

**“Searching”,  
delivered by Ken Mandile, August 7, 2016 at First Unitarian Church of Worcester.**

*(Note to readers: Included are notes at certain points where props were used when the sermon was delivered.)*

Each week, we begin our service with our covenant, where we say that we unite “in the love of truth”. Most of us probably say these words by rote without even thinking, but today, I hope to kindle a few questions.

What is this thing called truth?

And why is it so elusive?

Where are we supposed to look for it?

How will we recognize it when we see it? Is it something permanent and certain, like the maxims of the copybook headings? Or is wisper, like a cloud? I’ll warn you now that I won’t answer any of these questions in the next few minutes, but I hope to lead you into another direction when you think about truth.

The fourth of the 7 UU principles calls for “a free and responsible search for truth and meaning”. For the first 25 years of the Unitarian Universalist Association, the search for truth was principle #1. Its original words were: “To strengthen one another in a free and disciplined search for truth as the foundation of our religious fellowship.”

The UU Principles were revised in 1985, largely because words like “fellowship” were not gender neutral, and the search for truth, sadly, was bumped down to #4 and amended and shortened to “A free and responsible search for truth and meaning”. The disciplined search for truth became a responsible search.

The key word is not responsible though. I believe that the important word is search. While we may not share the same truths or even the same concept of what truth means, we can share together in the search for truth. We’ll all carry our own backpack and some trail mix and we’ll join together on a road that goes ever on and on. *(Pick up the empty backpack.)* What should we carry with us? Well, being the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we of course will have a GPS. It never hurts to have a guidebook too. Some bug spray and sun block. Some water and a hat. *(Show each item as they are added to the backpack.)*

And to make it fun, we should have a walking song, so we’ll borrow one from Bilbo Baggins:

The Road goes ever on and on

Down from the door where it began.

Now far ahead the Road has gone,

And I must follow, if I can,  
Pursuing it with eager feet,  
Until it joins some larger way  
Where many paths and errands meet.  
And whither then? I cannot say.'

Now, where to? Where do we look?

For many, we should be looking to the past. Search the roads already taken.

English writer, theologian, and philosopher, G.K. Chesterton compared the philosophy of the tree to the philosophy of the wispy and ever changing cloud: "... a tree goes on growing, and therefore goes on changing; but always in the fringes surrounding something unchangeable. The innermost rings of the tree are still the same as when it was a sapling; they have ceased to be seen, but they have not ceased to be central. When the tree grows a branch a top, it does not break away from the roots at the bottom; on the contrary, it needs to hold more strongly by its roots the higher it rises with its branches. That is the true image of the vigorous and healthy progress of man, a city or a whole species."

I like this metaphor for truth. It's not as harsh as Kipling's Gods of the Copybook Headings. We know that it's there, hidden in the core, permanent and unchanging, but, alas, we still can't see it. It remains hidden from us.

It's comforting to think of truth as something permanent though. It's not developed in a laboratory. It doesn't change with the wind like a cloud.

It's the result of millennia of learning,  
of mistakes,  
of wisdom,  
of battles won  
and of battles lost.

Knowledge and ideas, virtues and morality, carefully developed over time. From the past, we can find much of the truth that we seek today. Yes, our ancestors made many mistakes, and we need to discard their false beliefs,

their violent ways,

their prejudices,

their superstitions,

but much of what they passed on to us, were treasures; the truths found in the copybook headings. So, this idea that truths are just passed on to us makes life in the 21<sup>st</sup> century easy. We just need to look to the past, right? Let's just practice our penmanship, copying the maxims of the past over and over until we know them well.

Look to our sacred texts and the wisdom of the millennia. The parables of the New Testament, the Hebrew Bible's psalms, the Vedas, the Tao Te Ching, Greek philosophers, dozens of thinkers from the Age of Reason. The Golden Rule and our own sacred text, where we acknowledge that all men are created equal and that we are endowed with inalienable rights granted by God or nature. These are all such simple and important pieces of truth. They are gifts from the past. They are the guidebooks that we can use on our journey. We won't have to guess what road to take or where to stop for rest and nourishment. It's already been written down for us.  
(*Look for the guide book here.*) Ok. I'm afraid that our guidebook is missing.

We're wandering on our own here now. I don't know what direction we should go.

The truth was in that book though. Right? Well, somehow, as Unitarians, we wouldn't be quite satisfied with the guidebook anyway.

Is truth like the rings of the tree, permanently firm and solid? Is it in the copybooks that were discarded 100 years ago? Or is truth ever changing like a cloud?

Some of us think that the only truths lie in science. Ideas that have been tested and proven, free of superstition. In science, we should be able to determine the existence or non-existence of God or gods,

of the soul,

of the source of the universe,

of the purpose of life.

All we need is time and money and some smart people.

But even science relies on a bit of doubt and faith.

Much that was once scientific truth has been replaced by new beliefs and will be replaced many times over.

Galileo is supposed to have said, "Doubt is the father of invention." He believed that doubt is the source of understanding. Doubt is what causes us to ask the next question. Doubt threatens us, but it also moves us forward. Doubt is the trail mix that fuels us on our journey. 8

*(Drop bag of trail mix on table.)*

At one time, mankind was limited by the horizon. We couldn't see over the edge and we could only fantasize about what might be at the ends of the Earth. Today, still, we face the same dilemma, as we cannot see the edge of the Universe. The universe may be much larger than we imagine. There are aspects of reality that remain outside of the reach of scientists.

So, even in science, where we **should** be able to find certainty, we have trouble agreeing on what truth is. No matter how definitive scientific findings are, they depend on doubt. Science is not going to give us the kind of truth that we really yearn for.

So we turn to religion. Here, for many, there is no shortage of certainty. Dogmatic beliefs that ease the burden of not having proof. The most successful religions tell us what to think and what rewards to expect for having the right thoughts. The world's great religions wrap up truth in neat packages and they teach us not to question it.

Religious dogma is like GPS. *(Take out GPS)* Our roads and landmarks are well documented and mapped out for us. Religious dogma shows the safe paths and the unsafe paths, the dead ends and the freeways.

*(Show GPS with dead battery.)* Our batteries seem to be dead.

Ours is not one of the world's great religions though. Maybe to us, but not to outsiders. We don't wrap you up in warm feelings of eternal happiness for believing what is pronounced from above or found in a book. Much of the world takes comfort in not having to search for truth and meaning. Just show up, be a good whatever you are, and don't ask any questions.

Unitarians are searching for truth, but I'm not so sure that finding it would make us happy. We wander, lost in this foggy reality, halfway between dogma and confusion. We are like the followers of Buddha in this story.

“One day in the early morning the Buddha was sitting in a garden quietly with his disciples. A man arrived silently and stood in the shadows, that man was a great devotee of Lord Rama. He had built many temples across the country, he had devoted many years in the service of Lord Rama. He would always chant Rama's name and contemplate on Rama's greatness. He was old and close to his last years. Even after many years of dedicated spiritual effort he was not realized.

He wanted to know for sure if there is a God or not? When he heard about the Buddha, he came to get his doubt cleared. He asked the Buddha, "O enlightened one, Please tell me the truth! and truth only. Is there a god?".

Buddha, from his intuition knew that man to be a great devotee of Lord Rama, he looked at that man with seriousness and said "No, My friend. There is no god". 9

Buddha's disciples that were gathered there were very relieved and joyous to finally know the truth that there was no god. They all started muttering between them, sharing what the Buddha had just told. Whenever a disciple had asked that question to Buddha he would become silent. So they never knew.

His words spread through the whole town, the whole town was celebrating the day on which the truth of NO GOD was revealed by the enlightened. They were finally free of the ideas of hell, heaven and of somebody sitting up to judge one's actions.

It was getting late in the evening, and once again the disciples came back and sat around the Buddha.

There was a materialist who had been an atheist all his life, he had convinced 1000s of people that there was no god, he used to go to the priests and scholars and defeat them in the argument about god.

He too was getting old and little suspicion arose in him, "what if there is god? isn't it waste of my life to spread the "NO GOD" message if there is god?" he thought. He was eaten by this doubt, he finally decided to know the truth and sought the enlightened one.

He slowly came up to where the Buddha was sitting, and asked him "They say you are enlightened, please tell me if there is GOD?".

Buddha knowing that man to be an atheist said with firm voice as if he is in firm conviction "Yes, there is God". Buddha's disciples once again were back to confusion.

That's how I see many of us UUs. We're curious enough to ask questions, but not certain about the answers. But that's okay. We'll continue to wander and sing our walking song. In another version of this story, an agnostic asks Buddha about the existence of God. Buddha remains silent.

"And the person with whom I remained silent was the right inquirer. I kept silent. That was my message to him: Be silent and know. It is not a question which can be answered. It is not an inquiry but a quest, a thirst. Be silent and know.

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A UU lay leader name Mike Cluff offered these thoughts on our search for truth:

"...we recognize that we are privileged to be free, to have resources to pursue life beyond mere survival, to continually search for truth and meaning, to exist beyond bonds of dogma and oppression, and to wrestle freely with truth and meaning as they evolve."

He says that this privilege calls us “to be humble, to be open to the great mysteries of truth and meaning that life offers. And those mysteries may speak to us through our own intuition and experience—but also through tradition, community, conflict, nature, and relationships.

Cluff continues, “Institutionally, we have left open the questions of what truth and meaning are, acknowledging that mindful people will, in every age, discover new insights.”

I am grateful to be part of a tradition of a free and responsible search for truth and meaning. It is a privilege to live in a time and a place where we can ask important questions, and not worry too much when we don't have the answers. Guidebooks and a GPS are optional, but if you need them, take them along. Just be sure that the batteries are charged.

Here at First U we still treasure the sacred texts and the traditions of our ancestors. We still cherish the wisdom of the ages, but we are not completely satisfied with the past, so we must continue to wander and search.

Your truths may be firm like the core of an old tree or you may believe them certain, as if from science books. Or old, as if found ancient texts or in the copybook headings or maybe in none of these. Perhaps, perhaps, the truth you seek is buried in here, elusively hiding in plain sight and ever changing as you change. Keep searching though.

It's not knowing truth that we love. It is the journey in search of truth that we honor and enjoy and share and find meaning in.

In the love of truth, together, we will wander. Some of us will be lost, but we will all continue to sing.

'The Road goes ever on and on

Down from the door where it began.

Now far ahead the Road has gone,

And I must follow, if I can,

Pursuing it with eager feet,

Until it joins some larger way

Where many paths and errands meet.

And whither then? I cannot say.”

Where many paths and errands meet, and whither then? I cannot say. We don't know where this road will take us. We don't even know what paths we'll take or what direction we will go, but stay with us on this journey. Enjoy it. We're better off if we don't find the truth. It is the journey, the wandering, that gives meaning to life.

Amen

Benediction: 687- Go your ways

From John Brigham:

Go your ways,

Knowing not the answers to all things,

Yet seeking always the answer,

To one more thing than you know.