the wrong;  
Somewhere between the kind and the mean;  
Somewhere between…

Most of us probably won’t paint ourselves with such extremes, but most of us in our heart of hearts know we live with our compromises, somewhere in between… with our Freedom to choose.

Hindu faith puts it in a way that has long sustained me: “The winds of God's grace (The Spirit of Life, the wind’s of a gracious Creation) are always blowing, and we have to raise our sails.” Especially, in these times.

Creative Freedom is ours, each moment!

In the midst of challenges, we write the stories of our lives … claiming our dignity and worth, and trying to put the whole picture together into a reasonable narrative of who we are, what we value, and what we do next.
In this spirit, are you familiar with the country singer K. D. Laing? She grew up a vegetarian in western Canada’s cattle country. She talks about her struggle as an activist and as a lesbian in that traditional culture, and how as a public person it was even harder. When at the end of an interview she was asked about the rich, spiritual texture of her music and lyrics, she answered, “I believe that you are only as deep as what has been carved into you”, which is just another way of saying we are wounded healers.

Human worth and dignity…. Use of reason and the search for truth itself.

Then this Third ingredient: a respect for … embracing… human Freedom and power. The power we each have… human freedom to choose, act, live and thrive, to Love. Salvation through deeds, not creeds… through character and choices we make; not predestination or vagaries of a whimsical punishing, sometimes cruel God.

**Our Love heals, blesses and saves us.**

Another witness is the spiritual writer Nancy Mairs. In her volume of essays, CARNAL ACTS (published by the Unitarian Universalist Association’s Beacon press), she writes about her life with MS, multiple sclerosis, this way:

To view your life as blessed does not require you to deny your pain. It simply demands a more complicated vision, one in which a condition or event is not either good or bad, but is, rather, both good and bad, not sequentially but simultaneously. In my experience, the more such ambivalences you can hold in your head, the better off you are, intellectually and emotionally. Categorical statements become meaningless. The saddest stories are shot through with humor. You come to tolerate people, ideas, and circumstances wholly at odds with your dreams and desires. (15)

With beauty, astonishment and peacefulness of one “wiser than despair”, she is a writer, a feminist and an activist in various social injustice causes. She goes on to say, “I am still being the woman I thought I could never bear to be. And I am still afraid.”

Then, she adds with joy, and boldness and fearlessness: “We are all weaving some cosmic tapestry of which I’ve been able to glimpse a few threads.”

The difficulties of her life, she believes, empower her to do her justice work.

The difficulties of her life, she believes, allow her a greater range of responses, and allow a deeper “generosity of spirit.”
Most of us - though not all - live with fewer limitations than she.

It reminds me also of those singing words of Mary Oliver that are becoming part of my personal devotions.

What I loved in the beginning, I think, was mostly myself. Never mind that I had to, since somebody had to. That was many years ago…

… I have become the child of the clouds, and of hope….

And what do I risk to tell you this, which is all I know? Love yourself. Then forget it. Then, love the world.


“Love yourself. Then forget it. Then, love the world.”

This then is a fourth part of our faith, true of all the great traditions. Fourth is our commitment to one another – to interdependence not individualism – to this heavy-laden word, Love. That’s one way I speak about God, which is an even weightier and challenging symbol/word, part of so many people’s lives, and a mystery to so many others.

Universalist professor and Minister Clarence Skinner in 1915 offered this view: "The Universalist idea of God is that of a universal, impartial, immanent spirit whose nature is love." "It is the largest thought the world has ever known; it is the most revolutionary doctrine ever proclaimed; it is the most expansive hope ever dreamed. [If seeking to know God,] this is the God of the modern man [and woman], and the God who is in” … [us].

**Prisoners of Hope**

The larger theme... living as “prisoners of hope.” The means, the tools, the process, the faith, the path:

Affirming the worth and dignity of all of us; affirming the use of reason; affirming and living with the freedom and power we already have… with choices each day… each moment; and affirming the power of the heart, Love’s way, as well as the head…

People are Precious.

Reason guides us to Truth.
Creative Freedom challenges us and calls us to act.

Our Love heals, blesses and saves us and the world.

Much of religion does not take that path, but there are also many fellow travelers, even though they may differ from our big tent of universal religion. These kindred souls may be more particular in their symbols... e.g. Jewish, Christian, Muslim, Hindu, and Buddhist symbols, stories and language... holding perhaps their historic creeds lightly, rather than literally. Many good companions even from those of different traditions.

For example, I have always been troubled by the Anglican Book of Common Prayer, which includes the confession, “there is no health in us.” Yet, on the outside of an Episcopal Church in San Francisco are these words:

We understand ourselves to be called: To gather as a body which welcomes and celebrates human diversity including spirituality, ethnicity, gender and sexual orientation: to create a space where people of any faith or none can question and discover the sacred in life through openness, struggle and prayer: to a common commitment to be in solidarity with poor and marginalized people and to cherish Creation.

It concludes, “We don’t manage all the time so we try again.”

And so do we.... We keep on trying.

Truth is beautiful... even if makes you odd.

Together with so many others, in our world where truthiness abounds, we share the invitation to be prisoners of hope.

“We are all weaving some cosmic tapestry of which” [we've] been able to glimpse a few threads.”

*We don’t manage all the time, so we try again each day in Love.*