

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, New York
“Truth Matters”

Rev. Samuel A. Trumbore November 7, 2021

Reading

As a guide for seeking and speaking the truth, this morning, I bring to you a Truth Pledge as our reading. Developed by Dr. Gleb Tsipursky, a behavioral economist, cognitive neuroscientist, and a bestselling author, it was first published in 2016. It inspires his most recent book: Pro Truth: A Pragmatic Plan to Put Truth Back Into Politics (Changemakers Book, 2020). The Pro-Truth Pledge is partially a reaction (and a would-be answer) to recent political trends in the US and UK, for example to alternative facts, growth of fake news and post-truth politics; all of which are seen as acute problems.

You might be interested to know that this pledge has been scientifically tested and shown to be effective at increasing truthful sharing on Facebook and a statistically significant increase in alignment of the truth pledge taker’s behavior with the pledge. You can learn more here:

<https://www.protruthpledge.org/>

I Pledge My Earnest Efforts To:

Share truth

- **Verify:** [fact-check](#) information to confirm it is [true](#) before accepting and sharing it
- **Balance:** share the whole truth, even if some aspects do not support my opinion
- **Cite:** share my sources so that others can verify my information
- **Clarify:** distinguish between my [opinion and the facts](#)

Honor truth

- **Acknowledge:** acknowledge when others share [true](#) information, even when we disagree otherwise
- **Reevaluate:** reevaluate if my information is challenged, retract it if I cannot verify it
- **Defend:** defend others when they come under attack for sharing [true](#) information, even when we disagree otherwise
- **Align:** align my opinions and my actions with [true](#) information

Encourage truth

- **Fix:** ask people to retract information that [reliable sources](#) have disproved even if they are my allies
- **Educate:** compassionately inform those around me to stop using [unreliable sources](#) even if these sources support my opinion

- **Defer:** recognize the [opinions of experts](#) as more likely to be accurate when the facts are disputed
- **Celebrate:** celebrate those who retract incorrect statements and update their beliefs toward the [truth](#)

Take the Pro-Truth Pledge

Spoken Meditation

What is true in this moment, isn't far away.
It isn't on some higher ethereal plain
That takes years of navel gazing to discover.

It is right here, right now.

What you are experiencing right now is true.

Not necessarily *your thinking about*
what you are experiencing right now.
But the flow of this moment into the next moment
Seamlessly and without interruption.

If you can just know what is arising and passing away
right now
you will be deeply in touch with what is true
right now.

There isn't any right or wrong or better or worse to right now.
It is what it is.
All you add is *the knowing* of it
moment to moment.

Noticing what changes.
Noticing what *doesn't* change ... if you can.

The only effort required is paying close attention to
what is
right now.

Let's give it a try during the silent meditation
if
you're willing and able.

Sermon

Grant Cornwell, President of Rollins College, in 2018, wrote:

In the anti-intellectualism of our current political culture, I see a...disregard for the value of truth and its pursuit with integrity. Maybe worse, I see a dismissive attitude toward the knowing of facts...What is true has been displaced by what reinforces one's ideology and politics—and ideology trumps facts. I see this as a threat to democracy.... ([source](#))

I didn't realize how much I've taken for granted the value of seeking the truth until our previous national president was elected. What shocked me was the Republican willingness to select a candidate who had such disregard for truth telling – a total lack of interest for what was true and a lack of even embarrassment for telling lie after lie after lie.

I didn't understand, at first, why Republicans would tolerate a liar-in-chief as President ... until I recognized the reason. This self-promoting narcissist could stay on message and tell his supporters exactly what they wanted to hear. His supporters weren't interested in the truth either. They were interested in picking a winner. The only thing that was important was gaining power and using it to serve their interests. Truth wasn't close in importance to his supporters than power. And this former President understood that being truthful didn't matter at all. Only winning mattered.

I'd agree with Dr. Cornell that this former President's almost total disregard for truth has threatened and even deeply damaged the foundations of our democracy. He thought he could just give orders, as if he was the national CEO, and everyone would just do his bidding. Separation of powers were an inconvenience, the courts an obstacle for his agenda. He wasn't interested in being persuasive. He preferred intimidation. He expected his Republican minions to fall into line with his agenda. He did everything he could to try to dismantle the barriers that prevented him from dictating law and policy from the Whitehouse.

But that isn't how our system of government with its many checks and balances was set up. And thankfully it held together. The courts reined in Executive Branch overreach. Congress wouldn't cooperate with his directives. And truth still mattered. Truth still mattered because of the anti-authoritarian nature of our system of government.

America inherits the Protestant Christian allergy to authority that goes back to the Reformation. The Papal abuse of power and wealth extraction from the poor and the rich, precipitated Martin Luther to kick start the rebellion nailing his 95 theses to the Wittenberg Church door (so legend has it). The printing press allowed the theses to be widely circulated and give his protest traction. These reformers who joined Luther's protest believed they didn't need the Catholic Church to gain access to salvation. The Truth of Jesus' saving message was in the written word, the scriptures. They alone contained the truth that would set us free and assure salvation. The lineage of the Church with its ornate buildings, priests, and sacraments, that could be scrapped. All that was needed was the book. All that was needed was to understand the truth of the message. Choose truth over institution.

Reading scripture and accessing truth directly is very appealing. It wouldn't have made any sense without the invention of the printing press so Bibles could be widely distributed. They had to be translated into a vernacular that could be read. And people needed to learn to read and interpret the

meaning of the text to access its truth. In an age with Google searches, I wonder how many of us can imagine just how exciting it was to learn to read and have access to the formerly secret text only accessible to the priests. To read it then go to the corner pub or coffeehouse, have a few steins of beer or cups of coffee and argue about what it all meant. The Lord was *right there* speaking on the page for all to see.

Professors of literature and history were the party poopers who poured cold water on this amateur scholarship. There were problems with translation as the Bible was written in the ancient languages of Hebrew and Greek. Nuances of meaning mattered that got lost in translation. Then came the literary criticism that picked apart the inconsistencies in the text suggesting the document didn't have just one author, God, dictating it from on high. Various scribes had been editing the text to interpret it. They did so to make the message more consistent with the expectations of their contemporary believers in their political and social setting so they would understand. But in the process their edits changed the meanings. Changed the truth. Contemporary historians exposed the inaccuracies of the stories based on the archeology of the ancient lands. Rather than a consistent, historically accurate document, it began to fall apart into competing, sometimes contradictory narratives and agendas.

Then science came along and undercut the claims of the document itself. No, the earth wasn't just 6,000 or so years old. No, origins of the species didn't happen as Genesis describes. Where were the dinosaurs? No, there wasn't a physical Garden of Eden from which humanity was ejected. No, the dead do not come back to life. No, we don't have physical evidence for angels and devils. Revelation isn't a reliable guide to truth.

Finally, even the claim of objective truth is suspect, so says contemporary literary theorists and philosophers. Our subjective frame of reference distorts our perception of what is true. Our heritage, culture, abilities and disabilities, our belief system, our language all shape how we understand what is real, what is true. The Constitution of the United States of America has different meaning to white Southerners than Black Southerners. It was a document created to protect the interests of white slave and land owners of Northern European extraction and a lot of that language is still there. It created institutions designed to protect their interests.

In the struggle for truth, Unitarian Universalists have sided with the professors and the scientists. We've always been adjacent to the schools of higher education putting our faith in the advance of knowledge. Rather than take sides in wars of epistemology, in ways of knowing, we turn it over to the sanctity of the individual mind. It isn't my job to tell you what is true. I can tell you *what I think* is true, but it isn't binding on you. You are just as likely to come right back at me *with your perception of truth* and *change my mind*. We want each person to seek truth and meaning and come here to compare notes on the journey through life.

The danger of this individualistic approach is self-delusion. I come upon what seems like truth but upon closer inspection, those truth claims fall apart, hopefully before I start signing big checks to a cultish leader. The conspiracy obsessed Internet truth-seekers often deceive themselves by doing research that excludes trusted, reliable sources that question their theories. We are all vulnerable to being seduced by what we want to believe is true but might be just too consistent or coherent to be

true. The freedom of our searching process makes us vulnerable to exploitation. But so does uncritically accepting truth claims of an established religious tradition.

Our principle puts it this way, “a free and responsible search for truth and meaning.” This is a lot to take on as an individual with limited knowledge and capacity. How am I to assess big questions like:

- Did Jesus exist?
- If he did, was he *actually* the Son of God?
- If he was the Son of God, was he also *co-eternal* with God? Traditional Unitarian theology rests on the belief that if Jesus existed, he must have been a creature *not* a creator.
- Did he come back from the dead ... or just not die on the cross?

Or how about more mundane questions about which we don't have any personal experience

- Was the moon landing faked?
- What about the 9/11 conspiracy theories?
- How about the accelerating expansion of the universe – doesn't seem that way when I look up at night. Maybe its just light pollution.
- What about this crazy idea about dark energy and matter – I just don't see it.

To address these vulnerabilities in seeking the truth, Unitarian Universalism has some strategies.

First, we've identified sources we can go to in our search for truth. We appreciate our first source, the direct experience of mystery and wonder, our subjective experience, but we don't stop there. We may go to Jewish and Christian scriptures. We can also investigate world and earth centered religious traditions and humanistic teachings. We can check the results of science. We're open to many sources of wisdom to guide and shape our search for truth and meaning.

We have a responsibility to be fact based, as much as possible; to test our thinking to make sure it aligns with reality. I like to describe UUism as reality based religion. Critical tools in that process are the use of logic and reason. The reliability and limitations of sources are also important. I'm not going to use Christian theology to help me understand dark matter and energy, though one might have interesting metaphors for the other.

As a guide for that process, I was pleased to find the truth pledge. It is an excellent reference point for honest, sincere truth seeking. It is a way to seek truth rather than seek to be right or prove others wrong. I encourage it's use as a guide for truth seeking, even a spiritual discipline for growth and development.

And in our search process, as Unitarian Universalists, there are limits to what we will consider as we search for truth. We need to respect some guardrails in the process. We are not going to seek truth and meaning in the toxic, socially destructive areas like racist, heterosexist, homophobic, ableist thinking. If we are willing listen to those who are expressing those views, we will also want to hear, *at the same time*, those who provide counter-arguments, so the latent tendencies implanted by social conditioning white folks are striving to unlearn *don't* get activated. As for me, I'm not wasting my time on QAnon theories that Democrats' are scheming to harvest the blood of children, or examining the bogus evidence showing that the COVID-19 vaccines have microchips in them.

We will want to go to reliable sources in our search, ones we can trust. We may not be able to run all the calculations to convince ourselves the universe's expansion is accelerating. We can have a forum with Heidi Newberg who was one of the scientists who developed this theory. Most of us can't analyze three thousand year old artifacts from Palestine or read ancient Hebrew or Greek. We can read generally accepted books that can help us understand their significance. There is a reliable, collective pool of understanding and wisdom we can draw on to guide us.

Once I've come up with a sense of what is true, I'm going to want to find others to share my ideas *and hear their response*. I'd like those people to be thoughtful folks who know me and I know them. I do so in hope that they will have a wholistic response to my ideas that I wouldn't get in an anonymous Internet chat room or asking a question at a public lecture. I'd like to be in a shared journey of growth and development over months and years with others who know where I've been and the direction I hope to go. We already know we are not going to all agree, and that isn't the point of the shared journey. It is an appreciation that we are moving collectively toward truth and the shared journey is mutually supportive. We may not find the same provisional truth, but we can inspire each other through our efforts.

This is the great benefit of growth and development in a Unitarian Universalist congregation. We're not on this journey alone. Seeking and speaking the truth matters. Let us pledge ourselves to this effort.

Prayer of Affirmation

Let us be grateful this morning
for the amazing privilege of living in a free and democratic nation,
a nation of great resources, opportunity and ability.

We are a land of many colors, cultures,
beliefs, backgrounds and ideologies.
We embrace different politics and
a peaceful way to settle our differences.

We vote.

On Tuesday we exercised our freedom to elect our leaders.

Because of our political diversity,
some of us woke up happy Wednesday
while others were disappointed.
(I sense a lot of the disappointed here this morning)

Whether we chose them or not,
May we come together in support for our newly elected leaders.

May they be guided in their ability

to serve with wisdom, courage, and integrity
as they represent us and govern.

May their eyes and hearts be opened to see our greatest needs
and set the priorities for our government

May they not be distracted by the trivial from
the significant and profound needs of their constituents.

May they be surrounded by wise and ethical people
who will provide good counsel and encouragement.

May they find hope, wisdom, and strength as they govern.

And may we not forget that it doesn't matter who elected them

They were elected to serve all of us and all our needs.

And it is okay to remind them of that.

May we not forget our civic duty to communicate with our elected officials
and remind them of their oath to serve all the people
for the good of the whole community.

Blessed Be.