

If you were not here last week, for the next few weeks I will be doing a “sermon series” of sorts (say that five times fast) taking a look at the words of our Affirmation Statement—both as we have it written and how it was originally written by American Unitarian minister L. Griswold Williams—to take a look at what it actually says, and what meaning those words can have for us as Unitarian Universalists. Last week, we looked at the first line: “love is the doctrine of this church”; today, we will be taking a look at the second line of the Affirmation: “the quest of truth is its sacrament.” Or, should it be “the quest for truth is our sacrament”?

We are only two lines into the Affirmation Statement and we have already hit a point of contention between our Affirmation and the original statement by L. Griswold Williams. Williams’ original wording spoke of “the quest of truth.” Considering that he was writing in 1937—during the first half of the 20th century—this language is more consistent with the older Protestant Christian language that was still present in many Unitarian writings from around the same time period. It is also modernist in its outlook and approach—the idea is suggested that there is a specific universal and objective “truth” as the goal of this quest that can be eventually reach and claimed as a prize. As the 20th century continued ahead—and especially for us as UUs after the merger in 1961 between the Unitarian and Universalist denomination—a more postmodern understanding of truth as something that was relative—and often based on social realities and lived experiences was acknowledge and embraced. This is the reason many UU congregations ended up rewriting their Affirmation Statements and changing the wording from “the quest of truth” to “the quest for truth”—in recognition of the fact that the truth that one person may be in

pursuit of can look completely different (or be defined completely differently) than that of someone else, and that both pursuits are equally valid.

I could continue on into a sermon that dives deeper into 20th century philosophical understanding. But, I have a feeling that it is not the sermon that many of you want to hear—nor, to be honest, is it the sermon that I would like to deliver. What I do find interesting is that, while I do love a good semantic argument as much as anyone—and I have been in plenty of UU spaces where the debate over “of versus from” debate has raged on, I feel like it misses the importance of what this line is actually saying. What I would like to do is to reframe this statement and to move away from the word truth and focus on two of the other words: quest and sacrament.

Firstly, let us take a look at the word sacrament. Sacrament—just like the word “doctrine” last week—is another one of those religious words that seems very out of place in a UU context. This is because our understanding of sacraments is taken from how other denominations define the word sacrament based on their understanding and their beliefs. Sacraments are prominent parts of the Roman Catholic, Anglican, Lutheran, and Orthodox churches, and are variously defined as “a religious ceremony or ritual regarded as imparting divine grace,” “a visible symbol of the reality of God,” and “an outward sign of inward grace that has been instituted by Jesus Christ”—just to name a few of the definitions that I was able to find. None of these are very helpful to us in understanding what the word sacrament means for us as UUs. However, the word “sacrament” itself comes from the Latin word sacramentum meaning “sacred oath.” This is a direct translation into Latin of the Greek word μυστήριον—the root of our modern day English word “mystery.” What this means is that we can define the word “sacrament” as “a thing of

mysterious and sacred significance,” which is a much more accessible and relatable starting point for us, especially if we focus on the second word: quest. And especially if we focus on the fact that the QUEST is the sacrament, and not the TRUTH.

Unitarian Universalists are a people who are already well acquainted with the concept of questing for things. Many of us chose to go on quests that took us from the faith traditions that we grew up in because the truths that we were presented left us with more unsolved questions that they provided us with answers. We became seekers looking for different spiritual paths and longing for spiritual wisdom that would put things into perspective for us. We decided to try out the UU church because we read their website and there was something that sounded different about it—like maybe it had answers that we had not heard of before; answers that might make a difference to us. So, we came on a Sunday, we got to talking with people and having deep conversations, and we decided to say. And we have continued to come back every Sunday. But, let me ask you: can you conclusively say that, in that time, you have discovered any definite truth? Even though you may have found some of the answers to the questions that you have had in your time here, were all of your questions answered? Or, did it just give way to newer questions that you are still trying to answer; that you keep coming back, hoping to find the wisdom that answers them? Maybe you are because you do not have questions that need answers, but you are seeking to help find or create a world that reflects the hope in it that you desperately crave. And, you keep coming back because you believe that the deep conversations that we have here in this sacred space or the social justice that we do out in the community has something to do with bringing that hope about?

This are, of course, questions that I cannot provide the answer for; only you can answer them for yourself. But, it serves to illustrate that we as UUs understand that our own spiritual development and spiritual understanding is an ongoing journey and an everlasting process that takes precedence over any potential “truth” that we may discover. We also recognise that this process of being “seekers in the story of the world” is something that not only us, but all of humanity is participating in throughout the whole of our lives.

Rev. Bryan Jessup, minister emeritus at Humboldt UU Fellowship in Bayside, California, likens it to the Ancient Greek philosophical concept of *paideia*, the process of growing and developing people (linguistic sidebar: *paideia* is the root of the modern English word “pedagogy”). The Greeks understood that a person’s spiritual education was just as crucial to their personal development, and often included ethics, music, poetry, drama, philosophy, and religion alongside classical academic learning in subject like rhetoric, grammar, arithmetic, and science. The idea was that the best outcome for the development of a person was to grow a strong, centred human being who could ask questions and discover answers. In a sense, they were preparing their future progeny for what they knew would be a lifetime of asking questions that would lead them on a journey of finding answers. In many ways, our UU churches—and all of the religious education and social justice programs that we undertake—are halls of *paideia* where we come to continue along the quests for truth that we have already begun long before, which is the “thing of mysterious and sacred significance” that we keep cultivating for ourselves. When you put it like that, the quest for truth really is something that is our sacrament

The early 20th century British poet Alfred Noyes—himself a lifelong seeker, whose quest for truth led to him converting to Catholicism toward the end of his life—wrote: “We

are like children wandering by the shore gathering pebbles coloured by the waves while the great Sea of Truth (from sky to sky) stretches yet before us—boundless—waiting to be explored.

Dr. James Bosco, minister emeritus of education at Western Michigan University and an expert in educational technology and the education of future generations, when asked about what he wanted for his own adult children's educational future, was quoted as saying: "It's not that I want my adult children to have the exact tastes and preferences that I have. But I do want them to have their own continuing life-long passion for exploring life in mindful, compassionate ways. I want them, in their own way, to have deeply happy hearts—and to have a passion for intellectual and cultural growth. I not only want this for my own children—I want this for all people on the planet."

My hope for you today is that the quests for truth that you are on—both your own personal one and our collective journey as Unitarian Universalists—continues to foster in you a sense of lifelong passion for exploring life in mindful and compassionate ways. And may you come to the edge of the great Sea of Truth—as Alfred Noyes mentions—and not be afraid either of the great expanse that stretches in front of you, or of wading into the water and continue to explore. And, most importantly, may you never stop and never be afraid of continuing to ask questions—of yourself and of all of us, as well.

May it ever continue to be so. Blessed be. Amen. Shalom. Assalamu Aleikum.
Namaste. Thank you all so much.