

Truth Or Consequences

Unitarian Universalist Church of Southeastern Arizona

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Opening Words (#500, Denise Levertov, revised slightly)

Marvelous Truth, confront us at every turn, in every guise, iron ball, egg, dark horse, shadow, cloud of breath on the air,

Dwell in our crowded hearts, our steaming bathrooms, kitchens full of things to be done, the ordinary streets, and meet us here, now.

Thrust close your smile that we know you, terrible joy.

We are, all of us, seekers after the Truth.

Though we might use differing tools to conduct the search, science or sacred texts or meditation or travel or music or silence or dancing or doing or simply being and paying attention, we are all, in one way or another, *looking* for Truth.

And indeed our history, our tradition, is replete with powerful examples of this search. Today, in Unitarian Universalist churches across the world, we are commemorating the 450th anniversary of the martyrdom of Michael Servetus. He grew to maturity in the days of the Protestant Reformation, after Luther challenged the Catholic Church and, in the words of Stanley Kauffmann reviewing the new movie on Luther, "proposed the possibility of human judgment in the realm of the spirit, of personal evaluation in religious matters." Servetus made use of that newfound freedom to study the Bible himself. In his commitment to the truth as he came to understand it, he persisted in speaking out against what he saw as the hopelessly complex doctrine of the Trinity, taught by the Church since the days of the Nicene Creed in 325, seeing it as not only un-Biblical, but a positive deterrent to faith in the love of the One God.

For these ideas, printed in pamphlets, distributed and read widely, a Council of Protestant leaders ordered him to be burned at the stake, along with a copy of his book, *The Restitution of Christianity*. His

death led to a substantial outcry against the practice of killing heretics, and ultimately helped to spark a reevaluation of the rights of individual conscience in religious matters.

Today, in Geneva, there was a special service in his honor. Tomorrow, representatives of the global UU Community will gather for an act of remembrance at the place where he died. We Unitarian Universalists across the world honor his courage in speaking out and celebrate the space that he helped to create, the ground that he helped to till, in which our tradition could take root and flourish.

And at the same time, to be totally honest, I feel quite distant from the actual ideas that led to his death. I cannot imagine suffering minor inconvenience for them, let alone the agony that he suffered. What was this truth that had so taken hold of Michael Servetus and what does it have to do with me?

Listen to this description of his death from *Out of the Flames* by Lawrence and Nancy Goldstone.

On October 27, 1553, Michael Servetus was led to the stake. Even now, his enemies would not leave him alone. Every step of the way, Farel [one of the clergy who had condemned him] walked next to him, whispering in his ear, urging him to confess his errors and be spared the flames. Servetus prayed silently in reply.

Finally, they arrived at the hill at Champel, with its stake and pile of green wood. Servetus was seated; an iron chain was wrapped around his body and a thick rope wound several times around his neck. The crown of straw and leaves and sulphur was placed on his head, and his book was lashed to his arm.

The fire was lit. Servetus shrieked. At the end of the half hour[!] that it took him to die, he was heard to moan, "Oh Jesus, Son of the Eternal God, have pity on me!"

One biographer says that it is quite possible that even at that point if Servetus had simply shifted one word in his anguished prayer and said, "Oh, Jesus, Eternal Son of God, have pity on me," he might have been saved from the flames. (He cried out, "Oh Jesus, Son of the Eternal God"...if he had said, "Oh Jesus, *Eternal Son* of God"). His heresy was only *that far way* from the established doctrine.

So why did he let them do it? Michael Servetus was not crazy. He was something of a genius, which carries its own eccentricities, and he purportedly could be quite overbearing in his arrogance, but he was not bent on self-destruction, did not have a martyr complex as far as I can tell. Indeed, he pleaded with John Calvin for his life, he begged for a more merciful form of death...and when I read his story, a part of me wants to say, "Michael, Michael, Michael, just say what they want to hear. It's sort of a minor point, don't you think? And truth, you know, it's a relative thing."

But when it came to renouncing what he had written, another biographer writes, "He remained faithful unto death to what he believed was the Truth."

Do I have, have I ever had, such a relationship with the truth?

I think, as Unitarian Universalists today, we have something of an ambivalent relationship with truth. We long ago gave up on finding *A* truth. *The* truth. Capital 'T' Truth, I mean; the single Truth that we would each recognize as our own and that would yet serve to unify us all in perfect harmony. It doesn't appear to be forthcoming.

We came to realize that the search for truth must be carried out on an individual basis, and to draw from that understanding in various traditions: from Buddha saying to "hold fast to the truth within you," to Jesus saying, "The Kingdom of God is within you," to Muhammad saying, "Whoever knows himself, knows God," to Emerson writing on self-reliance, to Frank Sinatra singing, "My Way."...(ok, maybe not Frank Sinatra so much).

But this apparent fragmentation of truth into individual components has led to some unfortunate misconceptions about the value we place on truth and the importance of what we believe. I have heard it said that in Unitarian Universalist churches "you can believe anything you want," and, further, that "you don't have to believe anything."

You don't have to believe anything? Now, I realize that this sentence has nuances of meaning that are invoked depending on where you put the emphasis, but let me say here and now, *you have to believe something*, and that is not because you are a Unitarian Universalist, that is because you are a human being.

This piece of dialogue from a science fiction novel by Orson Scott Card entitled *Shadow of the Hegemon* illustrates my point:

"...I don't know a soul who doesn't maintain two separate lists of doctrines—the ones that they *believe* that they believe; and the ones that they actually try to live by. I'm simply one of the rare ones who knows the difference. You, my boy, are not."

"Because I don't believe in any doctrines," [he replied].

"That...is proof positive of my assertion. You are so convinced that you believe only what you believe that you believe, that you remain utterly blind to what you *really* believe without believing you believe it."

Our beliefs may be unexamined, they may be hiding under denial, they may be masquerading as the beliefs that we think we *should* have, but they are there. They may be deeply rooted, they may be mercurial and fleeting, they may enrich our lives or eat away at our joy, but they are there. They are often hard to look at or admit, but we cannot risk leaving them hidden because they have real consequences in our lives and in the lives of those around us.

Here is a sort of ridiculous, hopefully helpful, and undoubtedly embarrassing example:

Last Wednesday was *one of those days*. I was just in a fog. I wasn't getting anything done. I saw no possibility of getting anything done. I was depressed and frustrated and I couldn't seem to perform the simplest tasks without dropping something, spilling something, or losing something. From this vantage point, I can see that I was creating my own problems with my attitude, but in the midst of it, *I believed that there was a conspiracy against me of every living and non-living thing*. And as I found myself scolding the can opener in a frighteningly loud voice, I managed to shock myself into some sort of self-awareness and ask, "Do I really believe that inanimate objects are intent on foiling my every move?"

Crazy as it sounds, I had to admit to myself (and now to you, but it stays here, ok?)...I had to admit to myself that this was what I believed, for however short a time, and it wasn't until I exposed that crazy belief to the light of day that I could change it in light of greater truths that I hold about how the world works.

I think that this example, silly as it is, may mirror how belief systems operate at much larger levels also. The first step in a free and responsible search for truth and meaning is to uncover what we really do believe right now. I think the distance between what we believe and what we *believe* we believe is a distance that we must traverse.

Ed Waters spoke to this distance earlier when he spoke of the children that we say we care about, but know we do not; the people whom we call brother and sister, but do not treat as such. I can claim respect for the interdependent web of all living things, but am I still living from a much deeper belief that convinces me I am safely insulated from the implications of that web? It is not about being correct or feeling guilty or ashamed. The only way I can move closer to what I *wish* to believe, what I am discovering to be true, is by honestly assessing what it is that I now hold to be true. This is possibly what William James was referring to when he said, "The greatest enemy of any one of our truths may be the rest of our truths."

This is not an easy task. It's why we do it together, with the support of a community, with the combined wisdom of all of us here. Jesus' phrase, "The Kingdom of God is within you," has more recently been translated as, "The Kingdom of God is *among* you." Both are true, I think, and these are truths that we as Unitarian Universalists have always held dearly. It is precisely *because* we value truth that we cannot leave it to some religious authority to mandate. It must come from within, be formed from our experience and insight, take shape in our crowded hearts, make room in our steaming bathrooms and kitchens full of things to be done, walk with us on the ordinary streets, be tested, supported, challenged within a caring community like this one here and now. The free and responsible search for truth and meaning is not only a right, it is an expectation, and each of us is called to share the meanings we discover.

Because truth has consequences. Relative as it might be, it is how we are; it is what we do; it is where we stand. William James said, "Truth in our ideas means their power to work."

"We believe it is important from what beliefs we mold our action," wrote Sophia Fahs, Unitarian minister and educator, some 400 years after Servetus' death. "We believe it is even more important how we determine our beliefs and with what sincerity we keep them."

Michael Servetus did not die for an obscure theological point. He protested because of the consequences he feared of such a doctrine, a belief that could not be grasped by the common person, that could only perpetuate the corrupt authority of church officials, that could only obscure the love of God that was everyone's birthright.

"...[A]s soon as we try to think about God, we are turned aside to three phantoms," he wrote, "so that no kind of unity remains in our conception...[W]hat else is being without God but being unable to think about God?"

Michael Servetus, besides being a controversial theologian, was also a physician and the first to understand and record how blood circulated through the body. It is my hope that the heritage of freedom, integrity and commitment we receive from his life and work circulate like life-giving blood through this body of seekers, empowering our actions in the world, enlivening our attention to the truths within and among us.

Closing Words

As you believe, so you become.
As you become, so you believe..

- *Author Unknown*