

“The Quest for Truth,”  
a sermon given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson  
at the Universalist Unitarian Church of Haverhill  
on October 18, 2009

This is the second in my three part sermon series on our affirmation of faith, which begins, “Love is the doctrine of this church, the quest for truth is its sacrament, and service is its prayer.” Last week was “Love is the doctrine,” and so we’ve come to “the quest for truth.” We say we are people searching for truth. And not only that, we say this search is a sacrament. The classic definition of a sacrament comes from St. Augustine, who said a sacrament is “an outward and visible sign of an inward and invisible grace.” We are saying this search for truth is a holy act. But is it really?

Mike Durall, the source of our first reading<sup>1</sup>, doesn’t think so. He says the search for religious truth “should be a secondary focus, at best.” He is rightly concerned that the quest for truth can be a distraction, can too often become a private, self-centered search. He’s seen how this can keep a church from doing much good in the world.

I understand his concern. I’ve seen a focus on individual truth get used as a way to avoid discomfort and to preserve the status quo. I’ve seen it used to avoid accountability: “this is my truth” can precede, “so I don’t have to listen to you.” I’ve seen this take at least two distinct forms, excessive rationalism and self-indulgent spiritualism.

A couple of decades ago, the Episcopal church ran an ad campaign that featured a poster with a picture of Jesus and the words, “He came to take away your sins, not your mind.” This campaign was clearly a response to religious fundamentalism, which doesn’t ask people to think critically about their faith, but rather, to trust what they have been told. In our UU tradition, we’ve never had a problem with using our minds--if anything, we have been too heady. Sometimes we have let our skepticism and our rationalism keeps us from entering into mystery and wonder. Truth was seen as only what could be scientifically proven.

I’ve seen some folks in our tradition who seem to live from the head up. A generation ago, the most popular reason UUs gave for why they came to church was for intellectual stimulation. And some folks still say this. I don’t sense that’s why you are here, and I’m glad--because it’s not why I’m here either. If the search for truth is just an intellectual exercise, you might as well stay home and read the paper or listen to public radio or watch the Sunday morning talk shows.

At the other extreme, I’ve sometimes seen the search for truth look a lot like self indulgence. In our culture, people are hungry, and are seeking something that will satisfy this spiritual hunger, and there a plenty of folks who are happy to take

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<sup>1</sup> See “Reach Out to Become a Public Church,” by Michael Durall, in *UU World* available at [www.uuworld.org/ideas/articles/145381.shtml](http://www.uuworld.org/ideas/articles/145381.shtml)

advantage of this, who have products and services for the spiritual seeker. So the search can look like a shopping trip: “You know, if you’re going to really do meditation right, then you must have the \$100 cushion and matching prayer rug...” and spiritual experiences are treated like trinkets to be collected: “You’ve never been to Machu Picchu or sat at the feet of the Dali Lama?”

I’m glad to say that I don’t sense that either of these things--a hyper-intellectualism or a spiritual narcissism--are going on here. I just don’t see it. It seems to me that you have other, more important things to worry about.

So should we take Mike Durall’s advice and set aside the quest for truth? I certainly don’t want us only looking inward when there is so much we might do to be of use to our neighbors in this city. But I like our affirmation of faith, and don’t expect we are going to set it aside, or God forbid, revise it. That discussion could distract us for a year or more!

So is there another way to understand the quest for truth? Rather than, on one hand, a search for what is intellectually verifiable, and on the other, a feel-good spirituality? Is there a way to search for truth that is a sacred and not a selfish act, a way that is worthy of being called a sacrament? A way that leads us toward more engagement with others?

Let me tell you a bit about my own experience. Ten years ago, as I approached forty, I was restless. I wondered if there was something else I was supposed to be doing with my life. I thought about seminary, but I wasn’t sure I wanted to make such a big change. I was afraid of what I would have to give up. I wasn’t even sure I wanted to be a minister. But I sensed a call that, even though I didn’t understand it and couldn’t explain it, it was a call that, in the end, I couldn’t say no to. And the grace in that was that once I said yes to that call, I felt a sense of peace and clarity about it, and when I got to divinity school I knew it was where I was supposed to be.

It was a powerful experience there to worship with teachers and fellow students, and then to go to class with them, and later to sit around a table over lunch or dinner. My experiences in the chapel and in the cafeteria were just as important as the ones I was having in class. They seemed connected to each other, and these experiences informed one another.

I was a UU student who went to an Episcopal seminary because I sensed it was the place I needed to be. But in my first year I started to wonder, “Am I heading back to my Episcopal roots? Is there room within UUism for someone like me, who wants to engage with the Christian tradition, because I find life and liberation there?” I worried that UUism might be too rational and too skeptical for me. For a while I was on the fence, and unsure which side I was going to end up on. And this is not a bad thing to be doing in seminary, and not that unusual either. I knew others like me, who were finding their faith lives stirred up and turned around, heading in new and unexpected directions.

It was during my second year that I worked part-time at the UU church in Newburyport. I learned at least two things there--that I loved working in a parish setting, and that I did belong in the UU church. I realized how important it was to me to be in a tradition that is intentionally diverse--where all are free to conduct their own search for truth and meaning.

Looking back, this was a search for truth. But it wasn't something I did all alone, in my head or in a library or sitting cross-legged on the floor. No, it involved time in worship, in conversation with teachers and mentors and family and friends, time in prayer and meditation, time with people like you--people living out their faith through their daily joys and struggles, people with their own questions, people doing their own searching too.

What if we saw the quest for truth not as intellectual jousting or navel gazing, but simply as an openhearted search for what is real? Not as something we can figure out all on our own, but that needs to be tested in the context of community.

And isn't that why we are here? To touch what is real, to remember who we are and whose we are. Listen to these words from Joseph Campbell, from his conversations with Bill Moyers in *The Power of Myth*:

"People say that what we're all seeking is a meaning for life. I don't think that's what we're really seeking. I think what we're seeking is an experience of being alive, so that our life experiences on the purely physical plane will have resonance within our own innermost being and reality, so that we actually feel the rapture of being alive. That's what it's all finally about."

This past June I attended a workshop called "Ministry and Technology," and I was excited about this. We'd started the process of developing a new website here (and you will see it soon!), and I wondered about other technologies too, and how we might use them. The minister leading the workshop showed us how he used video clips to speak to his congregation on the website when he was away, and how he showed parts of movies in worship, as part of the sermon. It was interesting, and I thought it was creative and even effective, but I came away from that workshop with one big question: is it real? Is that what people come to church for--to look at images on a screen? Is that how people want to connect with their minister, or other church folks--through a computer and high speed internet?

Maybe I'm hopelessly old fashioned, but I think there is enough illusion and virtual reality in our world already. I think you come here for actual reality; you come here to see and be seen, to touch and be touched. To light real candles and see the light coming through these old stained glass windows. To stand before this congregation and share something that is painful or profound or joyous. To sense the presence of the holy in this place, whether in a piece of music, or an act of kindness, or in a moment you can't even explain, but in which you feel the presence of God. A moment like this one, when everything stops--and you realize you are here and you are alive and it is good.

I come to church, and I imagine you come to church, to touch what is real. To be part of something larger than yourself. To remember that you are loved, just as you are. And to find ways to share that love. We don't need to set aside the quest for truth, or give it second-class status, if it is a quest that draws us deeper into mystery, if it brings us into closer connection with others, if it calls us to love and serve our neighbors.

I had a teacher who said there are three essential parts to the religious life--gathering for worship as a body, like we're doing right now; and individual spiritual practice, whatever it is you do on your own to go deeper. She said the third part is the hardest to find--a small group of people to whom you can speak honestly about big and powerful things, who will listen to you and support you and also tell you the hard truth when you need to hear it.

It's what Starhawk was describing when she said "We are all longing to go home... Somewhere a circle of hands will open to receive us, eyes will light up as we enter, voices will celebrate with us whenever we come into our own power. Community means strength that joins our strength to do the work that needs to be done. Arms to hold us when we falter. A circle of healing. A circle of friends. Somewhere where we can be free."

That's how some of you have experienced Small Group Ministry, which is about to start up again. One of you said to me last spring, "My group really feels like church to me." I believe in these small groups as a place to wrestle with powerful questions, to touch what is deep and meaningful, to share your own story. Where the quest for truth is a sacrament, because it leads to greater communion with others.

I want us to provide here the kind of experience I had in seminary--classes for adults that are engaging and liberating, worship that inspires and challenges, and opportunities for connection that help us to go deeper and wider, to experience the wonder and mystery of life, and to reach out in care and in service to others. That's the kind of searching I hope we'll foster here.

A quest for truth worthy of the name, worthy of being called a sacrament, is neither a hardheaded rationalism or "spiritual" rejection of the physical world, with all its beauty and its pain. It is the search for what is real. It is the experience of being alive.

Amen.