

### **Truth, Lies and the Laughter of the Gods**

So I was walking out of the church the other day, and my friend Elaine stopped me and said, “Joan, I have been wondering about Truth. The Fundamentalist Christians have the Bible as their source of Truth. What have we got?”

I thought this was a pretty important theological question, so I told Elaine I would give it some deep thought. Actually, there is a very simple answer to her question. Unitarian Universalists find Truth in all the places listed in our six sources, just as you read them this morning in our Call to Worship.

It is our job to dive into those Six Sources to find the Truth, as if each source was the Bible itself. After all, that’s exactly what a responsible Fundamentalist does through Bible study. It’s really not that different.

I don’t know why Elaine asked about Truth, but I do know that we are living in particularly uncertain times. And, when we are uncertain, we are afraid. And, when we are afraid we cling to certainties, no matter how ill-founded.

We live in uncertain times. This nation is being torn apart politically. The electoral race, at all levels is, quite frankly, hair-raising, and our fears drive us to cling – not to pure Truths – but to ideologies. We have ceased listening to our brothers and sisters. Opposition is turning to hatred, everyone is engaging in smear

campaigns – artful or not. We are putting all our eggs in single baskets, and we really don't know who is going to win.

We live in uncertain times. Although climate change is a certainty, Mother Nature's mood on any given day, in any given place, is anyone's guess. Pacific Northwest wildfires, melting ice caps, mountains of snow here last year, none to speak of this year – the other day I saw confused snowdrops in full bloom muscling their way out of the earth. Floods, tornados, droughts – average temperatures and rainfall mean nothing anymore. These days we don't even know the Truth about the weather.

We live in uncertain times. Economic recovery is great spin, but it isn't clear how the recovery is actually affecting our community. Unemployment is still high. Elmwood Avenue – though bustling right here around the church with boutiques, restaurants, and the co-op – is pocked with whitewashed windows up and down its reach.

We live in uncertain times. The Flint water crisis. The war, that we would like to forget. The Zika virus. Gracious! We don't even know how the Zika virus affects us yet.

We live in particularly uncertain times. All is shifting around us and the stakes are high. This is a good time to talk about Truths that abide, regardless of the times.

So where do we, as Unitarian Universalists find the Truth? That's a big question. Really, that's one of the biggies with which systematic theologians spend their

lives filling great impenetrable tomes, volumes which sit neglected until the next class of seminarians are forced to pull the books off musty shelves, choking on years of accumulated dust, hauling their great weight to a library desk to digest their cloudy content. Mercifully, the dust rests a little more thickly upon these *opus magna* these days, thanks to the invention of Wikipedia.

Yes, the source of Truth is one of the Big Questions. But what the heck, let's give it a go – I've got what, say, 12 minutes left up here?

As Unitarian Universalists, as members of the even wider community of liberal religionists for that matter, our favorite road to Truth is science. The old bumper sticker "God wrote it. I believe it. That settles it." just doesn't wash with us. Unless, in some strange turn of events, God begins publishing peer reviewed articles in the journal *Nature*.

Our first source for Truth is our own direct experience – we want to see it with our own eyes, hear it with our own ears, feel it, smell it, taste it, touch it – use all our senses to know the Truth for ourselves. That is our first source of Truth and that first source is firmly backed by our affirmation of Humanist teachings, which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science. Science based on testing. The Truth is passed through the hot crucible of curiosity, doubt and questioning. Emerging, all dross of speculation burned away. Emerging, a scientifically tested Truth more pure than ever before. But before we settle on

Science as the final arbiter of Truth once and for all, let's just have a good hard look at science itself.

Let's begin with our friend Sir Isaac Newton. When Newton began dabbling at the laboratory bench, science was just a hodge-podge of miscellaneous, isolated facts and laws. Capable of describing some phenomena in nature, but not able to predict cause and effect.

Then the apple fell on Newton's head, he thought some big thoughts, and wrote some big stuff. Newton left us with a unified system of laws that help us understand a huge amount of why nature behaves as it does, and allows us to make predictions well beyond even our own direct experience of reality.

Do you remember in 1971, when Commander David Scott of Apollo 15 took the moonwalk, and he told us that the same Newtonian physics that allowed the spaceship to get to the moon should guide a simultaneous dropping of a feather and a hammer in a vacuum? On earth we expect the hammer to fall more quickly than the feather – not because it is heavier, but because the feather gets caught in all the air particles. In the near vacuum of space, there is nothing for the feather to get caught on. And, by golly, when Commander David Scott dropped the feather and the hammer at the same time in an instant, they hit the moon's surface at the same

time. This was great, everything works just as it is supposed to – predictability thanks to Newton. Science!

The poet, Alexander Pope, wrote, “Nature and Nature’s laws lay in night: God said, Let Newton be! And all was Light.” But Newton himself was quite a bit more humble about his findings. He wrote: “I do not know what I may appear to the world; but to myself I seem to have been only like a boy playing on the seashore, and diverting myself now and then finding a smoother pebble or a prettier shell than ordinary, whilst the great ocean of truth lay all undiscovered before me.”

Newtonian physics works all the time everywhere. Even on the moon – except when it doesn’t.

One fine day in 1820, something odd happened in the laboratory of Hans Christian Ørsted. Ørsted noticed that a compass needle that had been pointing north, just as it should according to Newtonian physics, changed direction all on its own, when he accidentally placed the compass beside a wire with an electric current running through it. When he turned the current off, the needle pointed back to north. On and off with the current; back and forth with the needle. This cannot be explained through Newtonian physics. And so the study of electromagnetism was born.

Einstein’s greatest accomplishment was to reconcile Newtonian physics with electromagnetism, through the theory of special relativity. Einstein’s discoveries led us to some more or less mind bending Truths: the space-time continuum;

length contraction; time dilation; and, my personal favorite, relative simultaneity. And yet, like Newton, Einstein was doubtful of his conclusions. “Whoever undertakes to set himself up as a judge of Truth and Knowledge,” he wrote, “is shipwrecked by the laughter of the gods.”

Where things began to get really hairy in science is what happened next: Quantum mechanics. One of the zanier notions in the plenty zany world of quantum mechanics is that a pair of subatomic particles can sometimes become “entangled.” This means the fate of one of these particles instantly affects the other, no matter how far apart they are. It’s such a bizarre phenomenon that Einstein “dissed” the idea in the 1930s as “spooky action at a distance.” He even said that entanglement was so weird that we needed to re-think our developing understanding of physics.

But it turns out that the universe *is* spooky after all. In 1997, scientists separated a pair of entangled photons by shooting them through fiber-optic cables to two villages six miles apart. And then, when they tipped one of the photons into a particular quantum state, its entangled mate, six miles away, followed suit in less than five-trillionths of a second – or nearly 7 million times faster than light could travel between the two. Of course, according to relativity, nothing travels faster than the speed of light – not even information between particles. *Spooky!*

Even the best theories to explain how entanglement gets around this problem seem absurd. One, for example, speculates that signals are shot back through time. Ultimately, the answer is bound to be unnerving: according to a famous doctrine

called Bell's Inequality theorem, for entanglement to square with relativity, either we have no free will, or reality is an illusion. Some choice.

The whole business of science as a source of Truth now leaves me wanting to either lash myself firmly to the mast of my ship of certainty, unable to move while the sirens of doubt sing their seductive songs in every direction – or, I find myself wishing to dive headfirst into the deep waters of wildly vying Truths and possibilities to painfully enjoy the swim.

Jeffery Lockwood wrote in our reading this morning that the essence of happiness – and I would say salvation – lies not in changing colleagues into people we can respect, neighbors into people we can value, or friends into people we can love. Happiness lies instead in turning one's self into a person who can respect, value, and love others, and honor their right to their own Truths.

Happiness lies in releasing yourself from the burden of convincing others of your Truth. Happiness lies in cultivating a deep and abiding curiosity about the needs, hopes, dreams and fears of all our neighbors on this blue, green boat floating in space. Get off the navigational certainty of your own ship, or as Einstein might say, your own shipwreck. Jump in the river. Try swallowing a different story, or try getting swallowed by the story. Tread water, thrash around in the waves for a

while. It might turn out to be a pleasant swim, or you might have to plug your nose!

Where is our abiding Truth? Our Alpha and Omega? Where can we find certainty in these particularly fearful and uncertain times? There is Truth to be found in all the six sources as we read them at the beginning of the service, but you have to take the plunge, dive deep, and find it. After all, that's exactly what a responsible Fundamentalist does through Bible study. It's really not that different.

**For further Study:**

Jeffery Lockwood, "Life Preservers," *A Guest of the World*, Skinner House Press, 2006

Unitarian Universalist Sources of our Living Tradition:

- Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life;
- Words and deeds of prophetic women and men which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love;
- Wisdom from the world's religions which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life;
- Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God's love by loving our neighbors as ourselves;
- Humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit;

- Spiritual teachings of Earth-centered traditions which celebrate the sacred circle of life and instruct us to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature.