

KINDLE THE SPIRIT



LIGHT OF TRUTH

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A lie can travel halfway around the world while the truth is putting on its shoes. This phrase commonly attributed to Mark Twain, which probably originated from 17th and 18th century satirist, Jonathan Swift, is as true today as it was 200 or 300 years ago. A lie can travel halfway around the world while the truth is putting on its shoes. Rings even truer this week for me as we grapple with the announcement that Meta, whose social media platforms are used by over 3.5 billion people. That's about 40% of the world's population. We'll stop fact checking its content and allow the loudest voices among its users to win the day. I know my feed was already full of AI generated images and now this. And I know that many of you are concerned about this and are seriously considering whether to accept this as a cost of using these platforms to connect with family, friends or colleagues or to jump ship.

A 2002 University of Massachusetts study found that in a 10 minute conversation, most people lie at least once. We all do it on some level and not just for the sake of lying and rarely with malicious intent. Sometimes it's for self-preservation or to be liked or to avoid conflict. The problem is lies, untruths, falsehoods and intentional deception spread faster these days than ever because they have a powerful platform and instantaneous global channels of distribution. Now, I want to be clear about the difference between fact and truth. A fact is a piece of information that can be proven real or true. It's something we know happened or happens, it's been calculated or experienced. I just said the words calculated and experienced. That's a fact. I'm a minister at First Unitarian Church of Dallas and I'm wearing a colorful stole. That's a fact. Climate change is a scientific fact, and I hope that's not a controversial statement here.

But a truth is something broader. It may be a fact, but it may also be a belief or a value. What's true for me may not be true for you, and that's why this whole truth thing is so tricky. It can be hard in these times to know what is true. Some religions will tell you this is the way and this is the truth, but that's not how we as Unitarian Universalists approach truth. As a faith community, we don't tell you what is true for you. We help you discover and discern and reflect on what is true for you. We help each other to know what is true so that we can be true, so that we can tell our truth.

This month in worship inspired by the symbolism of our chalice, we are kindling the spirit of truth, commitment, and community for this new year. The chalice represents many things, among them, the light of truth as we understand it. The chalice cup is of course a Christian symbol that comes from the cup in which Jesus served wine to his friends and disciples at the Last Supper before he died, now used in the ritual of communion. The flame, however, inside the cup was added by Unitarians. During World War II, the Unitarian Service Committee was working in Europe to get people safely out of Nazi controlled areas. They needed an official symbol for their work to put on correspondence and documents, but also as a clandestine way of representing or signaling safe places. So the Unitarian Service Committee employed the services of cartoonist Hans Deutsch to design a symbol, and the result was the flaming chalice.

Out of this context it became a symbol of active love and a willingness to take risks for truth and justice. Now, the Universalist Church of America, which had not yet joined with the Unitarians, had as their symbol an off-center cross representing their humble belief that Universalism or Christianity of any sort was not the center of the universe and representing their openness to a world of other truths and possibilities. When the Unitarian and Universalist denominations consolidated in 1961, their shared symbol became an off-center flaming chalice within two overlapping circles.

What makes Unitarian Universalism a liberal tradition as opposed to a literal tradition is our belief that there is always more truth to be found and that these new and expanding truths help us grow and shape the world of which we are a part. We are a religion that is committed to pluralism, affirming that no single person or perspective or book or religion holds all truth. Our faith and our world call us to wrestle with some really complicated and sometimes contradictory truths. A person can make choices that endanger or hurt themselves or others and still be a person with inherent worth and dignity. A person can die, but they are never entirely lost or gone.

The roads were clearer on Friday than they were on Thursday, but that doesn't mean it wasn't still risky to be driving on them. Or maybe you have a family member who drives you crazy and yet you love them deeply. We encounter these and we hold these complicated truths everywhere we go. Given that this is the case, it's critical that each of us remains grounded in who we are, in the values and truths that are at our core.

And I believe that this is what Mark Nepo was saying in our reading today *Made From Bone*, which ends with they say that animals recharge their innocence each time they hoof the earth and we are reborn each time we touch what matters. This is what it means to live with integrity. Integrity is about more than honesty or truth-telling. It's about being true to who you are, what you believe, and what

you say. It's the sum total of all those small everyday choices that are life-giving instead of life diminishing. Choices and actions that put us in touch with what matters and recharge us. Choices that contribute to and strengthen the interdependent web of creation. Choices that kindle the light of truth so that it shines out brightly from within.

I want to tell you the story today of two Unitarians who were exemplars in this way, making choices that not many of us could, but whose story is nonetheless significant and has shaped Unitarian Universalism and many, many lives. They were the subject of a PBS documentary a few years ago entitled *Defying the Nazis: The Sharps' War*. The Reverend Waitstill Sharp, a Unitarian minister and his wife Martha Sharp, a social worker, made the bold decision in 1939 to leave their children in the care of family friends in their parsonage in Wellesley, Massachusetts and traveled to Czechoslovakia to work with the Unitarian Service Committee. At first, their intent was to volunteer to bring food and clothing and other help to those who were impacted by the war. But one month later, when Hitler's army marched into the capitol and took over, the Sharps' mission became much more dangerous, to help Jews and intellectuals and others, including many children, escape to freedom.

Martha told the following story to her grandson Artemis Tchaikovsky many years later. It took place on one snowy night, Martha jumped from a taxi and darted around a corner and hid in a doorway because she had heard the heels of a Nazi officer behind her. After the heels clicked past her, she entered an unlit apartment building, dashed up five flights of stairs and rang the doorbell of an anti-Nazi leader. A woman opened the apartment door to Martha, who introduced herself and showed the woman her United States passport. The woman said a moment and then snatched Martha's passport from her and shut the door in her face. Now for the next few minutes, Martha was very worried about whether she would see her passport again because this of course was her ticket to safety.

When the door opened again, this time a man stood before her. Martha asked if he was Mr. X. He said he could give Mr. X a message. So she explained that she was there to help him sneak him out of the country. The man asked her to wait a moment and then disappeared back into the apartment. When he opened the door again, he was wearing an overcoat. He handed Martha her passport and said, "I am Mr. X." So together they walked through wind and snow across the city and a Nazi soldier stopped them when they reached a bridge over the river and Martha showed her passport and confidently announced Americans and the passport trick worked and they were waved across the bridge. But just steps outside of the British Embassy, the office that was helping to sneak Mr. X out of the country, another police officer stopped them and Martha loudly complained about the lack of taxis and her frustration at being late for a meeting with the embassy secretary, and she flashed her passport and demanded that the guard tell the secretary, Mr. and Mrs. Sharp are here.

And so he waved them ahead and Martha and Mr. X walked into the embassy safely. Mr. X is one of thousands that Martha and Waitstill Sharp helped between 1939 and 1940. After narrowly escaping arrest in Czechoslovakia and returning to the United States, the couple then traveled again to Spain and France to distribute food. They also organized the transport of children to the United States, which became a model for later transports of even more child refugees.

Now, the story of the Sharps is a remarkable one. It's one of difficult choices, to leave their children in someone else's care, to save children from danger halfway around the world, to use their privilege and risk their own safety to help numerous others. And interestingly, a choice to not always be honest in an effort to live a deeper truth. Their core belief that in the human dignity and the right to freedom of those who were suffering under the Nazi regime.

The story of the Sharp's though is not about one big moment or big accomplishment. It's about thousands of little choices. A tree grows so it can convey wind. It is not the wind. And a person grows in order to convey spirit, says our reading today. Being the truth and living with integrity doesn't require heroics on the level of the Sharp's, but they are an early example of Unitarians who conveyed the spirit of the chalice, the light of truth through their work. When I can be the truth that grows more and more clear when it is necessary to tell the truth, our reading says. Now, it occurred to me that we often think of it the other way around. Speak up and then we will be truth tellers and people with integrity, and then we will know what is true. The black feminist writer, Audre Lorde asks us, "What are the words that you do not yet have? What do you need to say? What are the tyrannies you swallow day by day and attempt to make your own until you will sicken and die of them still in silence?"

This is the truth that we need to be telling in this time, and we can't tell these truths until we know them, until we know ourselves, until we lived them and felt them in our bones. Knowing and being the truth also helps give us the courage to tell the truth, even in situations where it could make others uncomfortable or there could be fallout. Have you ever been afraid of telling the truth, of telling your truth, of speaking truth to power, of challenging something you know to be false, of telling a hard truth that you wish were otherwise? I know I have, and it's these moments when we sometimes become a statistic in the University of Massachusetts study, right? We lie, even small lies for self-preservation or to avoid conflict.

Luvvie Ajayi Jones who is a writer and speaker and self-proclaimed professional troublemaker. The kind of good trouble that John Lewis promoted, asks herself three questions before speaking a truth that might shake things up. The first question is, do you mean it? Is it something that you actually believe? The second is, can you defend it? Can you stand firmly in it and explain why you believe it to be true? And third, can you say it thoughtfully or with love? Is your intention good? We all know from experience, I imagine, that a message never lands well if it's said in a hateful or demeaning way. These are such good questions for our relationships with friends and partners as well as for more public proclamations and truth-telling. When you encounter challenges to what you know to be true, challenges to your commitment to be and to live the truth, times when you must speak out, ask yourself these three questions. Do I mean it? Can I defend it? And can I say it thoughtfully or with love?

When we're guided by the light of truth, when we can answer yes to these three questions, there comes a feeling of peace. Have you ever felt that peace of the truth? When we know the truth, when we can be the truth, when we tell the truth, we find peace like a river in our soul. Like the hymn says, love moves in our soul just as it does through our truth-telling words. We sometimes experience pain

as the tyrannies we swallow day by day are dislodged and let go, and we find strength like a mountain in our soul, knowing that whatever comes our way, whatever falsehoods and nonsense saturate our world, we will remain grounded in the light of truth. May it be so friends and amen.