

The Search for Truth & Meaning

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Reflection

Today we continue with our 4th in a 7-part worship series on our Unitarian Universalist Principles. Our 4th principle is: “A Free and Responsible Search for Truth & Meaning.” It is a principle that can be addressed from a number of different angles.

SUUS member, Ellen Creane, approaches it from the angle of the freedom to responsibly search . . . She says, “[to me, ‘this principle’] . . . means professional journalism. Training to be a reporter includes research, interviewing skills, a curious mind, an ability to look beyond the obvious, the desire to be complete, a skeptical attitude, and a collaborative spirit in working with other reporters and editors. But,” [she says] “undergirding all this are the First Amendment to the United States Constitution and Freedom of Information laws.

Unitarian Universalism embraces these laws as the foundation for [the] search for truth and meaning, be it a professional search or a personal search.” [She says,] “We Unitarian Universalists do not rely on direction from any [particular] kind of religious “god” or political dictator or historical regent. Our Fourth Principle gives us faith! in our innate ability to use our minds and our hearts in seeking truth and meaning.”

PAUSE

Another SUUS member, Jenny Lee, comes at it from the direction of the search for meaning:

She offers us a poem written by her brother, Chris Hoffman, from one of his seven books of poetry. She says, “Chris wrote a collection of poems in a book called *On the Way* after he and his wife, Susan, walked one of the Camino de Santiago routes in Spain. This meditative pilgrimage experience provided an opportunity for Chris and Susan to “search for truth and meaning”.

Invitation

Come to the circle; sit by our fire.

Rest from your journey of long faring.

All of us are pilgrims in life together.

Join with us now in our feast of hearing.

We all have our secrets of doubts and our shames
yet we're brothers and sisters under the skin because
we want happiness and freedom from pain.
And those hopes alone make all of us kin.

So now let our words give us patterns of pleasure
and enchant us with rhythm and rhyme.
May the angels of more-than-we-know come to bless us through
imagery deep and sublime.

And let us now hear, in the gap between thoughts,
the voice of our heart's deepest friend who speaks through
our impulse toward good and toward beauty, and
is waiting to meet us at life's farthest end.

Let us be kind here, because we're all guests.
And of all of our powers and arts
naught shall remain at the end of our quests
but the light [we've] kindled within others' hearts.

Jenny adds, "Today I was remembering an event, years ago. Our then 4-year-old son (TJ) asked, "Do you know what the best part of being me is?" I replied, "No, what?" and TJ answered,

'In all the world, I am the closest to being me.'

First, I was amused and then thought about the wisdom of the words...TJ was not finished becoming TJ and I was not finished becoming me... I'm still on the journey."

PAUSE

"A Free and Responsible Search for Truth & Meaning"

As I think again about these words, I recall an obscure lyric buried in one of Carolyn McDade's songs. As most of you know she composed many of our favorite hymns, including "Spirit of Life". The lyric that most miss, in a song rarely heard is this:

"What is truth, if not witness to the whole?"

When I first heard that line, I was arrested by its meaning, and suddenly, it became a moral guide that in times of any conflict, make sense to me. From my perspective, the "truth" is rarely on one side or the other, but in between. In any conflict I mediate, I am always looking for each person's story. Beneath the hurt, outrage and accusation, some facts are what I call the technical truth. But, even deeper are the emotional truths that inflame the raw nerve into accusation, rather than listening.

Resolution comes (when it comes) when both parties can generally agree on the technical truths of what happened, but more importantly, can both acknowledge each person's emotional truths, can accept

ownership for feelings they each have, and can understand that those feelings may be related to the current conflict, or, possibly, may be old feelings from other experiences that seem so very similar.

“What is truth if not witness to the whole?”

For years we have listened to people with power explain away the abusive and inequitable treatment that blacks and people of color have been subjected to for centuries. We have seen the videos over and over again. The technical truth was there in the videos, but because people who are white have had the power of weapons and can dominate the media, it’s not that hard to deny, ignore, or perhaps bemoan the technical truth that the abuse of power has been embedded in our society for a long time.

That said, while I support the rethinking of police enforcement, (allowing the best officers to lead those least able), I don’t want us to focus on it only, because police enforcement is only the tip of the spear. The pole that holds that tip, is the institutional racism that grew out of a caste society that said first that it was OK for people to import, buy, own, and abuse other people, and second, after emancipation, that it was OK to continue to demean and abuse those same people, over and over and over again.

After centuries of too many black people dying without cause at the hands of that “tip”, the stage was set, once again, for George Floyd (like so many others). That’s the technical truth. But, now we too, are beginning to absorb the emotional truth that others have lived with, all their lives.

Now, because we are all humans, and because at our best, we humans are capable of compassion and empathy, what happened to George Floyd and others has elicited outrage, compassion, empathy, and a new commitment to the creation of a just and equitable humanity, for and in people of all colors.

The technical truths have been revealed, as never before.

More importantly, the emotional truths are shared amongst humanity across the globe, as never before.

PAUSE

Those of us who are white, inherited at our birth (from a system we never created), a power and privilege that most of us have never understood. It has been invisible for many of us. Its truth hidden from our conscious and often from our compassion.

While I am enthusiastic about the global protests against violence to blacks and people of color, I don’t want us to only focus on protests that will, in time, fade away. I want us to use this moment to evaluate our society and our place in it! I want us to understand how it is that by our silence or ignorance we perpetuate a racist system.

I want us to figure out how we can assist people of color in correcting the system such that . . . (and here, I recall our Declaration of Independence) . . .

All men, women and those who identify otherwise, are created equal and have the unalienable rights of Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. That whenever any form of government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government¹ . . . because, when a long train of abuses .

¹ <https://www.ushistory.org/declaration/document/> June 6, 2020

. . . continue decade after decade, it is our right, our duty, to change this society, and to provide new guards for our shared future security.²

To be the new guards for our shared future security.

How can we turn this country toward the ideals upon which this it was founded?

Through action and reflection. Yes, action to change the system, but also reflection such that we come to understand how it is that our own assumptions, judgements and actions have made the particular “truth” of racism invisible for too long.

And, toward that end, I offer you these opportunities to begin the process of helping our society grow into the country it was supposed to be . . .

1. You can create posters to speak your truth, ready to use at a moment’s notice, publicly.
2. Today, you can show up in Branford at 1pm for a Black Lives Matter protest, and/or,
3. This evening, you can show up at the Black Lives Matters vigil at 6 pm, on the Madison Green. Masks and social distancing are required. If you have serious health concerns, join by driving your car slowly, silently using your flashers.
4. This coming week, SUUS members are invited to join our new SUUS Anti-Racism group. If you cannot join, then be sure to *cheer them on* and *listen deeply* when they share with us uncomfortable truths as we address racism as a congregation. I will hold a 2nd orientation session for those who couldn’t attend the first one, next Wednesday, June 10th, at 7:30 pm. If you are interested in joining this group, please let me know, so that I can send you the zoom link.
5. In 2 ½ weeks, you can join me to attend our national Unitarian Universalist General Assembly. Because it’s online this year, it is relatively inexpensive. Our denomination has been trying to address the issue of systemic racism in our society, for many years. Some of the workshops this year are:
 - Anti-Racism as a Spiritual Practice;
 - Building Communities to Counter White Nationalism/White Power;
 - Charting a Future for Inclusive Democracy;
 - Climate Justice;
 - Having Anti-Racist Conversations and Inviting Action;
 - And other programs that range from spiritual deepening to congregational leadership.

PAUSE

For years, I’ve heard shoreline residents say “we wish we could address the issue of racism, but “they” are not “here.” If you’ve thought that or heard that, I get it. It’s easy to believe. But, I encourage you to

² <https://www.ushistory.org/declaration/document/> June 6, 2020

consider the truth of the larger whole. The next time you are able, notice the people who wait on you at MacDonald's or Midas; if your groceries are delivered, look who brings your food; if you go to a grocery store, really notice who is working there.

People of color are here: in Madison, they are 3.5%³; in Guilford, they are 4%⁴; in Clinton they are 5%⁵; in Branford, they are 6%⁶; in New Haven, just 20 minutes away, they are 57%⁷.

If there is anything the last two weeks has taught us, it is this, *"they are us."*

There is work we can and must do.

"What is truth, if not witness to the whole of each and every one of us?"

Amen.

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https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Madison,_Connecticut#:~:text=The%20racial%20makeup%20of%20the,were%201.34%25%20of%20the%20population. June 6, 2020

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https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Guilford,_Connecticut#:~:text=The%20racial%20makeup%20of%20the,were%202.13%25%20of%20the%20population. June 6, 2020

⁵ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Clinton,_Connecticut#:~:text=CDP%20demographics,-The%20town%20is&text=There%20were%201%2C624%20housing%20units,from%20two%20or%20more%20races. June 6, 2020

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https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Branford,_Connecticut#:~:text=The%20racial%20makeup%20of%20the,were%202.57%25%20of%20the%20population. June 6, 2020

⁷ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_Haven,_Connecticut June 6, 2020