

Order of Morning Celebration for July 17, 2005

A Meditation on the Fourth Principle:

A Free and Responsible Search for Truth and Meaning

"The serious problems in life are never really solved. If ever they should appear to be so it is a sure sign that something has been lost. The meaning and purpose of a problem seems to be not in its solution, but in our working at it incessantly." –Carl Jung

To a visitor who described himself as a seeker after Truth, the teacher said: "If what you seek is Truth, there is one thing you must have above all else." "I know," answered the student, "an overwhelming passion for it." "No," said the teacher, "an unremitting readiness to admit you may be wrong." –Fr. Anthony de Mello

Greeting

from #444: This House

Laura Landy Carr
Steve Abbott

This house is for the ingathering of nature and human nature.

It is a house of friendships, a haven in trouble, an open room for the encouragement of our struggle.

It is a house of freedom, guarding the dignity and worth of every person.

It offers a platform for the free voice, for declaring, both in times of security and danger, the full and undivided conflict of opinion.

This house is a cradle for our dreams, the workshop of our common endeavor.

Kindling

the grail of our heritage is kindled

Susan Adams

The chalice you see on this chancel is a symbol that reminds us of sacrifice in defense of freedom. It reminds us of one of our forebears, Jan Hus, the 15th century Bohemian martyr who insisted that all participants should be able to receive not just bread but also the chalice--the wine--during communion. A flame was added to the image of the chalice by artist Hans Deutsch and used as a seal for the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee, which was created to assist Eastern Europeans who were fleeing persecution by the Nazis. In time the flaming chalice became a symbol of Unitarian Universalism all around the world.

Ingathering

Children's Story
Are You My Mother?
P.D. Eastman

Wendy Boortz

Devotion: Welcoming Memory and Hope

Perspective

My Search for Truth

Wendy Boortz

Are You My Mother? What a silly and delightful book. But one which also holds a deeper meaning. It is so important to us to know who we are and where we come from and that we have a safe home.

I was lucky growing up. I knew my family. Both my parents were only children. I envied my friends their aunts, uncles and cousins. But I had a brother and sister, and we reveled in the attention of our parents and four grandparents who lived close by. Unlike the little bird in the story, I knew who my mother was. I knew the truth.

Then, a few years back, the truth changed. My father received a call from a man who had just learned from his dying mother that my grandfather was his biological father. And so my father learned that he had a half brother, and I acquired my much longed-for uncle.

I am thrilled to have an uncle. But for other members of my family, this was something painful that was thrust upon them. They liked things the old way, and did not want a new truth. Sometimes the truth is too painful to bear.

The UU principle we are exploring today supports the free and responsible search for truth and meaning. Most of us don't have to search for our mother. We know her from birth. But the search for God, for Spiritual Meaning, for Truth with a capital T, is more complex. This truth is guided by Faith, not DNA tests. You can argue that Faith is different from Truth, but it is not for me. My Faith defines me. I believe things that can never be proven. And they live in my heart as absolute Truths.

I was thrilled after many years of searching to find the right church for me, a church that does not preach a truth, but rather a free and responsible **search** for truth. We have many seekers here, and I am one. I am on a journey that will probably never end. And like the quote from Anthony de Mello in your order of worship, the most important part of searching for truth is the willingness to admit I may be wrong. As I find new truths, I replace the old ones.

But there are many here and elsewhere who have found their answers. Who are at home with their beliefs, and don't want to journey any further. And this is the big issue. As a church, can we responsibly support each other? If I am a bird, and you are a cat, can you refrain from telling me I have to stalk, pounce and kill to get my food? Can I lay off telling you that flying is the only way to travel? And, most importantly, will you promise not to eat me for dinner?

From my own life's experiences, I believe we can co-exist and support each other. My religious heritage is woven from interfaith marriages: a Muslim and a Russian Orthodox, a Native American and a Southern Baptist, an atheist and an agnostic. As someone who is intrinsically religious, the different "truths" I learned from my parents and grandparents were confusing. Each family member believed something different, and had his or her own truth. It was as if the little bird went to the cat and dog and fairy and snort, and each one told her that it was her mother.

Ultimately I learned to accept that the people I loved had different truths. I went on to marry a man who holds strong Christian beliefs. I found it paradoxical when he first told me his religious views were the same as mine. But that's what he says. Several of my closest spiritual relationships are with evangelical, conservative Christians. Their deep faith in Jesus, God the Father and the Holy Spirit have inspired and strengthened me. Their prayers and support have sustained me through some very difficult times. Sometimes, I find myself thinking like my husband. That we are all saying the same thing. Perhaps we are just saying it in a different language.

Several weeks ago, I went to meet my uncle for the first time. Believe it or not, he asked me, "Who is my father?" We spent the weekend exploring this and other questions. It was just a beginning, but as time goes on, I hope we can help each other gain a deeper understanding of our family. Likewise, I hope that we at First UU can help each other search responsibly for truth and meaning in our lives.

Meditation, Silence and Remembrance

words for the silence:

From the moment I wake, I think "what's next?"
The mind spins into action, a flurry of whirring brain cells, planning my next move.
Then it's onto the treadmill, running again. The hamster next to me laughs.
Do I ever really get "there?" Where is there, anyway?
They say the journey of a thousand miles begins with the first step,
but I haven't really felt my feet hitting the ground for a long time.
So this morning, I will sit. I will breathe.
I feel my feet, firmly on the ground of this place.
What's next? Blessedly, nothing. Or, blessedly, peace.
Let us keep silent for a time.

words for the naming:

Sometimes on the journey, someone offers us a hand.
Sometimes it's a swift kick.
If we're lucky, as we round the corner to head home, someone waits there for us.

Remembering those who have been with us on our journey--those who eased our way and those who made it difficult, those still here and those who have gone on ahead--we say their names aloud or in silence.

[naming]

We keep these names close to our hearts as we move through this day and into the week ahead, knowing that these individuals are witness to our truth as it unfolds, as we are for them.

Reading

“Utopia”

Jim Svagerko

Wisława Szymborska

View with a Grain of Sand, 1995

Island where all becomes clear.
Solid ground beneath your feet.
The only roads are those that offer access.
Bushes bend beneath the weight of proofs.
The Tree of Valid Supposition grows here
with branches disentangled since time immemorial.
The Tree of Understanding, dazzling straight and simple
sprouts by the spring called Now I Get It.
The thicker the woods, the vaster the vista:
the Valley of Obviously.
If any doubts arise, the wind dispels them instantly.
Echoes stir unsummoned
and eagerly explain all the secrets of the worlds.
On the right a cave where Meaning lies.
On the left the Lake of Deep Conviction.
Truth breaks from the bottom and bobs to the surface.
Unshakable Confidence towers over the valley.
Its peak offers an excellent view of the Essence of Things.
For all its charms, the island is uninhabited,
and the faint footprints scattered on its beaches
turn without exception to the sea.
As if all you can do here is leave
and plunge, never to return, into the depths.
Into unfathomable life.

The past three weeks of worship services have provided much food for thought on the seven principles that guide us as Unitarian Universalists. In the first of our series, Bob Gordon provided an exploration of the first principle: “the inherent worth and dignity of every person.” Steve Abbott has offered reflections on the second principle: “justice, equity, and compassion in human relations,” and Jim Bailey has shared his perspective on the third principle “acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations.” Today I’m going to talk about the fourth principle, “a free and responsible search for truth and meaning.”

My friend Bill Inglis, who serves on the Worship Committee, had the idea of offering this series on the seven principles. He and I met several years ago during an adult religious education class called Building Your Own Theology. We met over the course of 10 weeks to discuss the “biggies:” our belief (or unbelief) in God, our values, the meaning and purpose of our lives. The end product was a personal credo statement, which we shared with the group.

What I remember most about the class, and about that time period in general, was how wonderful it felt to talk about these issues with other like-minded people. Most of us had come to First UU from more traditional Christian faiths, casting off many of our former beliefs. We had had new insights that in many cases went beyond what we had been taught, but we had no pre-set vocabulary to use in talking about them. We needed a way to process these new ideas, to give them some structure and make them manageable. We often joked that BYOT stood not for “Building Your Own Theology,” but “Bring Your Own Truth.” At the time, it seemed like the most natural thing in the world, to *decide* for ourselves what was true.

I didn’t realize at the time what a gift this was, a gift I had given to myself: a sacred time and place each week to explore new ideas, to test out hypotheses. I felt as though the whole world was ripe with possibilities, and that I had the support, the resources, and the time to define the views and values that would give shape to my life. I felt *free*.

The word free brings many thoughts to mind: unfettered, like a bird in the wild, we can soar toward whatever flights of religious fancy we choose. Not bound by a creed, we can find our own connections to what is meaningful to us. Free means we are at liberty to find our own way--we can lay other burdens down: the pressure to think as others do, to live the lives they would like to see us lead. Being free means that we can abandon institutions and structures that no longer work for us, and find or create new ones. To be “free” means that we discover the truth about our lives and our world on our own terms.

Too often, I have heard other UUs say that, when telling their friends or co-workers about the non-creedal nature of Unitarian Universalism, the response they hear is, "Well, I guess that means you can believe just about *anything*, and still be a UU!" This sentence is usually said in a somewhat mocking or disbelieving tone, as if the person in question pictured scores of Unitarian Universalists at a giant metaphysical buffet--taking a heaping helping of Buddhism, a soupçon of Jesus, hold the mysticism, if you please. There are several misconceptions within this picture, besides the obvious--that the Buddha would never have been caught dead at a buffet.

There are times when I wish there were such a buffet, with my spiritual choices clearly marked, and all of them protected from contamination by a huge sneeze guard. Buffets are wonderful

because they eliminate the need for thought. I don't have to guess what a menu item might look like, because it's laid out for all to see. I don't have to make a commitment, because if I don't like what I've chosen, I simply abandon my first choice, get a clean plate, and go back for more. I don't even have to take the hard stuff, the stuff that's good for me, like vegetables, or liver. I could just head for the dessert, because hey--it's free for the taking, right?

It's easy to fill the space with jokes when trying to grasp the concept of being free to decide for oneself the beliefs that define our lives: where did we come from, why are we here, and where are we going? The very thing that makes being a UU so exhilarating also makes it frightening. Challenging. Disturbing, even. There is no road map to assure me that I'm on the right path, no specific sacraments or statements I can make that will guarantee I'm in the right place, doing the right thing. Like the little bird in our story, we as UUs find ourselves alone in the nest, wondering, where did we come from? We know there must be a way to make sense of the maddeningly difficult, joyful, violent, bountiful world we live in, so we get out of the nest, and we start looking.

The Reverend Frederic Muir of the Unitarian Universalist Church of Annapolis noted in an essay on the fourth principle that "the critical question for us is to ask not about the existence of God, but who or what is *my* God? The issue is not the presence of God, but God's importance. It's not about what God is like, but what we are like, given the God we believe in."

You can take this use of the word "God" with a big G or a small g. What are our Gods? Is it the notion of a higher power, a source of all existence? Is it commitment to an ideal--to furthering a specific cause? Or is it to our careers? Or to a breakneck pace we have set so that we can arrive more quickly at... what? Success? Money? Achievement? Security?

This is where that other, more tricky half of the fourth principle comes in: responsibility.

The fourth principle challenges us to *be present*. For UUs, the highest spiritual authority is not our minister, our government, or our family of origin. It is not a particular text or tradition. It is personal experience. In order to have experiences, we need to be awake—to be truly present! This sounds ridiculously simple, but in the rush of our everyday lives, it's easy to exist just under the radar—to go through the motions of working, caring for our children, keeping house. These things all need to be done, but the magic lies in how we do them. Am I so focused on the next task that I do not fully experience the task I'm working on now? Am I tuned out, from my spouse, my friends, my children? More importantly, am I just going along, accepting the status quo? Without confronting these questions, we are de facto living a life that is unconscious, that is spiritually bankrupt. Without being attuned to the world around us, we cannot begin to uncover the truth.

The fourth principle challenges us to continually *examine our assumptions*: about everything, and everyone. It states that we as UUs promote and affirm a free and responsible search for truth and meaning, not the search. There is more than one way to go about this journey, and as individuals it is our responsibility to find the path that is right for us. But, others are on their particular journeys as well. Not just those here in our congregation, but everyone: evangelical Christians, Jews, Catholics, humanists, agnostics. Just as we commit to the full examination of the truth as it unfolds in our daily experience, and as we are taught it by our teachers, friends and families, we must continually remind ourselves that our search is not the only viable one. That is why there is not just one principle, but seven. The third principle calls us to accept one another. The second principle demands justice, equity and compassion in our relationships with all others. We realize of course that these principles sound simple, but that to live our lives in accordance with them is a challenge of the highest order.

Finally, the fourth principle challenges us to *give up our complacency*. Whenever I think that I have finally found the answers, it's usually the exact moment when I realize that I have probably missed the mark completely. This is precisely because as UUs we recognize that the search for truth and meaning in our lives is about the process, not about the destination. It's about the choices we make every day: how we treat others, and how we treat ourselves. Whether we are open to experience, or whether we are shut down. Our choice is to grow, or to stagnate.

The 19th century German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer said that, "Truth that has been merely learned is like an artificial limb... It adheres to us only because it is put on. But truth acquired by thinking of our own is like a natural limb; it alone really belongs to us." May each of us be open to the truth as it unfolds for us, and cherish the opportunity we are given every day to use our reason and compassion to give meaning to our lives.

Closing

The search never ends, it seems. And no matter how hard we try, we may never find exactly the answers that we want to the questions we can't help but pose. But there is comfort to be found. In your hand is the hand of another seeker. We are all in this together. I can't think of a better consolation than this. May we always remember that we are never alone. And that's the truth. So be it—amen.