



Auckland Unitarian Church
Love beyond belief

Listening for Your Own Truth

Ron Ahnen © 24 November 2024

Truth. What's the truth? Can you handle the truth? I want the truth.

As you all know, we just finished an election in the U.S. with so many different candidates—not just presidential ones—putting forth many competing claims about what “the truth” is. The good news is that we’ve got fact-checkers and journalists all trying to help us sort out exactly what is and is not true. You might think it’s easier to find the truth these days, given that you can Google just about anything in a nanosecond. It turns out, finding out the truth is not so easy. In fact, it’s often really, really hard.

However, my sermon this morning, while focused on truth, is not focused on the recent US election. I’m already seeing relief on a few faces. Instead, I want to focus on the deeper search for truth as part of our UU heritage and as a key part of our faith. Our recently reformed UUA by-laws state in Article II “We covenant to learn from one another in our free and responsible search for truth and meaning.” Truth is indeed foundational as we explore how to live out our lives both as individuals and in community.

So how do we find truth or the truth? That is a key question, of course, but before we can reflect on how to find it, we have to acknowledge that truth itself is a complicated beast. It turns out that there are different kinds of truth, and how we find truth depends on the kind of truth we are after.

Let’s start with “observable truth” or what academics like to call “empirical” truth. These truths result from widespread agreement among most rational people about what we observe and include such things as the sky is blue, the earth is round and orbits the sun, and New Zealand has 4.6 sheep for every person living here (yes, I looked that one up). By the way, since the last time I was here I spent over a week touring the south island and I think I saw most of them. These truths are heavily “objective” meaning that one’s opinion about them matters little as to whether they are true or not. So you can claim to be flat earther if you like, but the spherical earth will continue to orbit the sun no matter your opinion.

Now we may be tempted to think that all truth is like that: objective and fixed. But there are other forms of truth that are important to us that introduce varying levels of subjectivity. For example, we have religious truths. As UUs, we are well aware that religions come in many shapes and sizes, especially because we tend to lean into so many of them. We are a multi-religious faith. Religious truths help us understand the meaning and purpose that we give to life, and instruct us in how to act toward one another. These truths are based on the traditions, rituals and practices our ancestors have passed on to us. However, which religious truths you decide to embrace because they make sense for you is much more subjective than determining objective facts.

And though we think of religious truths as fixed and immutable—almost like observable truths—people of every religious tradition are in a constant conversation with each other about how to update and reform their traditions, as we UUs just practiced with our recent reform of Article II.

The stories and myths from different religions of how we came to be, what sacred texts we should read, and how we are to live seem to contradict one another at times. Once we dig deeper, however, we find these

various religions often express similar truths about how to live including with respect, generosity, forgiveness, peace, and love.

One way to think about the deeper values that various religions point to in our lives is to think about moral truths, a third type of truth. Moral truths include the principles and values that determine what is collectively “the good,” and what constitutes “correct” or “right” action toward each other. Moral truths may vary from person to person, from community to community, and over time. Which version of the good do you espouse? Which community principles do you accept, or we as a UU church community? So moral truths are also subjective. Actually, part of the reason that we can live in a country that embraces so many different religious practices is because of our common morality. Yes, moral vision can certainly vary, but most of us seek and favor human well-being and flourishing. So religious and moral truths are both objective and subjective.

There is one set of truths, however, that is almost completely subjective, and those are our personal truths. How do I see myself as a person, a friend, a family member? What is my race and ethnicity, and what importance does that hold for me? What is my sexual orientation or gender identity? What do I believe about God, about what will happen to me after I die, and how do I want to spend my time and resources in this life?

No one can decide how to answer those questions for you—you have to find out these answers yourself. The personal nature of these truths requires us to focus inward. For example, is the silver fern or the kiwi the most authentic symbol of New Zealand? What is your personal truth on that issue?

So we have four different kinds of truth—empirical, religious, moral, and personal—with varying levels of objectivity and subjectivity to each. That fact leads me to two important observations. First, even though they are distinct, they are connected. Our personal truths inform our notions and ideas of our moral truths—those principles that we would see accepted widely by our community. Objective facts about human psychology, mental health and physical well-being can inform our moral truths, for example how to provide health care or housing. Our personal truths can guide us in choosing religious practices that bring meaning to our lives. In turn, our religious truths and practices can help us see and appreciate our deeper moral and personal truths.

The second observation is that we get ourselves into trouble when we confuse these truths and their often subjective nature. Some people, such as Christian Nationalists in the US for example, would like to see their interpretation of religious practices mandated for all citizens, squelching the freedom of religion that has long been our American tradition. Mistaking religious for moral or objective truth has led humanity through our sad history of tremendous suffering including wars, inquisitions, oppression, colonialism, and genocide. In arriving at and considering “truth,” we need to be aware of when truth is relatively objective—like observable facts, and when subjectivity plays a more important role in determining our own truth, and to have a reasonable level of humility that avoids imposing our personal or religious truths on someone else.

Okay, so how do we do this? How do we find truth? We find objective facts through observation and reason, that is, using the scientific method. Religious and moral truths are rooted in individual and communal reflection, and hammered out in some social fashion—perhaps democratically, though sometimes church or political leaders decide these truths for us—or at least try to. I think, however, the most interesting story of how to find truth is by focusing on our journey and pathway to personal truth, which is the focus of the rest of my sermon this morning.

How do you know who you really are? One way to think about how we come to understand ourselves as we do is through listening—but not just listening: deep listening. People sometimes use this term “deep listening,” but you may be wondering, how does “deep listening” differ from just plain old listening?

Our general experience of listening, of course, focuses on paying attention to the communication of others. When we listen deeply to others, we introduce specific skills to our listening. These include:-

- 1) suspending judgment of what someone is saying,
- 2) avoiding assumptions about what they said,
- 3) holding back from quick responses to allow time for careful consideration of what is being said, and
- 4) seeking clarification instead of adding our own commentary.

These are all good deep listening skills.

In discovering our personal truth, we can apply these same skills of deep listening to ourselves. How do you listen to yourself? Some of us might do this by talking out loud to ourselves—I'm a firm member of that group, by the way. I'm not ashamed to admit that I talk out loud while cooking by myself in the kitchen, while cleaning the house, and even singing in the shower. But listening to ourselves typically involves the practice of silent, critical reflection. We listen to ourselves by paying attention to what we read, to our conversations with others, or to what we see on television or the movie screen, and then reflecting on it to see what resonates with us.

We also listen deeply to ourselves by paying attention not just to our mind, but also our bodies. We zero in on what gives us energy, health, pleasure and satisfaction. Listening deeply to ourselves includes paying careful attention to both mind and body.

I believe all of us here have had this kind of experience of deep listening to ourselves in our lives, though we sometimes understand it and express it differently. Focusing on the mind, some people call searching for our personal truth listening to God, or to the Spirit of Life, or attuning oneself to the Energy of the Cosmos. Some people may think of listening to an angel on one shoulder and a devil on the other. Still others think of it as focusing on our inner voice, or listening to our conscience. Focusing on the body, we discover personal truth from engaging in everything from exercise, to dance, to yoga, to having intimate physical encounters with others. Then, reflecting on our experiences, we decide which ones lead us to well-being and wholeness.

No matter how we understand the process, we know it takes deep listening. We suspend judgment of ourselves, throw out old assumptions, and slow down to listen carefully to both our mind and body. Most importantly, we have to open ourselves to new possibilities on our life journey.

Some of us may find our personal truth early on in life and stick with them for a long time thereafter. Others may find new personal truths only later in life. I have an uncle, for example, who, at the age of 48, after two marriages and another long term relationship with a woman, publicly proclaimed his personal truth that he is a gay man. Coming to that truth required suspending judgment of himself, and was a long and arduous process for him.

I was brought up Catholic and always had an image of God as an old man with a white beard who lived in the sky. More importantly that God was out to reward me for being good and punish me for being bad. That was my personal truth. After many years of critical self-reflection, I became a religious humanist and no longer relate to a Divine Spirit in that way. Giving up on my old notion of God was also a very long and hard journey. Arriving at my new personal truth could only happen after I let go of past assumptions and carefully considered new possibilities for my religious belief.

Indeed, one of the most interesting facts about Unitarian Universalists is that a majority of us were not raised as UUs. Through the process of deep listening, we arrived at new personal truths and found this religious community. By the way, that does not leave those raised as UUs off the hook. They must also eventually question whether their UU heritage still inspires them to live out their personal and moral truths.

Yet deep listening for truth cannot focus only ourselves as individuals, as our reading this morning tells us. Deep listening for truth requires that we also listen to the deepest truths of others. In the Hindu tradition of

Vedanta, we are not just our individual selves. We are also ourselves as one with the universe. In other words, we cannot focus only on ourselves to arrive at truth. We need to listen deeply to others. I happen to be a white, cisgendered male. As such, I know that the systems of bias and oppression in my society facilitated my chances at life. Perhaps my initial sense was that my professional success resulted solely from my own efforts and hard work. When I listen to the truth of others, however, I can clearly see how racism, sexism, homophobia, classism, and ableism still prevalent in my society made their lives harder and my life easier. Part of deep listening for my personal truth, then, must incorporate my ability to be humble enough to listen to the personal truths of others. When I do, I can begin to understand the world anew from their experience, and incorporate into my truth the need to dismantle structures of oppression whenever we encounter them.

So yes, deep listening for truth, especially for personal truth but also religious and moral truth, can be a resource hungry process. It takes effort. It takes time. It takes humility. A friend of mine used to have a tagline to his email that read: many people pass up a good opportunity because it comes dressed in blue jeans in looks like hard work. I think that applies here. In other words, the process of discovering truth is a great opportunity because it leads to a huge pay-off: it's called liberation. Yes, along with those taglines about truth I started out with today, let's add another one that we just sang about: the truth will set you free!

When we arrive at our personal truth, we experience our inner most authentic selves. Having discovered who we are at our core, our heart is in a holy place. And when it is, we can finally share our lives with each other freely, completely and honestly. We can embrace and love others with authenticity, and be authentically loved by others. We become liberated individually and collectively as a community, and begin to live out our highest aspirations of our communal life as the people we truly are.

To love and be loved as our truest selves, to me, is the greatest gift and joy of this life. May we find the strength we need, along our whole life journey, to search out and find our deepest truths by listening deeply to ourselves and others.

Amen. Blessed Be.