

The Search for Truth and Meaning

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We, as Unitarian Universalists, covenant to affirm and promote the free and responsible search for truth and meaning. That is the fourth of the seven principles of our Association. And this is the fourth in an ongoing series of sermons on those principles. My aim this morning will be to probe this seemingly simple and straightforward principle, pick it apart into its component elements, explore some of its subtleties, and encourage a process of reflection on its meaning and importance that I hope will continue well beyond this morning's time together.

Let me begin by taking a brief look at each of the five key words of this principle; namely "free", "responsible", "search", "truth", and "meaning". Then I will consider some of the important interactions between these concepts, as we begin to pull out, or perhaps construct, the greater meaning of the whole. Finally, I will suggest some of the implications this principle has for the way we approach life – particularly the religious life.

At the heart of this principle is the idea of the Search. And indeed the search – the quest – is at the heart of the religious life. Religion is not something that can simply be handed to you complete and whole – though there are those who will try. Your religion – if it is to be true to your experience and your self – must be sought out over a lifetime. That's why the search must be free. Free of the imposition of another's formulation. Free of the limitations inherent in any particular religious text. You must be free to follow the search wherever it might lead.

But lest the search degenerate into mere flights of fancy, it must also be responsible. Responsible to what or whom? To your own conscience. To the well-established body of human knowledge that has grown out of the natural and social sciences. And to the larger community of which you are a part.

While "free" and "responsible" describe some qualities of the religious quest, "truth" and "meaning" are its objects. They are what we are searching for. Truth is most commonly used to mean correspondence with facts or with what is real or actual. An individual truth, then, is an expression of something that is actually the case. The capital-T Truth may be thought of as the collected totality of all small-t truths. Meaning, on the other hand, refers not so much to the objective reality of something, as to its inner significance. It is a matter not of fact, but of interpretation. Truth in the form of facts is an objective, empirical matter. Something is either true or it's not. Meaning depends on a subjective determination of importance or relevance.

All facts may be taken to be in some sense equal, until meaning is assigned to them. Then some facts become more important than others. And depending on which pieces of truth you consider most important, and depending on how they apply to your own experience and understanding, the meaning you draw from them may be very different than for someone else.

For instance, a minister decided that a visual demonstration would add emphasis to his Sunday sermon. Four worms were placed into four separate jars. The first worm was put into a container of alcohol. The second worm was put into a container of cigarette smoke. The third worm was put into a container of chocolate syrup. The fourth worm was put into a container of good clean soil. At the conclusion of the sermon, the minister reported the following results. The first worm in alcohol – dead. The second worm in cigarette smoke – dead. The third worm in chocolate syrup – dead. The fourth worm in good clean soil – alive! So the minister asked the congregation, "What can you learn from this demonstration?" One woman, sitting all the way in

the back, quickly raised her hand and said, “As long as you drink, smoke, and eat chocolate, you won’t have worms!”

The woman and the minister were working with the same set of observable facts. The meaning each drew from them was considerably different. Before I leave this discussion about truth and meaning, let me try a couple more ways of distinguishing them one from the other. While a grasp of the truth might be characterized as knowledge, I would consider a grasp of the meaning of something to be a matter of understanding. While truth deals primarily with the *what* of a situation, meaning also concerns itself with the *why*. That particular distinction has often been used to differentiate the respective roles of science and religion. That is, science addresses the *what* and *how*; religion the *why*. While I think such a separation of powers is exaggerated, it does reflect a real difference in emphasis. As religious seekers, we must work with the same set of facts or truths as science. Scientific method is particularly well-suited for winnowing out the facts. But since we have a lot of *why* questions, we must also seek meaningful patterns and larger frameworks of meaning within which things make sense to us.

Now let me return for a few moments to the concepts of “free” and “responsible”. Between these two there is the tension of opposites. Freedom would seem to imply a lack of responsibility. Responsibility seems to impose constraints on freedom. This is by no means the only instance of the dynamic tension of opposites in our Unitarian Universalist principles. In fact, the Rev. Frances Manly points out that “the overall structure of the Principles reflects the fact that as human beings we are always in dynamic tension between separateness and connection, between individualism and community, between autonomy and interdependence.” She finds a certain symmetry in the structure of the principles. There’s the inherent worth and dignity of every individual person in the first principle, and the interdependence of everything in the last. Similarly the second and sixth principles both address the issue of justice, one primarily from the perspective of the individual, the other with respect to world community.

The principle we’re talking about today, the fourth, is right smack in the middle. It’s kind of the pivot point of the principles, “the point where individualism and interdependence meet” in the free and responsible search for truth and meaning. This very structure, according to Manly, “suggest[s] that the very meaning we search for, the meaning of human existence itself, is to be found somehow in the fact that we are at once separate individuals of worth and dignity and [at the same time] interdependent parts of an indivisible whole.” Wow! There’s a chunk of meaning right there. And “free and responsible”, then, means that this search is not a purely individual one, but rather “it is inherently something we carry out both in the privacy of our own souls and in community with others.”

I have already suggested that given a particular set of facts or truths, the resulting meaning is not a foregone conclusion. So where does meaning come from, and do we discover it or create it? Existentialist Albert Camus suggests that there is no inherent meaning embedded in the universe. We humans don’t *find* meaning. We *create* it out of the raw stuff of our own experience. Viktor Frankl, based on his three years in Nazi prison camps, developed his own version of existential analysis, which found expression in his book *Man’s Search for Meaning*. Frankl suggests three sources of life meaning, which he calls experiential, attitudinal, and creative values.

By experiential values he means experiences of love or beauty, which are of intrinsic worth in and of themselves. Experiential meaning needs nothing else to justify it. It is good for its own sake, regardless of any external, objective factual evidence. By attitudinal values, Frankl means our capacity to find meaning even in suffering, tragedy and death. Suffering is not

inherently meaningful, but our response to it can inject meaning. As Ann Morrow Lindbergh wrote, “I do not believe that sheer suffering teaches. If suffering alone taught, all the world would be wise, since everyone suffers. To suffering must be added mourning, understanding, patience, love, openness, and the willingness to remain vulnerable.”

By creative values Frankl means commitment to another person or to a cause beyond the self. As the Rev. Richard Gilbert puts it, “A vital source of personal religious meaning emerges out of a commitment to causes that transcend the self, the creation of something that will outlive the self.” I think it’s interesting to note that the range of sources of meaning identified by Viktor Frankl span that same continuum from individual to community that I keep talking about. Significant meaning emerges from the direct experience of wonder, awe, or beauty, which is an intensely individual experience. But equally significant meaning emerges from transcending the individual self, connecting with and serving the larger community. Richard Gilbert sums all this up by stating simply that “Meaning emerges from lived human experience.”

Before I close, I’d like to mention a couple of qualities that I think are important for a responsible search for truth and meaning. The first is humility - an awareness of our shortcomings, our fears, our uncertainties, and our human limitations. Anthony de Mello, in his book *One Minute Wisdom*, tells this story:

To a visitor who described himself as a seeker after Truth, the teacher said:
“If what you seek is Truth, there is one thing you must have above all else.”
“I know,” answered the student, “an overwhelming passion for it.” “No,”
said the teacher, “an unremitting readiness to admit you may be wrong.”

That is a possibility we should never forget.

One final quality of the search I want to mention is balance or groundedness, which is addressed in a piece by the Rev. David Rankin entitled “Fetish on Fads”:

I felt sorry for Jake. We were friends in seminary – many years ago.
He was now a broken soul.

When he was a college student, he was into existentialism – Camus,
Sartre, and Kierkegaard.

When he was a graduate student, he was into world religions – Taoism,
Hinduism, and Buddhism.

When he was a theological student, he was into the new psychology –
Fromm, Rogers, and Maslow.

When he was a minister, he was into experimental worship –
guitars, folk-songs, and dialogue.

When he was a community organizer, he was into direct action –
marches, sit-ins, and rallies.

When he was a welfare recipient, he was into human potential – est,
Rolfing, and holistic medicine.

Jake had discovered all kinds of things – but never the center of
himself. He could not dance in the empty spaces, or listen to the sound of
no birds singing.

Breadth and variety of experience and knowledge are good, but should not be obtained at the expense of depth and balance and nourishment of your own center.

In closing, I'd like to return to the idea of meaning that comes from transcending your own personal concerns or needs. In a recent issue of *UU World* magazine, John Graham writes that millennia of human experience and thought tell us that "there's no deeper human need and no more powerful yearning than to live a meaningful life. We all want to . . . know that who we are and what we're doing matters." Graham says that the work he's done over nearly two decades has led him to the conviction that:

people who lead meaningful lives don't find that meaning in possessions or positions; they find it in carrying out personal commitments to ideals bigger than themselves and their own needs. And the most consistent, powerful, lasting meaning comes from commitment to ideals of service, of working for the common good.

Graham goes on to provide some practical advice for those seeking a path to a meaningful life. The advice comes in the form of a series of three questions to ask yourself:

- Is what I'm doing with my life, including any current volunteer work, meaningful enough to me, or am I just going through the motions?
- What ideals am I committed to – or might I commit to – to provide that meaning?
- What more can I do to put those ideals into action?

And to those three questions, I would like to add one more, posed by poet Mary Oliver: "Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?"