

This month my sermons will focus on our fourth principle, a free and responsible search for truth and meaning. I chose this morning instead of using a reading to tell you the story of the six men and the elephant. Because in that story we have six people who have a piece of the truth but not the whole truth. Each of their experiences is valid and true for them. None of them tell a falsehood. And yet each one of them treats their piece of the truth as if it were the whole truth. Each of them is just a bit too sure that what they have is right. It is I believe a story that many many people can relate to because it is a pretty human experience to realize that what you thought was the whole truth was really only a part of the truth. This story reminds us that in our search for truth and meaning a little bit of humility is helpful.

This concept of truth is tough. And as our principle clearly points out there is truth and there is meaning and they are not always the same thing. And there is information - in this day and age there is a lot of information. I'm not sure how much truth there is

Steven Colbert in the first episode of his show the Colbert report coined the word truthiness.

Colbert defines the word this way:

"Truthiness is what you want the facts to be, as opposed to what the facts are. What feels like the right answer as opposed to what reality will support."

**Truthiness** is a quality characterizing a "truth" that a person making an argument or assertion claims to know intuitively "from the gut" or because it "feels right" without regard to evidence, logic, intellectual examination, or facts.

(<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Truthiness>)

Interestingly as Colbert tells it he made up the word right before he was to go on. He decided that the original scripted word "truth" was just not ridiculous enough. And the ridiculousness of that word - truthiness - points to something that is true. There are a lot of folks in the media, using media, who speak from a place of truthiness but not from a place of truth.

Colbert caught something important when he coined this word - and it caught on. The American Dialect Society announced that "truthiness" was the Word of the Year for 2005 and The New York Times listed it as one of nine words that captured the spirit of 2005.

This search that we UUs are on for truth and meaning is difficult because sometimes it's just difficult to tell the difference between truth and truthiness.

So what are we affirming in this principle? Actually we are not affirming the truth or what is right or good. We are not affirming what untrue or what is wrong or bad. We are not affirming truthiness. Actually this principle stays away from any kind of either/or thinking. What this principle does affirm is a **search** and that is key - key to understanding this. Our fourth principle affirms yours and my search for truth and meaning and it affirms our, both on a congregational level and on a denominational level, our collective search for truth and meaning.

And even more than that I believe that this fourth principle is the keystone to our 7 principles

There is a poetic structure to the seven principles. Imagine an arch where the 1st principle - the inherent worth and dignity of each person, and the seventh - the interdependent web of existence are the pillars upon which the arch is built. These two principles are cosmological in nature. They help to explain what it means to be an individual and help to explain the structure of the cosmos. It is an interdependent web

2nd and 6th - eschatology - the theological word meaning having to do with the end event. In conservative religious circles eschatology usually has something to do with the end times. But in our theology we aspire to what is our end event or goal which is justice not judgement. The second and sixth principles are about creating justice in our personal relationships and in the larger global environment. We aspire to be and build the beloved community to help create a world where we all are one.

The 3rd and 5th are expressions of our theology of ecclesiology how we gather as a community. The third is about how we accept one another and in that acceptance build community. And the 5th is about how as communities we use democratic process. Ours is a congregational polity - meaning each congregation make their own decisions.

And the 4th principle is the keystone principle it holds the arch together - metaphorically you take it out and the rest fall apart - this is our statement of how we know what we know. This is our statement of epistemology - the source of authority rests in each individual conscience among us - fairly radical when you really think about it.

Some of you come from religious backgrounds where "truth" was used like a weapon. And the person who had the truth - the real truth was right. And the person who had the wrong truth was wrong. Some of you have been shamed with the term truth. Like the internet truth can be a tool - it can be used well and it can be used

poorly. We as UUs are called to seek truth and meaning responsibly and I think we are called to use truth responsibly.

It still amazes me that our principles were in essence written by committee. I have never really had good experiences of group writing. Usually whatever is produced is muddled, it lacks clarity, the wording ends up confused and confusing. But although our principles lack some things never once is beauty or love mentioned. There are some amazing details in them.

This principle affirms that I and you have the moral authority to make truth claims and meaning claims. We each are capable of and expected to be the ultimate deciders of what is true. The writers of this principle knew that there is more to this world than truth - there is also meaning. Our world is round that is a truth, that is a fact but what does it mean. Facts are important but truth is not simply facts.

So it is not truth that defines us as UUs but our search for it and not any kind of search but a free - meaning unfettered by limitations of creed, and a responsible search at that. Our freedom is balanced by our responsibility. And we are not simply looking for truth we are also looking for meaning.

When we confuse truth for meaning I do not believe that we searched in a responsible way.

In preparation for this sermon I spent a lot of time on the internet looking at writers I don't normally look at, reading the comments, and you know what it is not pretty. I stopped reading comments a number of years ago. Someone I knew and respected was in a pretty bad car accident, there were serious injuries. I knew the driver to be a person of integrity and kindness. The comments on the internet underneath the news article were horrendous. Like the men describing the elephant the commentators made proclamations based on partial knowledge. And seemingly with little regard for the humanity of the people involved. I read a lot of vitriol this past week. It left my heart heavy. The internet has a lot of information but I am not sure how much truth it has.

If we are going to responsibly search for truth and meaning we, by which I mean not only we collectively but also each of individually, must take care. We should remember that it is the search that is sacred not the answers. It is in the search that we find the sacred, not in the answers. We must craft our questions carefully. How you ask a question has a lot to do with what kind of information you get. How you ask a question can create more dialogue or stop dialogue. I find that open ended questions tend to help my search. It is an all together different conversation if I ask "So tell me about your views on the sacred?" as opposed to "Well that's the silliest thing I ever heard -

you can't really believe that can you? The first is a searching question the second is a statement with a question mark stuck on the end of it that shuts down dialogue and closes off the search.

Perhaps it would be good to develop some thoughtful guidelines for searching for truth online. Here are some suggestions - they are only suggestions - a starting point really.

- 1) Know your source and their biases. It is easy in this digital age to have a commentator write an article and then have that one and only article cited in many different sites. The effect is that the story looks bigger than it is and looks as if it has many sources.
- 2) When you can check the facts of an article and its sources. Are you reading an article about vaccinations - check the sources that are cited. Are they old sources, or more recent. Are they credible sources - meaning is a scientist making statements about scientific fact or is a politician grandstanding?
- 3) perhaps you don't have time to do that kind of research. that is a reality of life. If you haven't checked out a news source don't quote it or repeat it.
- 4) Avoid ad hominum arguments such as using someone's educational level as a means to exploit and degrade the opposer's argument, such as, "You didn't even finish high school - how could you possibly know about this?"
- 5) Speak from the I position as in "It is my belief that" "Here is how I understand it" or I have found it helpful to consider x y or z
- 6) Even when I practice these suggestions there are moments when I read something online or in the newspaper that just infuriates me. Moments when I find myself no longer in a responsible search for truth and meaning mode but rather simply fuming. And here is what I try to do. I imagine that the person who just made what I believe to be a deeply idiotic statement is one of my children or someone that I care very deeply about. How would I want them to be treated, what tone would I want the comments to have in response. I take a deep breath and try to craft a response that has that kind of tone.
- 7) If all else fails walk away from the internet - have the dialogue face to face. My search for truth and meaning is way more responsible when I know that there is real person with real reactions facing me on the other side of the argument.

I invite you in this week upcoming to think about how you search for truth and

150208 "Whose Truth Will Set You Free?"

**Page 5 of 5**

meaning. What draws you to that search. I invite you this week to ask the questions but do not push too hard for the answers - remain open and see if you find a truth you did not see before.

In a world without end may this be so.