

**To Tell the Truth**  
**A Sermon offered by Reverend Kathleen C. Rolenz**  
**Fox Valley Unitarian Universalist Fellowship**  
**Appleton, Wisconsin**  
**fvuuf.org**

**Saturday, March 13 – Sunday, March 14, 2016**

It is so good to be here with you again today, after being together last month for what we called “The State of the Fellowship Address.” How many of you were at that service on February 20-21? It was like no other service that I’ve done before – where co-minister Reverend Wayne Arnason and I sat in two chairs – you all sat around tables – and we offered to you some of our own impressions of the Fellowship and you then, offered back your thoughts, feelings, hopes and dreams about and for the Fellowship. A summary of all the comments is being compiled and will be available when complete. Even more than that, your ministers and staff are reading through every single page that you submitted so as to get the fullest expression of what you – the members, friends, visitors and guests said about what was important to you about this community that you cherish so much. After the ministry team and key staff members have finished reading your comments, we plan to write a narrative response; about what we heard and what next steps might we take together.

I have to be honest with you – I had planned to do a different sermon this evening/morning; one that I had already written for the other congregation I serve in Cleveland, but after reading the comment sheets from the Feb. 20-21 services, it became more clear to me that responding to the service was more important than my sermon on Islam, Fundamentalism and Terrorism. Maybe another time. So today, I want to look at why truth telling is an essential spiritual practice for us as Unitarian Universalists. I want to share some liberating truth-telling stories with you that may empower you to speak your own truth and finally, I want to circle back to what you said during the extended Congregational Response time two weeks ago; a kind of collective truth-telling about your own lives, the life of this fellowship and your hopes and dreams for its future.

I suspect that one of the reasons why you’re a Unitarian Universalist is because of our insistence on engaging with the fourth principle “a free and responsible search for truth and meaning.” It’s not that other religious traditions don’t do that of course, it’s just that Unitarian Universalists have historically been like the little child who, when seeing the Emperor pretend to be wearing invisible finery, would call him out and say “the Emperor is actually not wearing any clothes!” I mean we’re the tradition of Michael Servetus, the 16<sup>th</sup> century physician, theologian, who scoured the Bible for a legitimate reference to the Trinity and having found none, gleefully told the Christian world of his findings, for which, he was promptly burned at the stake. We’re the inheritors of Thomas Jefferson, who took a pair of scissors to the Holy Scripture, removing all the references to the supernatural or the miracles of Jesus and created his own Bible. That took moxie. We’re the ones who even would re-write favorite Christmas Carols so that they would more closely align to our own theology: Like this one for example: God rest ye, Unitarians, let nothing you dismay; Remember there’s no evidence There was a Christmas Day; When Christ was born is just not known, No matter what they say, O, Tidings of reason and fact, reason and fact, Glad tidings of reason and fact.

We like our religion to be based in truth, not fantasy; our Principles are both aspirational and rooted in human experience, not in Divine intervention. By and large most Unitarian Universalists don’t believe in an Absolute or Ultimate Truth, but are more interested in the lived experiences of our lives and what they reveal.

For our critics, this comes across as a kind of religious truthiness; meaning that we may not agree on an Ultimate Truth like “there is a God” but that all truth is relative and comes from our own experience, history, culture and upbringing. Our

faith – and by that I mean – the religious tradition and movement in which we place our confidence – stresses the importance of telling the truth whether it be about the Bible or our own lives. So today, I want to look at some of the ways we engage in the spiritual practice of speaking the truth in love to others; to ourselves and to our faith as Unitarian Universalists.

When it comes to truth-telling, I'm a product of my own culture, class and up-bringing. My mother was raised in the South and there was code there – that you could tell the truth about someone, but you had to add “bless her heart” or “bless his heart” to sweeten the criticism. So, my mother told me that her relatives would say things like: “that Betty Jean, she can draw real good, but she cannot make biscuits to save her life” bless her heart. As a result, truth telling was offered indirectly, through every other means possible than face to face, one on one honesty.

She embodied and passed down the wisdom from Emily Dickinson's poem: *Tell all the truth but tell it slant —Success in Circuit lies Too bright for our infirm Delight--The Truth's superb surprise==As Lightning to the Children eased With explanation kind--The Truth must dazzle gradually--Or every man be blind —*

For Dickinson, truth is better revealed in small doses; a little bit of ipecac rather than a whole spoonful. So what does it mean to tell the truth slant? Does it mean to tell a little white lie so as to avoid the truth? I think what Dickinson meant was that sometimes telling the truth slant protects the tender parts of ourselves; it's like shining too bright a light on a plant; too much sun and it will wilt under that intensity. Sometimes we need the cooler hand of a friend on our shoulder when we realize that there is a gap between how we perceive ourselves and how others perceive us; between the Self we think we are – and the Self that others see. If we have that friend in our life, we are so blessed – so lucky – someone whom we trust, who knows us and loves us enough to speak the truth with love. Maybe it's simply: “You know, I've noticed you've been drinking every night and then you pass out.”

Maybe it's “You seem to be angry and ticked off all the time – at everyone, have you noticed that?” If we can hear this slant – as a compassionate call to change and not a harsh judgment or critique of our being, then we can begin the deeper spiritual work of self revelation – of uncovering the microlayers of defensiveness, protection, fear of being vulnerable and do the work I believe we were put on this planet to do – to become fully whole, integrated, compassionate human beings. That is as close to divinity as I can imagine.

The hardest work of all though, is not really telling the truth on others, but, as Abbey mentioned, telling the truth on ourselves. It is the line found in the David Whyte poem that asks us to “hold to the truth you make every day with your own body... don't turn your face away.” Those who have been involved in a twelve step group know that one of the cornerstones of recovery to practice absolute, rigorous honesty. You didn't get tipsy – you were drunk. You didn't have one night stand – you had an affair. It seeks to counter the stories we want to tell ourselves in order to justify our own behavior or to live out a picture of ourselves in our own heads.

The fourth step of Alcoholics Anonymous is that we make a “searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves,” and through the process of recovery, you write down every single lie you ever told yourself or others and then you share that list with a trusted person, breaking the secrecy that lies create. Only in this way can recovery begin; by closing that gap between the story we tell ourselves and the reality of the way things actually are.

We have plenty of people in twelve step recovery in Unitarian Universalism, but even those who are not can appreciate this dedication to truth telling as a spiritual commitment. As we've heard, it's a commitment that cost some of our spiritual ancestors considerable pain and even their lives. So we are a people who believe that the truth shall make you free. It's a big part of what it means for us to be a people of liberation, who want to tell the truth about our lives, about our triumphs and our struggles, I had a powerful experience with this kind of truth telling just two weeks ago in the other congregation I am serving this year in Cleveland. It was one of the most difficult things I've ever had to

do as a minister, and it involved officiating at the memorial service of a long time, deeply beloved member who died by suicide. He was 87 years young.

He had, up until a recent back injury, played tennis and golf; bantered with me about my spiritual sermons and was well known to almost everyone in the congregation. To the outside, he looked great; from his perspective, he had begun to notice that age was finally taking its toll on him and it depressed him. In talking with his family about his shocking death, I decided to ride the elephant in the room. "In my remarks, may I say how he died?" I asked and the family immediately said "yes, of course. Everyone will want to know, and besides, it's the truth." The day of the service came and the sanctuary was literally packed with people from all walks of life representing many different faith traditions. I said that he died by suicide, and that I knew some were hearing this for the first time. Then I said, "We may have mixed feeling about this; we may be angry that he would leave us still seemingly so vital; we may have a grudging respect for his choice, regardless of how we feel about how he chose to end his life, we are left with our questions, our grief, and our need to celebrate the life that was his."

Afterwards, so many people from both the church and other faith traditions thanked me for simply naming the truth and not speaking evasive platitudes about his death.

One woman said "I have never attended a memorial service for someone who died by suicide where the minister spoke so honestly about it. It was a liberating moment for me." I give the credit to his family, steeped in their Unitarian Universalist faith, who did not take Emily Dickinson's advice to "tell the truth, but tell it slant." Instead, they said: "This happened to me. To us. To my family." There is great strength in honest truth telling.

We know this of course, from our GBLTQ members and friends, whose coming out stories remind us of how painful and dangerous telling the truth can be. I remember Kim - a brand new member from rural Ohio, who told us the story of being bodily thrown out of his parent's house by his father when he told him he was transgender. When

people of color who attend our largely Euro-American/white congregations tell me that when they are able tell their story and it is not received with denial, "oh no, that couldn't be true" but instead openly and in the spirit of "tell me more" this is a liberating experience for them. When their truth as a person of color is believed and not dismissed, then they may feel safe enough to call this place a spiritual home - where the stories of their lived experience will not be discounted or dismissed.

Truth telling ! It's a spiritual practice that's been a part of Unitarian Universalism for a long time. One of the most important aspects of our religious community is embedded in the belief that "revelation is not sealed," meaning that the truths you hold onto right now may be subject to change. Religious conservatives call this a form of moral relativism; meaning that truth is not something that carved in stone, but more mutable, fluid and influenced by our relationships with one another. I know this to be true in my very bones, because of my own experience. Sixteen ago, I was called to serve a church in Cleveland, OH with my husband, the Reverend Wayne Arnason. The search committee was pretty excited about the prospect of getting two ministers for the price of one; and they really liked the fact that Wayne was a practicing Buddhist. That fit nicely with their largely humanist theology. However, they weren't so sure about me. I am a Christian Unitarian Universalist, which is not only a minority theology in our faith, but frankly, one that is met with a good deal of suspicion, hostility and even fear. All the other parts of our match were good, except for that one, pretty big thing: a Christian called to serve a Unitarian Universalist humanistically oriented church.

One of the members, an avowed atheist, decided it might be a good idea to keep track of how many times I used religious language - like God or spirituality. One sermon, he actually used a little clicker to help him keep count. He kept challenging me to be more precise in my use of language and I kept reminding him that the Christianity he was rebelling against was not the one I believed in. We went round and round, but fairly soon we realized that our shared love of Unitarian Universalism created a third place for a

new truth to emerge. One day, he pulled me aside after the service and said “Kathleen, I’ve had what you would call an “epiphany.” Really – Bob, that’s some pretty religious language for an atheist. “He said – I’ve figured out that Unitarian Universalism needs all of us. It needs me, the atheist; it needs you – the Christian, it needs Wayne the Buddhist. All of us.” From these two places of ours, we created an even greater truth – a deep love and respect and affection that continues to this day.

What we saw happening here in this sanctuary two weekends ago was a people forged together by respect and affection and pride in what has been developed over the last sixty years. What we heard was a desire to keep both the intimacy of the smaller fellowship you once were and engage in questions and actions of ultimacy; why are we here? What is our purpose? What shall we do, as the poet asks, with this one wild precious life of ours? It not only spoke well of this particular fellowship, but of the hope that I have for Unitarian Universalism as one that where different truths are spoken and joyfully received – a place where all of us can call home.

As I think about the tasks ahead of us, I don’t think that this Fellowship will have any trouble telling me or anyone else their truth. (Am I right about that?) I think the larger spiritual challenge for us can be found in another, equally familiar Emily Dickinson poem. The challenge is to hang onto hope - the “Hope” that she writes about is the thing with feathers -That perches in the soul - And sings the tune without the words - And never stops - at all.

In a sermon entitled “Planting Ourselves at the Gates of Hope,” the Reverend Victoria Safford says this about congregations like this Fellowship: “Our mission is to plant ourselves at the gates of Hope — not the prudent gates of Optimism, which are somewhat narrower; nor the stalwart, boring gates of Common Sense; nor the strident gates of Self-Righteousness, which creak on shrill and angry hinges (people cannot hear us there; they cannot

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pass through); nor the cheerful, flimsy garden gate of “Everything is gonna be all right.” But a different, sometimes lonely place, the place of truth-telling, about your own soul first of all and its condition, the place of resistance and defiance, the piece of ground from which you see the world both as it is and as it could be, as it will be; the place from which you glimpse not only struggle, but joy in the struggle. And we stand there, beckoning and calling, telling people what we are seeing, asking people what they see.”

Two weeks ago, that’s exactly what happened here; Wayne and I spoke not THE truth, not even “our truth,” but instead we named what we saw and asked you to do the same. And in that stack of pink sheets, I have to tell, we not only saw, but heard, and felt the power of this place in your life; of how you have been inspired by both the truths you hear proclaimed from the pulpit and the ones you hear from each other; by the music that is co-created by professionals and fellowship members; we heard stories of children and youth being shaped by the values they learn in Religious Education and acting on them in bold ways in the world; and underneath the words and the exclamation points on the page was a bass note that pulsed through it all, like a heartbeat, we heard “this is my spiritual home.”

What we heard and saw was not turning away from the pain or the weariness of change, but a desire to hold true to the image of the Fellowship you cherish, while knowing that truth is made anew every day, by every new story that enters it; with every new person that comes to the Fellowship, each of them moving and growing with us silently, like seeds, until the conditions are fully ripe and ready for them to blossom and contribute their gifts. This is a Fellowship that knows what liberation means, in heart and spirit, because you have seen it happen, one person at a time, year after year, and that is the commitment that I share with you.