

## FINDINGS ON A SEARCHER'S PATH

A Sermon by Fritz Hudson

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Every year, once or twice, I pick up the phone in my office to find myself talking with a teacher in one of our local high schools. His or her question is: Would I meet with their class to explore: What is Unitarian Universalism? Last spring the call came from the Arts and Humanities focus program. It's housed across Capital Parkway from Lincoln High. But they wanted to come to me here. They wanted to see as well as hear who we are. So I decided to lead them in a little service, at 11:45 on a Thursday morning.

- I met them at the door as our ushers would, with printed bulletins. I brought them to seats in these first three rows, fitted out with hymnals.

- I took my place over here behind a music stand.

- I rang our bell. I lit our chalice. I explained their significance.

- We sang from the front of our book. We read responsively from the back. We lit candles for their milestones and millstones.

And then, for a sermon, I introduced them to the words on the back of our bulletin: our covenant of the principles we affirm and promote, and our statement of the sources for our living tradition. I spoke a little about how we'd come to these words over our 425 years of institutional life. And then I invited their questions.

Almost all of those questions left no lasting mark on my memory. They felt honestly and respectfully asked, and I was confident and comfortable with my answers. One question though still rings in my ears and rattles my spirit. It came from a dark-haired young woman, small, friendly through her glasses, seated right over here. She said simply: So you've been "affirming and promoting" this "free and responsible search for truth and meaning" for all these years now. So what truths have you found?" Bong. I should have rung the bell again to fill the silence I left. When I finally opened my mouth I said something about the diversity of "truths" among us. Something else about one "truth" I personally could humbly affirm, I think. She was kind, accepting. But I don't think either of us was satisfied with my answer. "Good question," I'm sure I said. But ever since I've been thinking – "and it deserves an equally good answer, or at least a much better one than I gave". In baseball terms, my first swing at her pitch no more than nicked it. Today, you'll get my second cut. The pitch again: "In our free and responsible search, what truths have we found?"

First let me say just how good this question is – how central our answer is to our vitality as a religious community. Our choir set this up well for me by singing, at our opening, "Love is the Spirit of this Church." The words were composed by Griswold Williams, a Universalist minister, perhaps 75 years ago now. In many of our churches they are said in unison by the entire congregation, standing, to open each Sunday's service. They are in Omaha. They were in Phoenix, my prior church. Starting next Sunday, we'll give a whole month of Sundays to working through that first line, to seeing how "love" can be our church's "spirit." Today, we'll take on the second line, to see how "the quest for truth" can be our "sacrament."

How many of us here can still remember our own former church building, the one at 12th and H streets downtown? (Perhaps 10 raise hands.) We built it in 1894 and occupied it until 1961, 67 years. How many have seen pictures of it? (perhaps 50 raised hands) For the building's last 30 years, a huge mural hung on the wall behind its pulpit. Its title was "The Search for Truth." Its artist was the same muralist, Elizabeth Dolan, whose work still graces the walls of UNL's Morrill Hall and the State Capitol. It showed a "striking young woman" inspiring "a young man in his search for truth." Its background figures personified eras in humanity's progress on the search: a Hebrew seer, a young Greek, the gallant Galahad of Arthur's England. Our minister at its unveiling in 1930, the Reverend Arthur Weatherly, said that the image was "especially successful in depicting a certain indecision in the youth, who despite his enthusiasm and his confidence in the young woman, is sobered by the importance of his task." O that that image had still been up here for me to draw on that Thursday morning last spring. Would I then have been quick-witted enough to point to the "striking young woman" and then answer my young inquisitor: "One truth we've found is that you're better qualified to answer that question than I am?" Probably not.

A sacrament is a sacred ritual. That's to say that  
- first, it's a disciplined, routinized practice, and  
- second, it requires some sacrifice of things we hold quite valuable to serve what we hold most valuable, most high or holy. Sacrifice is what creates the sacred.  
When we say that we hold the quest of truth as sacrament, we're saying we sacrifice valuable things to its pursuit. First let me talk about the ritual. Then I'll talk about the sacrifice. Then lastly, I'll try to actually perform the sacrament.

Can you recall where and why you first learned the name Joseph Priestley? Was it in a science class, like me? Were you taught, as I was, that Priestley was the first to isolate oxygen as an element of air? So now I wonder if you, unlike I, were also taught what he did for a living. Priestley, the oxygen discoverer, I met in middle school. Priestley, the minister, I didn't meet until my college years, when I started attending a Unitarian Universalist church. The Rev. Joseph Priestley, in fact, in the 1770s became one of the first Unitarian ministers in England. Nobody paid Priestley to play with brewery gases in the back room of his parsonage. That was his private "soulwork," if you will. Those who could stomach his approach paid him to preach - to preach the gospel of Christianity passed through the fire of reason and tested for meaning by means of a ritual just forming in our culture - something we now call the scientific method.

Do you still remember learning to recite the steps of the scientific method? The way I remember them it was:

1. Define a problem or question.
2. Gather data which seems related to understanding the problem or answering the question.
3. Form an hypothesis from the data, a best guess as to what the answer might be.
4. Test the hypothesis - devise an experiment which

a. isolates one variable among the possible causes for the phenomenon you're trying to understand and then

b. tests the outcome when that variable alone is present or absent.

Revise your hypothesis according to your results and continue to test subsequent hypotheses in a similar fashion.

5. When you've isolated a variable which seems to fundamentally cause the problem or answer the question, repeat the experiment several times under the exact same circumstances and maintain a record of your results.

6. When your repeated experiments support your hypothesis, recast it in the form of a broader theory. Then publish your study and theory so that others may test it on their own.

Do you remember it more or less like that? If you think I could improve my understanding of the method, please tell me. Understood properly, this step-by-step practice to discern what's going on around, and within, us is the ritual of our church's sacrament.

Now, what makes it sacred for us? What sacrifice does it demand?

That actually has two dimensions.

Griswold Williams' words say that our covenant is to "seek knowledge in freedom." But the freedom of the scientific method is a particular kind. It is

- the freedom to think for oneself, to draw one's own conclusions;

- the freedom to experiment oneself with various routes to truth; and

- the freedom to share one's experiments with others, to tell ours and hear theirs, to gain from each other's experience.

That's why we've come to say that our covenant is to affirm and promote the free and responsible search. A responsible search is a search undertaken in community – challenging, responsive, supportive to the searches of all those who share this life with us.

And a responsible search, in fact, requires that we sacrifice something of the very freedom we value so deeply. We value each person's freedom to proclaim his or her own "truth." But, our sacrifice is to subject what we say to each other's questions – to invite us all to ask each other: is your proclaimed "truth" supported by reason, by scientific inquiry? In so doing, we sacrifice some intellectual and emotional independence to our search for truth. And more.

Henry David Thoreau, our forebear, wrote in *Walden*: "I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach. . . . I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, . . . to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms, and, if it proved to be mean, why then to get the whole and genuine meanness of it, and publish its meanness to the world; or if it were sublime, to know it by experience, and be able to give a true account of it." We value the comforts that life offers us. But we are not satisfied to simply sense their surface. We want to experience life, as well as

understand it, at its most profound depth. And to do so, we will sacrifice some comfort, if need be.

So now (finally! you might well say) let me perform our sacrament. Its first step, you remember, is to define our problem, our question. We actually have two of those, as well. They are rooted in perhaps the first two questions our early, growing mind can form. We ask from an early age:

- first: "Where am I?" and

- second: "How do I get what I want or need here?"

Where am I? How do I get what I want or need?

Those are our baby questions. As we grow toward adulthood, however, - as we enter that transition time occupied by my young congregation on that Thursday morning last spring - those questions grow.

"Where am I?" grows into "what is the ultimate context of my life?"

And "How do I get what I want or need here?" That grows into "What is my ultimate purpose or destiny?"

Those are life's BIG questions, aren't they?

And we are pulled by powerful desires as we try to find answers to these questions.

- We want, perhaps we even need, to continue feeling safe and secure in our ultimate situation, as most of did as a baby in our family. We strain desperately to see our life held in the context of a cosmic power who cares for us as our parents have.

- We also want, perhaps even need, to continue to feel the vitality which our body's growth has brought us so far. We strain desperately to see our personal identity expanding through death, not ending with it.

But what happens when we subject such "hypotheses" to the experimentation of our sacrament, of science. Sadly, painfully, they find little support.

Paula Poundstone, the comic and writer, once said, "What moron said that knowledge is power? Knowledge is power only if it doesn't depress you so much that it leaves you an immobile heap at the end of your bed." There's the sacrifice of our superficial comfort.

It leads us to begin mumbling about different "truths" for different people or cultures, or worse still, about private "truths" concealed in each individual. In any conventional sense, such talk is nonsense. Truth is universal or it's not truth.

Jules Fieffer, the cartoonist, once drew a character telling his search's story:

- I was taught as a boy: "The truth shall make you free."

- So I ventured out to seek the truth. And I found it.

- And did it make me free? Hell, no!

- Did it make me frightened, defensive and insecure? You bet it did!

- So now I know the truth about "the truth." Avoid it at all costs.

- Make up your own truth ... And stick to it no matter how little sense it makes.

- And sooner or later, you'll have converts.
- Trust me.

All our searches for truth, if they go deep, if they suck at the marrow of life, can't help but lead us to be frightened, defensive, and insecure for a time as well. But our faith's response to this pain is not to retreat from what can be universally demonstrated to proclaim some comforting personal desire as "truth." Our faith's response is rather to respect all our personal proclamations as working hypotheses to be tested in community. Our faith's response is to turn our fright into courage, to turn our defensiveness into acceptance, to turn our insecurity again toward comfort by sharing the quest for truth with each other no matter where it may lead. That is our sacrifice of intellectual and emotional independence.

BUT – in this is a HUGE but – BUT this is just the beginning of our search! Where this leads us is just to the beginning of what is really important. For most of our history we spoke only of our devotion to the search for truth. Twenty-five years ago, however, we realized that we'd been conflating and confusing in those words two interdependent but distinct searches – the search for real, universal, truth – and the search for personal, life-giving meaning. The search for meaning is the search for how to live best, given what we can honestly discern of the cosmic context of our lives and the nature of our destiny. What we've found, more than truths, are pathways to meaning. We covenant - we co-venir (in French) - we come together, to follow those pathways, as marked by such signs as inherent worth, justice, growth, democracy, peace, and interdependence.

So my answer now to my young inquisitor comes down to this:

We haven't found "truth" in answer to life's big questions. We don't "know" demonstrably what ultimate context we all live in, or what ultimate destiny our personal identity follows. In fact our sacrament, the scientific method, has brought us to accept Walter Heisenberg's principle, that our process of observation alters the very reality we're trying to understand. Some years ago our member Ed Long introduced me to the words of French author and critic Andre Gide. I've kept them it seems for this very time: Gide wrote: "Believe those who are seeking the truth; doubt those who find it."

Our answers to life's big questions – our working hypotheses – are well echoed in this morning's story by Leo Tolstoy. As the hermit turtle answers young Nikolai:

What is the best time to do things? It is now.

Who is the most important one? It is the one here with you.

What's the right thing to do? It is to help that one.

(The Three Questions. retold by Jon J. Muth)

So, now, as this year's baseball season draws to a close, long after I just barely nicked that ball back at its opening, I'm searching for that student, my pitcher. I've called the school, but I've yet to get through to the teacher. I don't know the student's name. She wasn't wearing a uniform

number. My quest may be fruitless. But I would like to engage again with that "striking young woman." Indeed I want to engage with the indecisive, enthusiastic but sober young people of any gender. I want to join their search – and I want to invite them to join ours - to seek truth and to find meaning as a beloved community. Most of all I want to give them well-earned praise. Following Kenneth Patton, I want to tell them how fervently we.

Praise sometimes those of stubborn creed,  
Praise them with skill at ancient task.  
Praise more that minds that work on need;  
Praise more the questions that we ask.