

First Unitarian Universalist Church
Rev. Sandra Fees
Seeking the Truth: Principle 4
February 25, 2007



There are many jokes Unitarian Universalists like to tell about themselves. The search for truth and meaning, our fourth principle, turns out to be at the crux of a number of them. We seem to know that we privilege the search in matters of faith, and that sometimes we even get carried away with this idea.

It's good that we are able to be a bit lighthearted with ourselves, even able to poke fun at ourselves, and not take ourselves too seriously.

Here is a classic:

What do you get when you cross a UU with a Jehovah's Witness?
Someone who knocks on your door, week after week, for no apparent reason.

Or try this one:

A UU brought a friend to church one Sunday. After the service, a crowd of UUs gathered, pointing up and looking at the steeple. The friend turned and looked but saw nothing.

He asked, "What are they looking at?"
"They're looking at the question mark on the top of the steeple," said the UU.
"What question mark? Said the friend. "I don't see any question mark up there."
"Well," said the UU, "I guess you have to be a real UU to see it" (The Church Where People Laugh, ed Gwen Foss).

This one makes me wonder, has the question mark become our test of faith? It's a funny idea. It is so much the inverse of how we have come to understand religion in general. Rather than being able to recite a creed or doctrine, must we be able to see the question mark above the building?

Last week I talked about how many of us were attracted to this faith because we see ourselves as spiritual seekers. Many who visit us are on a spiritual search. I consider myself a seeker, and I'm pretty confident most of you see yourselves as seekers.

But what does it mean to be a seeker, a questioner, and what is it we are in search of? What questions are we seeking answers to? Are we in search of God or something else? Where's the best place to look? How will we know if we have found what we are looking for? I seem to have my share of questions myself this morning.

Our questions can lead us all kinds of places. I think of Maria (Mar-eye-ah) Mitchell who was a Unitarian and America's first woman astronomer. She grew up a Quaker. When she was a child, Mar-eye-ah and her father used to do stargazing together. They would take out a telescope and search the sky over Nantucket Island and above the Atlantic Ocean. They would look at the constellations. They would chart the location of the moon.

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She became a Unitarian because she said people like Ralph Waldo Emerson “woke up her mind.” At the age of 29, she discovered a new comet. It was named Mitchell Comet after her. As a scientist, she asked lots of questions. And as a professor of astronomy, she used to tell her students, “We must question everything” (from We Believe, “Session 11: Asking Questions”). Mitchell, it would seem, was a good Unitarian. For her, questions were at the very heart of life.

Sincere questions can help us to discover truth and meaning. They help open up the possibilities for learning and also for finding answers that are true and right. Our search for truth and meaning may lead us to ask questions about the nature of God and existence, about why we are here, and how we got here.

Our search can lead us to wonderful religious discoveries. It can help us recognize other religious perspectives. It can cause us to think about spiritual matters we’d never dreamed of before. And of course it can lead us to more questions. But the idea isn’t to wander aimlessly, asking why why why why, without hoping to find answers.

There’s a story about Nasrudin. Every day, he rode the train to work. Each day the train conductor came and asked for his ticket. One day, when the train conductor asked, he began fumbling around in his coat pockets, and his pants pockets. He even fumbled in other people’s pockets. He looked everywhere. He looked in his briefcase, in his bags, and even in other people’s bags.

Nothing. Well finally the train conductor said to him, “Nasrudin, I’m sure you have a ticket. Why don’t you look for it in your breast pocket? That is where most men keep it.”

Nasrudin said, “Oh no, I can’t look there. Why, if it isn’t there, I would have no hope” (from Awakening: Conversations with the Masters by Anthony de Mello).

I’m not really like Nasrudin. I want to look where I think I might actually find the ticket. When I ask the big questions about the truth and meaning of life, I want to be able to find some answers, even if it’s not what some might call the absolute and final truth.

I’m willing to live with the idea that the search may take years or a lifetime. I’m also open to the possibility that I may have to rediscover what I already thought I knew or even revise what I know, which happens sometimes.

We live in an age where some have come to the conclusion that truth is relative. In other words, there is no final truth, no capital T truth. It can be hard to live in a world like this. Just as it is hard to live in a world where there are few, if any, definite answers to our questions.

In this regard, we UUs tend to straddle two worlds. Most of us would agree that there are a few truths that have some universal value, things like love and compassion and justice. We also recognize that not all truth is known to us and that no one of us can know the whole truth. We have learned, sometimes the hard way, that what we think is the truth may turn out to be a partial truth, a misinterpretation, or even a lie.

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Sometimes there is not yet enough information and capability to know the answers to our questions. The earth may be round, but is Pluto a planet or not? When it comes to the great religious questions, we recognize the partial nature of truth.

Many of us grew up in another church where we learned about religious truth and meaning – many of us in Christian churches. Some in the Jewish tradition. Others are largely unchurched. In those religious communities, we might have learned that the Bible or Torah is the only source of information about God and religious matters. We might have learned that certain rituals must be observed for us to be in right relationship with God or others. We might have learned that there is one and only one idea of God.

Yet here we are today. Many of us because we want a religious home that acknowledges a diversity of theological perspectives. As Jean Starr Williams, a religious educator has written,

We think of each person and each constellation of persons in our community as being in need of intellectual enlightenment. It is not enough to know only the worlds we ourselves move in. Each of us must be invited, encouraged, even prodded to look beyond our immediate surroundings to the wide world around us. We need to strive toward an educated outlook (Church).

We need to strive to respect insights that are different from our own. And so we try to acknowledge the partial nature of our own understanding. We recognize there is some truth in the beliefs that others hold but do not allow others to deny our truths.

This requires a certain amount of humility. If we are to make room for the possibility that we are wrong, or only partially right, we need to be humble. Have you ever found that on something you are most adamant about, you are in most need of humility ([A Chosen Faith](#), “The Cathedral of the World” by Forrest Church)?

The partial nature of truth and the consequent need for humility is illustrated in the children’s story this morning of the blind men and the elephant. Each one of us can have part of the truth, a piece of the answer to life’s big questions. But none of us is going to know the whole truth or be fully right.

So we live in a place, not of confusion, hopefully, and not of despair, but in a place where we are able to reach out with one hand to hold onto the things we know, the experiences we’ve had, the learning, wisdom, and knowledge.

This includes what we have found on our own individually and also what has been acquired by society throughout the ages. At the same time, we hold open the other hand to receive new revelations, new possibilities, new experiences that may alter what we hold in the first hand.

As human beings, we have a desire to search for and find meaning in life. We want to believe that our lives are purposeful. Consider Opus and Auggie, the comic strip.

Opus and Auggie are staring up at the night sky filled with stars and a full moon.

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Opus says, "Auggie, ol' buddy, ever wonder how all of this came to be?"

Auggie says, "You don't believe in God, Opus?"

Opus says, "I'm a penguin. We're not sure what we believe in. Except purpose. We believe in having purpose. Also lots of squid."

"That's ridiculous. If you think this is all just a cosmic accident, you're left purposeless!"

"I'm not purposeless!" insists Opus.

"Yeah well, if we really are merely atoms bumping around by chance, there's little hope for finding meaning in life. Yawn." And with that Auggie falls asleep.

Just then it starts to rain. Opus looks up at the sky and then covers Auggie with a coat and puts an umbrella over him to protect him from the rain. Opus concludes, "Ah, life's meaning. Maybe it's no so much found as it is ... made" (Opus, September 17, 2006).

Ah, life's meaning. Something we seek. Something we find. Something we make. Something as simple as protecting a friend in a rainstorm.

May it be so. Amen.