

# “When Truth Speaks”

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a sermon by Dan Lillie  
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at First Unitarian Church of Albuquerque

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## ***True or False?***

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- 1) True or False: we are at First Unitarian Church of Albuquerque. True.
- 2) True or False: it is Sunday, March 10, 2019? Conditionally true. It is true here, but on the other side of the international date line it is currently Monday, March 11, 2019.
- 3) True or False: water boils at 100 degrees Celsius? Conditionally true. This is true at sea level, but not true, for example, in the Himalayas.
- 4) True or False: blue is the prettiest color? This is subjective. It is likely true for some people, but cannot be proven.
- 5) True or False: all human beings have inherent worth and dignity? Well, I'd like to be able to say it is true; but even among Unitarian Universalists, I think there would be some debate about whether this is true of all people. That is to say, this is another question where the answer is subjective; however, it feels more important to get this one right, or to be able to justify why we answered the way we did, and maybe even try to convince others to agree with us. Subjectivity can get tricky and uncomfortable around issues of morality.

When it comes to determining what is true, facts and the scientific method are reasonably solid ground to stand on; but there is a limit to what can be tested, let alone proven.

So beyond proven facts, we also tend to rely on our ability to reason and rationalize about the truth of things that are not or cannot be proven. In some contexts, our rational brains can be useful in determining truth. But sometimes, our rational brains can betray us. This is especially the case when it comes to moral decision-making, or passing moral judgments.

## ***Moral Truth***

In his book *The Righteous Mind, How Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion*, Social Psychologist Jonathan Haidt (that's spelled H-A-I-D-T, not H-A-T-E); Haidt says that when it comes to moral psychology, intuition comes first, and strategic reasoning second. In other words, we make almost immediate judgements based on our intuition, and then we find ways to rationalize and defend that initial judgment.

In these moral situations, our intuition calls the shots, and our ability to rationalize operates to justify what our instincts tell us is true, not the other way around. As much as I like to think (and I'm sure I'm not the only one in this room who believes this), but as much as I like to think that I make all my supposedly rational decisions based on the best evidence available, the truth when it comes to morality is, we have a gut-level instinctual reaction that tells us whether something is right or wrong, whether it is morally acceptable or not. And then, we look for the evidence that supports that gut feeling, and ignore the evidence against it. This is called *Confirmation Bias*. And confirmation bias gets in the way when we are listening for the truth.

Haidt writes,

“Anyone who values truth should stop worshipping reason. We all need to take a cold hard look at the evidence and see reasoning for what it is... reasoning [has] evolved not to help us find truth but to help us engage in arguments, persuasion, and manipulation in the context of discussions with other people... ‘skilled arguers... are not after the truth but after arguments supporting their views.’”<sup>1</sup>

And it's not just others we deceive with our confirmation bias. This process is so ingrained in us, so automatic, we actually believe ourselves. Without awareness that this is what's happening, we find the facts that support our intuition and while ignoring the ones that contradict it.

Now, I'm not claiming that our gut-instincts are always right, and our reasoning is always wrong. Rather, I'm saying that if we are aware of this internal moral process, we can take it into account and adjust accordingly. This awareness is the first step toward listening for a more authentic voice of truth. By recognizing both our intuition and our reasoning, we can open ourselves to hearing more clearly when truth speaks.

### ***Truth, Morality, and Religion***

As we explore this idea of searching for truth, we should recognize the natural extension from being a moral topic to being a religious topic. Questions of truth come up a lot around the subject of religion, and religious beliefs, and Jonathan Haidt has a lot to say about the connection between morality and religion. Regarding the truth-claims of organized religions, I think many non-religious folks, and some Unitarian Universalists, feel that to follow a religion is to have to believe stories and narratives that just don't seem believable.

But for those who are quick to dismiss religion as being only for gullible people who have trouble thinking for themselves, or are duped into believing foolish and obviously false religious stories and narratives; if this is your view of religion, and of religious people, then I think you have missed something important. Certainly some people do literally believe the

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<sup>1</sup> Haidt, Jonathan. *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion*. Vintage Books, New York, 2012 (p 104).

religious narratives of their faith tradition. And yes, many of these can be either disproven from being factually true, or they significantly lack historical evidence that these stories happened the way they are told.

But the lone-wolves who claim that all religious people are sheep, and therefore reject (or deeply distrust) organized religious institutions, miss an important point about the value of religion. It is a bonding and unifying agent. It gives us a social group to belong to; a social group built upon moral values. Jonathan Haidt explains it better than I can. In his book, he says:

“If you think about religion as a set of beliefs about supernatural agents, you’re bound to misunderstand it. You’ll see those beliefs as foolish delusions... But if you take a Durkheimian approach to religion (focusing on belonging) and a Darwinian approach to morality (involving multilevel selection) you get a very different picture. You see that religious practices have been binding our ancestors into groups for tens of thousands of years. That binding usually involves some blinding – once any person, book, or principle is declared sacred, then devotees can no longer question it or think clearly about it.”

Now, I want to pause and draw your attention to this statement, because we are going to return to it in a moment. Here it is again: “once any person, book, or principle is declared sacred, then devotees can no longer question it or think clearly about it.”

Now, to continue the point, Haidt goes on:

“...once early humans began believing in [supernatural] agents, the groups that used them to construct moral communities were the ones that lasted and prospered... they used their gods to elicit commitment from members... their gods helped them to suppress cheating and increase trustworthiness...”

This is why human civilization grew so rapidly... religions and righteous minds [have] been coevolving, culturally and genetically, for tens of thousands of years.

We humans have the extraordinary ability to care about things beyond ourselves, to circle around those things with other people, and in the process to bind ourselves into teams that can pursue larger projects. That’s what religion is all about.”<sup>2</sup>

So what does any of this have to do with truth, or rationality? If anything, it seems I am making the point that religion is not based on truth, but rather on the shared buying-in to falsehoods. But the truth of the matter is, religion is a bonding agent that serves as an evolutionary survival tactic. Because our survival depends on our ability to get along with others, to have a group to belong to, we build moral communities.

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<sup>2</sup> Haidt, Jonathan. *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion*. Vintage Books, New York, 2012 (p 317-318).

Over time, our moral communities have helped us develop a spiritual life, one that brings into balance our intuition with our reasoning, and allows us to be more open as a result; open to hear when truth speaks from this place of balance.

We have different names and ways of understanding this place of balance, this deep source of truth. In our religious tradition of Unitarian Universalism, we have many names for this source of truth and inner wisdom. A couple of my favorites are in hymns from our gray hymnal:

#391 calls it "Voice Still and Small": *Voice still and small, deep inside all, I hear you call, singing.*

And #123 calls it "Spirit of Life": *Spirit of Life, come unto me, sing in my heart all the stirrings of compassion.*

These are the hymns I think of when I'm hearing a truth that I have a hard time putting into words. Often, the truth I'm struggling to articulate is a feeling that exists within me, that is saying something about who I am, and what it means to be me in the context of this world I am a part of. It is often a truth that points inward, toward self-understanding, and outward, toward something bigger than myself, and to which I belong. It is both personal and relational. And these kinds of truths just cannot be proven.

I'd like to share the stories of two people who were able to listen and hear when truth was speaking to them. These truths were not convenient for either of them. It would have likely made their lives easier if they had just pretended they hadn't heard the truth. But ultimately, neither could ignore what they knew to be true by listening to the voice of inner wisdom, that comes from balancing intuition with reasoning.

### ***Bishop Carlton Pearson***

The first is Bishop Carlton Pearson. A Pentacostal Minister, Bishop Pearson was a protégé of Oral Roberts. He was a rising star in the world of evangelical Christianity, and his mission was to save people from Hell by converting them.

He founded Higher Dimensions Church in Tulsa, and quickly grew it to a megachurch that saw up to 6000 weekly attendees. Something about his message and the way he delivered it was resonating with a lot of people.

Until it stopped resonating with him. When he truly stopped to listen for the voice of truth, he discovered that he could not reconcile his belief in a loving God with the concept of Hell, and that a loving God would send anyone there. Taking a huge risk, he began to preach the message of universal salvation, that Jesus saved everyone from hell.

This was not well received by his congregation, and Bishop Pearson lost his church. But his conviction in his new message of universal salvation was so strong, he could not give it up. He led the followers that remained loyal to him to borrow space in another church during off-

times; and that church was All Souls Unitarian Church in Tulsa. After meeting separately for awhile, the Unitarian Universalist congregation and Bishop Pearson's congregation realized that it was silly for two communities who both believed in Universalism and met in the same space were meeting at different times as separate groups. And so, they chose to integrate.

Now, in addition to traveling and speaking all across the world, spreading his message of radical inclusivity, Bishop Carlton Pearson also serves as an adjunct member of the pastoral staff at All Souls Unitarian.

Bishop Carlton Pearson followed the truth when it spoke to him, and while it caused him to lose all he had, he held onto that truth, and used it as the cornerstone of a new, more authentic life.

### ***Jiddu Krishnamurti***

The second is Jiddu Krishnamurti. Krishnamurti was born in 1895 in India. As a young boy, he was identified by members of the Theosophical Society, who believed him to be a prophet, and the incarnation of Lord Maitreya (my-TRAY-uh), the World Teacher of humankind. He was raised to be the Head of the Order of the Star in the East, a religious sect.

Now, if you were raised as the incarnation of a divine teacher, to be the leader of a religious order, I can see how it would be easy to believe that you are in fact what everyone around you believes you to be.

It would be easy to go along with a bunch of people who were proclaiming that you were the World Teacher of humankind.

But a truth spoke louder to Krishnamurti than the praise of his adoring followers. In 1929, at the age of 34, he gave a speech called *Truth is a Pathless Land*, in which he renounced his role as the World Teacher, and dissolved the Order of the Star in the East.

Remember that line from the Jonathan Haidt quote from earlier?

"...once any person, book, or principle is declared sacred, then devotees can no longer question it or think clearly about it."

This was the truth that Krishnamurti recognized from somewhere within himself. He knew that he was a person who had been declared sacred, and that his followers' adoration of him was preventing them from accessing a deeper, truer spirituality based on their own discernment and experiences, rather than on what he, the proclaimed World Teacher said was truth.

You heard a small part of that speech in the Reading earlier in this service, but I want to highlight part of it again. He said, "Truth is a pathless land, and you cannot approach it by any path whatsoever, by any religion, by any sect... if you do, it becomes dead, crystalized... a creed... to be imposed upon others..."

I maintain that the only spirituality... is the harmony between reason and love. This is the absolute, unconditioned Truth which is Life itself... Truth is in everyone; it is not far, it is not near; it is eternally there.”

Krishnamurti came to understand that truth is simply *what is* – all that is – and only each person’s direct encounter with *what is* could lead to an individual seeing, knowing, and understanding that truth. He believed it could never come through a teacher or organized religion.

But what can come from organized religion, is what we have here: beloved community. Organized not around creed, but Covenant; brought together not by a shared belief in the divine, but a shared understanding of how we want to be with one another in community. We don’t claim to hold the divine truth that anyone or everyone must adhere to, but we promise to support each other as we each try to encounter the truth that is *what is*; or as Krishnamurti called it, “the absolute, unconditioned Truth which is Life itself.”

So, let us journey together in our search for truth, and may we learn to listen for the still small voice within. For when we silence all the distractions, when we seek a deeper spirituality by listening for a more authentic truth, may we find what Krishnamurti calls “the harmony between reason and love.”

And from this place, is where we build the beloved community.

As the truth speaks, may it be so.