

Free and Responsible Truthiness

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"Nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind."

—Ralph Waldo Emerson

Truthiness (noun): "truth that comes from the gut, not books" (Stephen Colbert, Comedy Central's "The Colbert Report," October 2005)

Meditation — W. WALDEMAR W. ARGOW (*Faith There Shall Be*, 1942)

The old year has slipped through the glass of time, taking with it a portion of my life. For me a face has faded, a voice is stilled, a chair is empty; precious ambitions lay scattered like broken alabaster boxes, and my sky is oft tarnished by the low-hanging clouds of failure.

But I stand again at the threshold of eternity—the Land of Beginning Again—where the New Year woos with an enchanting hope. So I plight my troth to the Mystic Comrade by my side, who teaches me to read the meaning of life in the light of its high hours. In my scars I see the ministry of redemption, and in my slow-healing wounds I read the gospel of Triumphant Life.

Each morn the world wrapped in winsome smiles unfolds, and I know the best is yet to be. All through the year I shall work and play, sing and pray, dream and hope, suffer and love; for I was as one lonely and have found anew a friend who walked ever by my side. And since I have come out of the Silence, and shall return again into the Silence, as a pilgrim of time I will walk with faith the streets of years.

Readings

Our **first reading** today is a passage from Ralph Waldo Emerson's essay *Self-Reliance*.

I remember an answer which when quite young I was prompted to make to a valued adviser, who was wont to importune me with the dear old doctrines of the church. On my saying, What have I to do with the sacredness of traditions, if I live wholly from within? my friend suggested, — "But these impulses may be from below, not from above." I replied, "They do not seem to me to be such; but if I am the Devil's child, I will live then from the Devil." No law can be sacred to me but that of my nature. Good and bad are but names very readily transferable to that or this; the only right is what is after my constitution, the only wrong what is against it. A man is to carry himself in the presence of all opposition, as if every thing were titular

and ephemeral but he. I am ashamed to think how easily we capitulate to badges and names, to large societies and dead institutions. Every decent and well-spoken individual affects and sways me more than is right. I ought to go upright and vital, and speak the rude truth in all ways.

Our **second reading** today is a series of excerpts from Bart D. Ehrman's book *Misquoting Jesus*. Ehrman, a "world-class Biblical scholar", chairs the Department of Religious Studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He writes:

"The more I studied the manuscript tradition of the New Testament, the more I realized just how radically the text had been altered over the years at the hands of scribes, who were not only conserving scripture but also changing it. ...

Sometimes they didn't mean to—they were simply tired, or inattentive, or, on occasion, inept. At other times, though they did mean to make changes, as when they wanted the text to emphasize precisely what they themselves believed, for example about the nature of Christ, or about the role of women in the church, or about the wicked character of their Jewish opponents." ... "I began seeing the New Testament as a very human book.... ...I came to realize that what they were doing with the text was not all that different from what each of us does every time we read a text.

For the more I studied, the more I saw that reading a text necessarily involves interpreting a text. I suppose when I started my studies I had a rather unsophisticated view of reading: that the point of reading a text is simply to let the text "speak for itself," to uncover the meaning inherent in its words. The reality, I came to see, is that the meaning is not inherent and texts do not speak for themselves.

...think back on the last time you were involved in a heated debate in which the Bible was invoked, and someone volunteered an interpretation of a scripture verse that left you wondering, How did he (or she) come up with *that*? ... Texts do not simply reveal their own meanings to honest inquirers. Texts are interpreted, and they are interpreted (just as they were written) by living, breathing human beings, who can make sense of the texts only by explaining them in light of their other knowledge, explicating their meaning, putting the words of the texts "in other words."

The only way to make sense of a text is to read it, and the only way to read it is by putting it in other words, and the only way to put it in other words is by having other words to put it into, and the only way

to have a life is by being filled with desires, longings, needs, wants, beliefs, perspectives, worldviews, opinions, likes, dislikes—and all the other things that make human beings human. And so to read a text is, necessarily, to change a text.

Intro to sermon

When member Mike Delaney chose today's "You make the call" sermon [an annual reprise of a previously delivered sermon] as a result of his being the highest bidder for the right at the recent church auction, I thought it was interesting that he chose "Free and Responsible Truthiness" because I had just recommended it to someone on Facebook who was having trouble understanding Unitarian Universalism.

You see, after I preached a sermon in October about my experiences officiating same-sex weddings, member Greg Pelley posted a link to the sermon on his Facebook page, prompting a debate between one of his more religiously conservative friends, and some of Greg's other friends (including several members of this congregation).

The debate started when his friend Jason declared that he didn't agree with marriage equality and wrote:

"I am not sure what Unitarian Universalism is, but it sounds like a religion that has set aside God's word in order to make themselves feel better about decisions that the Book does not allow. ...As a practicing Christian [I] have unshakable faith that the Bible is the inspired true word of God and to say anything else is against God. If you read the New Testament Jesus did not cross words and clearly spoke to the damnation of those who did not follow his father's word."

He later asked the UUs and more-liberal minded Christians who had been responding:

"How can you believe half of a book? If you believe its teachings how can you not believe its consequences or authority? I think that the Bible is true, from cover to cover, and I am not going to pick out the things that make me feel good and ignore those things that make me feel accountable."

He then explained his conservative Christian theology before asking,

"Is UU a religion or doctrine that can promise a peaceful eternity with your creator, or is it basically a forum where people can get together, feel good about their decisions, and explore new ways to find salvation here on Earth? Well if you are truly exploring for the truth I invite you to study the word of

God through the Bible. I think that with your desire to Love and Help you will find that it is not offensive, but indeed very helpful and necessary.”

Finally I chimed in (there had been more than 25 comments at this point):

“Good morning Jason. I appreciate your attempts to understand UUism, and the kind spirit with which you have attempted to engage with those of us still paying attention to this inherently limited Facebook discourse :-). I respect the devotion you exhibit toward your faith perspective.

“I wrote a sermon in 2008 that I think addresses at least one UU perspective (mine!) on ‘truth’. Perhaps you will find it helpful in further understanding where at least some of us UUs are coming from. Perhaps not. In any case, I want you to know I thank you for your blessing and return the sentiment.”

I will share with you the sermon now, and at the conclusion I will tell you how Jason reacted.

Sermon

In the 2005 pilot episode of his satirical cable news show *The Colbert Report*, host Stephen Colbert coined the word “truthiness,” which, before making it into the title of this morning’s sermon, was named as a “Word of the Year” by both the American Dialect Society and Merriam-Webster. Truthiness is a word he created to express not literal truth, but, he has said, “something that seems like truth—the truth we want to exist.” Colbert contends:

“Truthiness is tearing apart our country....It used to be, everyone was entitled to their own opinion, but not their own facts. But that’s not the case anymore. Facts matter not at all. Perception is everything. I really feel a dichotomy in the American populace. What is important? [He asks] What you want to be true, or what is true?”¹

When I first prepared this sermon in the summer of 2008, and reflected upon one of our Unitarian Universalist principles through the lens of “truthiness”, it was a coincidence that the two national political conventions had just taken place, two heaping piles of truthiness that played (at times anyway) to audiences larger than the opening ceremonies of the Olympics or the final episode of *American Idol*. As candidates and their supporters ripped each other apart with half-truths if not downright lies, Colbert’s definition of his lauded word

¹ Stephen Colbert quotes taken from Wikipedia page on “Truthiness”:
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Truthiness>

seemed to fit the political climate perfectly. "Truthiness," he says:

"...is 'What I say is right, and [nothing] anyone else says could possibly be true.' It's not only that I *feel* it to be true, but that I feel it to be true. There's not only an emotional quality...there's a selfish quality."²

Here we are, 15 months later, and with all the distortions and deceptions around the ongoing health care reform debate, we could say that truthiness remains the most prevalent tool of political discourse.

But the focus of this sermon is not politics, which may be a far too easy target of truthiness critique anyway. No, my purpose in our time together is to consider the relationship of truthiness to religious perspectives in general, and our Unitarian Universalist perspectives in particular.

I started thinking about truthiness and religion when I read Bart Ehrman's book *Misquoting Jesus*. Ehrman's book reminded me a lot of my Bible classes at the University of Chicago Divinity School when I was a seminary student. These classes were grounded in biblical textual criticism and analysis (which is a fancy way to say that we focused more on how the Bible was written and who wrote it than the stories found within its pages). Both my classes and Ehrman's book share a common message: You can't really trust what is in the Bible to be consistent with what was originally intended, due to the mistakes, misinterpretations, or misrepresentations of the scribes who served as the human printing presses in the hundreds of years before such equipment existed. To a Unitarian Universalist student (and probably most of my religiously-liberal-minded classmates from many denominations), these claims of biblical inconsistencies were not shocking. However, I did wonder about some of my classmates who may have been carrying with them the "truth" of more biblically-literal traditions. If one enters school believing that the Bible is the inerrant word of God, divinely inspired and communicated in fine and consistent detail, so much so, in fact, that one's sense of faith is intricately tied to such a conception, what happens when evidence arises to not only challenge those assumptions and beliefs but to translate them from "truth" into "truthiness"?

² Stephen Colbert quotes taken from Wikipedia page on "Truthiness":
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Truthiness>

Well, the very definition of “truthiness” implies what typically happens. Nothing. When a rigid belief system (whether political, religious or cultural) is devoutly held, the facts usually don’t matter. Those under the truthiness spell will merely justify their stubborn positions with the mantra: *What I believe is right and nothing anyone else says could possibly be true.*

Ehrman’s book makes this point, at least initially, as he examines the likely changes made to biblical texts, changes that could have easily been based in ideology or a need for power or even just a sense that a scribe knew best how something should be written. But the real gift of his work for me was the personal story he shares along with the textual criticism. You see, Ehrman comes at this issue of biblical truthiness (we might call it) from a multi-layered perspective, as someone both steeped in it and removed from it. The steeping began when, as a high school sophomore, he struck up an inspirational friendship with an older evangelical classmate, which led him to leave behind his family’s mainline Protestant church tradition and become “born again”. Deeply moved by his heartfelt faith, he enrolled at Chicago’s Moody Bible Institute, where, he remembers, the students liked to say, “*Bible* is our middle name.” Ehrman earned a three-year degree in Bible theology there, with the bulk of his classes devoted to Biblical study and systematic theology. He recalls, “Only one perspective was taught in these courses, subscribed to by all the professors (they had to sign a statement) and by all the students (we did as well): the Bible is the inerrant word of God. It contains no mistakes.” At the time, he says, he reveled in this “hard-core Christianity for the fully committed,” as it was an “enormous ‘step up’ from the milquetoast view of the Bible” he had experienced growing up as an Episcopalian. Even in the midst of his euphoria at being engaged in the rigors of what he describes as a “kind of Christian boot camp”, Ehrman did notice that the inerrancy claim might have some holes in it, considering, as his professors there had to admit, we simply do not have the original writings of the New Testament. While he remembers that most of his classmates were able to “shrug off” this fact of missing originals, Ehrman was inspired by the mystery and what it all might mean. He became more serious than ever about his future as a Christian scholar and completed his bachelor’s degree at Wheaton College, a school, his Moody classmates warned him, where he would have trouble finding “real Christians”, which, he says, only showed how “fundamentalist” Moody really was [or, for the purposes of this sermon we might say how “truthiness-y” Moody was]. Even at the religiously conservative-minded Wheaton, he enjoyed a more traditional liberal arts educational experience and continued down the

path that would lead him to Princeton Theological Seminary to study with one of the world's leading experts in the textual criticism field. Ehrman's more evangelical friends again tried to dissuade him from his choice of Princeton, suggesting that it wasn't a place for "real Christians." But Ehrman's education in literature, history and philosophy had led him to a turning point. He writes:

"If learning the 'truth' meant no longer being able to identify with the born-again Christians I knew in high school, so be it. I was intent on pursuing my quest for truth wherever it might take me, trusting that any truth I learned was no less true for being unexpected or difficult to fit into the pigeonholes provided by my evangelical background."³

Clearly Ehrman's graduate work and further studies have transformed his previous allegiances to his faith, or at least the more truthiness-laden aspects of his faith, enough for him to become a noted scholar in the textual criticism field, and to write a book with the title *Misquoting Jesus*. But what I find to be most intriguing about his journey is not that he eventually arrived in some promised land of truth that enabled him to reject all the ideas or notions that had come before. What impresses me is his example of intellectual integrity without sacrificing an understanding of the limitations of the human personality and mind. I kept waiting for him to rip on the commitments of his past, to feel some bitterness or shame over his previous allegiances and dispositions, and maybe to seek some written revenge on the people he now must know had led him astray. But he doesn't go there, and one can plainly see, he doesn't need to. What good would it do, beyond the limited rewards of defensiveness and a need to be seen as "right" about things that ultimately remain speculative anyway? Instead, he embodies and models for his readers what I believe is a truly enlightened position which acknowledges that even though all religious claims have some (if not many) aspects of truthiness, to reject them all out of hand is to engage in another form of truthiness. Indeed, to be human, it seems, is—from generation to generation, from family to family, from moment to moment—for each individual to follow the dictates of his or her own fallible, and therefore always disadvantaged, mind. We all know that something that appears abundantly true at one moment can be patently false the next. That is a part of our human experience and our human heritage, as ideas and commitments have shifted with more knowledge and experience,

³ Bart D. Ehrman, *Misquoting Jesus* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2005), p. 8.

leaving individuals with understandings that are as varied as the lives each of us has lived.

Some doors open for us because we have gone down hallways that seem inconceivable now. And some doors may remain forever shut no matter how much circumstances (and facts) may be trying to pry them open. Some understandings we choose, others choose us, and some are simply incomprehensible, no matter how true they might be to others. In the end, it seems, we are creatures who, despite ourselves, cannot fully escape the temptations and easy answers of truthiness.

When viewed through this lens, one of our principles that is often trumpeted in UU congregations might take on some new meaning: *We, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association covenant to affirm and promote a free and responsible search for truth and meaning.*

When we consider this fourth principle of Unitarian Universalism, as adopted at a General Assembly of our association in the mid-eighties, I think it is easy to focus on a supposed promise of “truth and meaning”, which will inevitably be somewhat (if not a lot) different for everyone, and altogether forget the first part of the principle, the part about the “free and responsible search.”

What exactly is a free and responsible search, and how do we know if we are affirming and promoting it?

A free search seems easy enough to explain. Free means without encumbrance, without coercion, without being under the power of another. A free search is one that is conducted on one’s own terms, for one’s own purposes. From the perspective of our 19th century Unitarian forbear Ralph Waldo Emerson and his transcendentalist cohorts, who, by insisting on the primacy of mystic and direct connections between the individual and the divine, sought to radically alter what was once considered Unitarian truth, there is no other alternative but that we are free in our own religious search and understandings. *No law, Emerson contended, can be sacred to us but that of our own individual nature.*

Though his articulation of “self-reliance” may have been radical at the time, even in Unitarian circles, his contention has become a foundation of the liberal religious perspective. To affirm and promote a free search, then, is to be clear that no individual, no church, no government, no family member even, has any ultimately authoritative

power over another's religious questions or quest for convictions. Sure these understandings and commitments can be (and certainly have been) squelched, whether by oppressive government action or by bullying or marginalization, but they cannot be eliminated without the consent, brainwashing (or death!) of the holder. And, of course, any of us may find reason to quibble over, argue against, if not outwardly counteract, the behavior that results from other people's beliefs. But the beliefs themselves, whether ours or someone else's, cannot be commandeered, as though it would do any good to even try to force our sisters and brothers to relinquish the internal understandings and commitments from which they find and make meaning. When we look closely at the development of our own individual religious beliefs (or lack thereof), we know that they are a product of innumerable influences and experiences. They are part and parcel (either as reactions to or expressions of) our family history, our cultural environment, our schooling, our jobs, our aptitude for metaphor, our genetic makeup ...in short, our lived lives. A UU commitment to a free search, then, is a commitment to understanding that, when it comes to non-violent, non-coercive individual beliefs, anything goes, whether we like it or not.

This emphasis on freedom of belief (or quest for belief) can be particularly challenging to those who interpret their religious perspectives more dogmatically, as though there is one primary way to be religious (or not). Most of the pointed questions UUs tend to hear regarding our religious perspective have to do with, one way or another, this inherent freedom (or is it inevitability?) to believe as we are bound by our own constitutions to believe. If you've been open about your Unitarian Universalism in mixed religious company, you know what I mean: *So, these folks may inquire with varying levels of curiosity, if not fear or disdain, if you don't follow the Bible [or any particular religious text for that matter], how do you know what to believe?*

It is an understandable question from those who do find meaning in a particular text or interpretation of a text. Our promotion of freedom of belief can threaten the very foundation upon which they have constructed their own sense of meaning, and can therefore, be interpreted as ignorant, arrogant, and offensive, if not downright dangerous. Thus, the surprise for us should not be that we are occasionally (if not frequently) challenged, but that we would ever expect not to be.

How we respond to these kinds of questions and challenges has a lot to do, I think, with whether or not we are truly affirming and promoting a “free and responsible” search for truth and meaning—as our fourth principle suggests we do—not just for ourselves, but for all. Simply defined, to be responsible is to be trustworthy and accountable. Do we respond with affirmation for others’ freedom to search for meaning as they are compelled? Do we hold ourselves accountable to our commitment to free inquiry? I’m not sure I always have. At least not at first. I’ll admit, during my initial months as a UU, I used to interpret the “responsible” search as the *reasonable* search. Maybe my confusion was an expression of a then-hardcore humanist’s wishful thinking that speculative religious belief would one day be eradicated by hard, cold facts. But time and experience, especially my tenure as a minister, have taught me that even as humans are creatures capable of reasoning, of analyzing data according to logic and attempting to persuade via rational argument, one person’s reason is another person’s lunacy. Always has been. Always will be. Similar to how I interpreted Bart Ehrman’s underlying message and our fourth UU principle, I contend that, as nice as it may sound, there is no promised land where we will all finally see the light and agree on matters that will inevitably remain rooted in speculation. The search never ends. The possibility of revelation is continuous for all of us. Through my interpretive lens, then, a “responsible” search is one that not only reflects the individually unique and perhaps-evolving religious questions or beliefs that we claim as our own, but that leaves room for others to see and experience things as they must as well.

When I first wrote this sermon, I had just been at a meeting with some church members who were planning a social justice empowerment workshop, when a concern was raised that the UUA facilitators we were bringing in to lead the event might not give adequate attention or respect to a particular way of organizing for social change. Another member tried to alleviate this concern by saying that in all his years in UU congregations, he has never witnessed an attempt to tell people what they have to believe. In his experience, ideas are merely presented and the congregation can accept or deny them as they feel internally compelled to do so. At the time, I nodded in agreement and I still, in essence, agree.

However, I do think there is one *have to believe* that is too integral to Unitarian Universalism to deny. It is the point I sometimes try to make when we have the ceremony to welcome new members to our congregation and I say, *The only thing you absolutely have to believe to be a part of this congregation is that the door through which you*

entered does not shut behind you; it must remain open for those who will follow. To suggest that certain beliefs or perspectives (excluding those that would jeopardize the congregation's safety) are not welcomed here is to not embody what I believe is the core UU way of being religious: free and responsible.

We gather here not to receive specific divine truth from without, but to engage in the kind of interactions with people and ideas that enable us to develop our own divine truth from within. We bother to walk together despite our disagreements or differences of opinion on theology, despite our own unique arrays of truthiness, because we know that the speculative should not separate us from the possibility of the spectacular—the possibility that, despite the odds against us, we might just be able to learn something from our differences, develop our understandings, and approach the truth that never rests solely within ourselves, but that emerges in creative interchange with others. We might just be able to grow our own souls enough to empower others to do the same.

For me, that's the kind of free and responsible search for truth and meaning truly worthy of affirmation and promotion because it doesn't seek to deny our innate human independence or our need for community. It seeks to build them...one precious, curious, humble, forgiving, free and responsible relationship at a time.

Except for a concluding paragraph, that was the sermon. Jason then took the conversation off the comments section of Facebook and wrote me a personal e-mail. He wrote:

“I read your sermon on Truthiness and while I will agree that no one should have blind faith in anything let me follow up with a question to you. When members of any 'church' are looking for truth and guidance are they not Inherently going to be persuaded by the education or teachings that are provided to them by their pastors? I would say that you either have a large responsibility because you are interpreting truth for people or you have it easy because you let them find truth on their own, I am not sure which. In the UU sense of things could a person decide that the Bible is the one and only truth and leave the UU for a Assembly of God Church, or find that Islam is the 'true' faith?”

When I answered I fought the urge to be defensive and talk about how my job as a minister might be easier than some, in terms of having to declare Truth with a capital T, but that leading a community that seeks to nurture freedom of belief, in which each of us has to determine with integrity--and responsibility!--our own truth is far from easy. Instead,

I chose to explain my understanding of my work as a minister and our work as a UU congregation. I wrote:

“My responsibility as a UU minister (as I see it) is to present (as honestly as I can) my way of seeing the world, which will include my own life experiences, as well as my understandings of sacred texts, literature, poetry, pop culture, etc. I do this not with the expectation that others will agree with me (obviously they sometimes don't...LOL), but with the hope that in response to my honest sharing, others will be encouraged to think for themselves... (even if they must disagree!). Furthermore, I hope when they do, they will tell me so, because then I have a chance to grow my own understandings (even if I must disagree...). You see, in our tradition, the sermon is not a monologue. It is a dialogue...which is a way we try to keep ‘truthiness’ at bay :-)

“If people ‘leave’ us for another church or faith, I say ‘Good for them!’ Everyone should be encouraged to pursue the path that brings out the best in him/her, and therefore, in turn, the world.”

That was the end of our correspondence. I’m now thinking I should have also written that Unitarian Universalism definitely has its share of Truthiness, but it is uniquely positioned to call itself on it, I believe, because it encourages, if not demands, even without a dogma, that we leave space for others, including those who see things differently. Especially those who see things differently.

So, I say, let’s rejoice and be glad for this religion, for this wonderful church and these wonderful people—the people already here and the people yet to come, the people who were once with us and who have moved on, and, while we are at it, the people who will never find a home with us, even people like Jason, who think we are dead wrong. Let’s rejoice for them all, truthiness-laden every one. People to engage with, learn from, bounce up against, and see ourselves reflected in. And let’s continue, in this new year and all the years to come, to encourage each other on our gloriously uniquely individual searches for truth and meaning. After all, it’s the free and responsible thing to do.