

A Free and Responsible Search for Truth and Meaning

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There's a wonderful metaphor I've heard that we Unitarian Universalists might use as our "elevator speech"--that summary of our faith that we're each supposed to construct that's concise enough to explain to a stranger in the time we might share an average length elevator ride. The metaphor describes religious truth as the sun, and we're all in a cathedral trying to understand and describe it. We're all standing at different stained glass windows within the cathedral, so we each perceive the sun differently. But we're all looking at the same sun. That's how we UUs reconcile differing views about religious truth, or God, or whatever you choose to call it. Just one truth, but viewed by many different people from many different perspectives.

Search for Truth and Meaning

The search for truth and meaning is as old as mankind. So many religious (and non-religious) traditions have arisen as the result of efforts to put a new framework around the current understanding of a given culture. The search for truth, and its associated risks, are at the heart of the very first drama to play out in the Bible: Genesis chapter 3, where Eve eats from the Tree of Knowledge and gains an understanding of the difference between good and evil, but at a great cost. It underpins the conflict between religion and science that plays out with nearly every discovery that has the potential to change people's worldview. It was even envisioned far into our future by humanist Gene Roddenberry, creator of Star Trek, who penned its famous tagline--"To boldly go where no man has gone before!"

A key element of Unitarian Universalism's mission is creating an environment that allows people to describe that metaphorical sun as they see it from their place within the cathedral, and to learn from how others describe it. This is memorialized in our fourth principle: what we call our free and responsible search for truth and meaning. It assumes that none of us see the sun directly, and so we must triangulate an understanding by listening to how others describe what they see, and by observing the way the light illuminates the objects around us. We respect differences in perspectives; or even more to the point, we rely on differences in perspectives.

Inherent Hopelessness

I think it's important to point out that, at its core, figuring out what the sun looks like from within our cathedral is a futile task. We never get to go outside, at least not during our lifetime, so we can't know if we get it right. We don't know the extent to which we should trust others', or even our, perspective. We don't know how much evidence to collect. We don't even know if the truth we seek is in fact findable. One might argue—and many do—that it's so hopeless, the benefit to us isn't figuring out the answers so much as experiencing the exploration together. The process we go through can be a

beautiful thing in and of itself. Because how can you be in a cathedral full of breathtaking stained glass windows and not look at the sun shining through them, bathing the space around us in radiant color? It's what we humans are drawn to do, a big part of what makes us human.

Free and Responsible

So let's drill down on this fourth principle that's so essential to us. Note that we call for the search for truth and meaning to be both free and responsible. While that sounds a bit like the UU response to Fox News' "Fair & Balanced" tagline, I like to think we take it a little more seriously. I think we probably all understand what we mean by "free." We are encouraged to formulate our own answers, and even questions, about the riddle and mystery of life, without the constraints of any particular creed.

But we've seen how unfettered religious interpretation can go dangerously awry, seen in some of the ideas that have been embraced over the years. Ideas like:

- It's just to put people to death for their blasphemous beliefs. Ideas like:
 - God prohibits people of different races, or of the same gender, from marrying each other.
 - The earth is the center of the universe and it's heresy to believe otherwise.
 - Experiencing secular culture will lead to temptation and/or sin.
 - The world will end on December 21, 2012.
 - Or as Leviticus tells us: A woman who becomes pregnant and gives birth to a son will be ceremonially unclean for seven days, and must wait thirty-three days before going to a temple to be purified. If she gives birth to a daughter, she will be unclean for two weeks, and must wait sixty-six days to be purified.

Clearly, a free search for meaning can leave something lacking.

A Responsible Methodology

Which is why the Fourth Principle states that the search also needs to be responsible. And as Unitarian Universalists, we are able to look to an unlikely source for guidance about how to conduct a responsible spiritual search—a source to which many other religious traditions aren't comfortable referring. We can look to science, which probably provides the best framework for our task. The scientific method employs a thoughtful combination of direct experience and reason to parse out

- fact from fiction
- truths from untruths
- what is likely from what is unlikely

One of our most noted Unitarians, Thomas Jefferson, wrote in a letter to his nephew that the same process should be applied to religion: ...divest yourself of all bias... shake off all the fears & servile prejudices, under which weak minds are servilely crouched. Fix reason firmly in her seat, and call to her tribunal every fact, every opinion. Question with

boldness even the existence of a God; because, if there be one, he must more approve of the homage of reason, than that of blindfolded fear.

The minister of our church recently related a quote from a woman he knew at the first congregation to which he had been called. "Unitarian Universalism," she told him, "has given me the freedom to believe what I want, but I don't know what I believe. It has set me free, but hasn't given me any tools."

I believe that the guidelines for conducting, not just a free, but also a responsible search comprise the best tool we have for figuring out what we believe. In preparing for this service, I've found that there isn't much out there specifically about the inclusion of the word "responsible" in the Fourth Principle. So this morning I want to explore what we mean by it.

There's a lot loaded into the requirement--and I do think it's a requirement--that our search for truth and meaning be conducted responsibly. I have found it to be the most complex, and wonderful, and challenging element of the Fourth Principle. And I believe that—on our search—it's that requirement that most draws out our humanity.

The Responsible Search

I've read in a few places that by "responsible," we mean simply that it's our responsibility to find meaning--that it's up to us, and nobody can do it for us. While that's certainly true, searching responsibly involves more than that. I think that we can actually sketch out a sort of roadmap of elements that define what we mean by "responsible."

So what are the things we're called to do to search for truth and meaning in a responsible way? We need to look both outward and inward. Looking outward, we should seek to learn from the entire spectrum of spiritual practices—from the Jewish, Christian and Muslim faiths, to humanist and scientific teachings, to Eastern philosophies. This requires that we respect those sources that are new and strange to us. And also those that have repelled us in the past as a result of having been corrupted or misappropriated by closed-minded or intolerant practitioners.

We want not to confuse freedom OF religion... with freedom FROM religion. As Rev. Dr. Victoria Weinstein wrote of Unitarian Universalism that some of us "come in the door all sweaty and frantic having fled an oppressive religious past and... collapse into our pews and say 'Phew, that's over. I reject this and this and this and that and that other thing, and the whole scene I just came from.' ...Rejecting religious doctrines that offend our spirit is just the beginning... of the faith journey. Part two is seeking understanding of those doctrines and our relationship to them..." Then we "find what we can affirm, what we do believe..."

Our responsible search also looks inward. We need to listen to ourselves, to the voice inside us that guides us and provides moral direction. We have to acknowledge our belief system's ongoing subjectivity. Because we are evolving, changing beings, we want to

remain open to our own development. Just because something makes sense to us today, doesn't mean it will always make sense. And so we must continue to remain self-aware.

We should be careful not to embrace concepts just because they feel good. Blaise Pascal, the French mathematician, physicist, and religious philosopher, said that "People almost invariably arrive at their beliefs not on the basis of proof, but on the basis of what they find attractive." So give ideas time to sink in. Ask why you are drawn to a particular perspective. Maybe it's because it doesn't challenge you too much. So be willing to question yourself. But... if you are intuitive, do listen when something seems to resonate, as it may be telling you it's an idea worth listening to.

We need to appreciate that our denomination is more than just an opportunity to come to church, socialize, and drink coffee. It's some of the most fertile ground we have for worship and learning. Don't get me wrong—Kim will confirm that I love socializing and drinking coffee at church as much as anyone! But we are also part of a rich faith tradition that serves as an important tool as we seek spiritual wholeness. So however each of us defines church, and worship—consider making Unitarian Universalism, a UU church community, the Unitarian Universalist Association, and its rich resources a part of your religious experience.

Finally, I believe that we are called to confront our fear and discomfort. How often in human history has the first reaction to a new idea been reactionary fear and denial--from Jesus of Nazareth, to Copernicus and Galileo, to Darwin, to Dr. King and other civil rights leaders, to political theorists on either side of the ideological spectrum? But in her book "Learning to Walk in the Dark," the Rev. Barbara Brown Taylor describes the journey into the unknown, and what we gain from that unsettling journey, using the metaphor of darkness. "It's only by confronting our fear of the dark," she writes, "that we learn how strong we are." This search for truth and meaning is no easy business. Especially if we're truly open to anything we might honestly discover.

Risks and Sacrifices

So what does this search for truth and meaning hold for us? I hope... everything each of us needs and desires on our journey toward understanding. But we must acknowledge that it's also accompanied by its own set of risks and sacrifices.

- It will require our time.
- It will require our patience.
- It may be frightening or uncomfortable for us.
- It will challenge us.
- And it may put us at odds with the people we love.

The Carlton Pearson Story

How many of you have heard the story of the Bishop Carlton Pearson? Bishop Pearson was an evangelical Pentecostal minister and part of the Reverend Oral Roberts' inner circle. He was so close to Roberts that at one point Roberts referred to Pearson as his

black son. He relied on him to connect their ministry to the African American community. Pearson's Tulsa, Oklahoma-based church thrived, topping out at around 5,000 members. He has an infectious, charismatic personality, and was sought out to speak and preach all over the country.

Is there such thing as a rock star in religion? Carlton Pearson was a rock star. But at some point Pearson became a Universalist. Meaning he stopped believing in Hell, and more importantly, in a God who would send his children there. He kept this secret for a while as he thought and prayed about what to do. Eventually he decided to reveal his new truth to his congregation, and to his religious mentor and friend, Oral Roberts. In doing so, he risked everything—his reputation, his church, his livelihood.

And he ended up losing everything. Roberts told him he could no longer have him representing their ministry. Pearson's congregation fell apart, dwindling down to 200 members. He had conducted his search for truth in a responsible way—with honesty and integrity—even though it tested him so severely. Even though it cost him so much.

Bishop Pearson's journey stands as both an inspiring example of the responsible search for truth, and also an extreme example of the consequences that search may hold. His story, as I've told it so far, all comes from what I learned about him in the news years ago. You can look it up and find pretty much the same account. But there's another reason I'm telling you about him.

I had not heard anything more about Carlton Pearson until last year, when I began listening to podcasts of services from All Souls Unitarian Church in Tulsa. It turns out that his small church met, and eventually merged, with All Souls. And this minister, whose spiritual journey has been so painful and led to no small amount of humiliation, is once again embraced by an enormous loving community of people several thousand strong, our second largest UU congregation.

Unitarian Universalism provides a place to practice the fourth principle in an environment of support and acceptance. And the benefit of that environment pays forward; because Bishop Pearson has found a welcoming pulpit among us—and a pulpit with a lot of broadcasting know-how, I might add—he is again able to share his message with a receptive audience all around the world.

Let me highlight in the clearest possible terms that All Souls didn't find Carlton Pearson's congregation through some crazy happenstance. Our Fourth Principle sets up a framework that inspires us—that requires us—to find each other, to listen to each other, and to work to understand one another. It's one of the great gifts that our denomination brings to the world: we commit to a free and responsible search for truth and meaning before we even know what we'll find. That takes bravery and compassion. And so we do it... with bravery and with compassion. Therefore let us bravely and compassionately continue to live that principle. And to share it with a world that may secretly be yearning for it.

May it be so.