



September 2017 Monthly Theme

TRUTH

the practice of diving and divining

The intention of the themed year is to help Unitarian Universalists build a robust spiritual and ethical vocabulary. The themes are points of departure for religious liberals seeking to think, speak and act theologically, prophetically and prayerfully. The themes reclaim religious language, casting old terms in a new key to deepen spiritual grounding and sharpen moral reasoning. More at: wbuuc.org/themes or sign up for a circle at wbuuc.org/classes.

QUESTIONS

Where do you go to find truth?

What practices help you discern what is true and what is not?

How do we get to a place of compassionate communication with those whose truths are different from our own?

QUOTATIONS

"The truth." Dumbledore sighed. "It is a beautiful and terrible thing, and should therefore be treated with great caution."

~ J.K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*

"The truth is rarely pure and never simple."

~ Oscar Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*

"The truth does not change according to our ability to stomach it."

~ Flannery O'Connor

"It is your mind that rules the body. You cannot go further than that mind to seek truth and to know truth and to react to truth."

~ Marcus Garvey

POETRY

All Is Truth

~ By Walt Whitman

O me, man of slack faith so long,
Standing aloof, denying portions so long,
Only aware to-day of compact all-diffused truth,
Discovering to-day there is no lie or form of lie, and can be none,
but grows as inevitably upon itself as the truth does upon itself,
Or as any law of the earth or any natural production of the earth does.

(This is curious and may not be realized immediately, but it must be realized,
I feel in myself that I represent falsehoods equally with the rest,
And that the universe does.)

Where has fail'd a perfect return indifferent of lies or the truth?
Is it upon the ground, or in water or fire? or in the spirit of man?
or in the meat and blood?

Meditating among liars and retreating sternly into myself, I see
that there are really no liars or lies after all,
And that nothing fails its perfect return, and that what are called
lies are perfect returns,
And that each thing exactly represents itself and what has preceded it,
And that the truth includes all, and is compact just as much as
space is compact,
And that there is no flaw or vacuum in the amount of the truth—but
that all is truth without exception;
And henceforth I will go celebrate any thing I see or am,
And sing and laugh and deny nothing.

Love is Truth. Truth is Love.
With Love the Truth, man finds his place in the Heart of God.
With Truth the Love, God finds His place in the heart of man.

~ Sri Chinmoy

EXCERPT

From “The Post-Truth Era: Dishonesty and Deception in Contemporary Life” by Ralph Keyes

I think it’s fair to say that honesty is on the ropes. Deception has become commonplace at all levels of contemporary life. At one level that consists of “He’s in a meeting,” or “No, that dress doesn’t make you look fat.” On another level it refers to “I never had sexual relations with that woman . . .” or “We found the weapons of mass destruction.” High-profile dissemblers vie for headlines: fabulist college professors, fabricating journalists, stonewalling bishops, book-cooking executives, and their friends the creative accountants. They are the most visible face of a far broader phenomenon: the routinization of dishonesty. I’m not talking just about those who try to fib their way out of a tight spot (“I wasn’t out drinking last night; I had to work late”) but casual lying done for no apparent reason (“Yes, I was a cheerleader in high school”).

Ludwig Wittgenstein once observed how often he lied when the truth would have done just as well. This Viennese philosopher has many modern disciples. The gap between truth and lies has shrunk to a sliver. Choosing which to tell is largely a matter of convenience. We lie for all the usual reasons, or for no apparent reason at all. It’s no longer assumed that truth telling is even our default setting. When Monica Lewinsky said she’d lied and been lied to all her life, few eyebrows were raised. Our attitudes toward lying have grown, to say the least, tolerant. “It’s now as acceptable to lie as it is to exceed the speed limit when driving,” observed British psychologist Philip Hodson. “Nobody thinks twice about it.”

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As long as human beings have had words to say, they’ve said words that weren’t true. At the same time, most societies have had some variation of Honesty is the best policy as a norm. What concerns me is the loss of a stigma attached to telling lies, and a widespread acceptance of the fact that lies can be told with impunity. Lying has become, essentially, a no-fault transgression. “That’s okay,” we say of those who are caught dissembling. “She meant well.” “Who am I to judge?” And the clincher: “What is truth, anyway?”

Nearly everyone trims and embroiders the truth and hopes for the best. I’ve been known to round down how many miles an hour I was driving, and round up the size of audiences at my lectures. I also get lied to a lot, big lies and small lies, stretchers and whoppers, fun lies and devious ones, petty fibs and felony lies. Who doesn’t? Not that I wring my hands and gnash my teeth when I’m deceived. Like most people, I’ve come to accept dishonesty as commonplace, even routine. Perhaps it would be better if we didn’t.

The obvious cause of dishonesty’s rise is ethical decline. From this perspective, moral compasses have broken down. Our sense of right and wrong has gone into remission. Conscience is considered old-fashioned. Conviction has been replaced by cynicism. Restoring prayer in schools, some argue, would be a giant step toward renewed morality. Or hanging the Ten Commandments on walls of public buildings. Nonsense. There is no evidence that early Americans were more moral than their descendants. It’s doubtful that former-day Americans – the ones who broke treaties with Indians, enslaved

Africans, and exploited child labor – had better ethics than current ones. Nor was antebellum religious faith as devout as we like to imagine. Two centuries ago church membership was far lower than it is today, involving less than 10 percent of all Americans.

There never was an ethical nirvana in America or anywhere else; only a time when it was harder to tell lies, and the consequences were greater if one got caught. This book’s premise is that we may be no more prone to making things up than our ancestors were, but we are better able to get away with deceiving others, more likely to be let off the hook if exposed, and in the process convince ourselves that no harm’s been done. As we’ll explore, the mobility and anonymity of contemporary life facilitate dishonesty. So do deceit-friendly intellectual trends, the many celebrity role models of self-invention, and repeated instances of high-profile dissembling that desensitize us to its dangers.

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Post-Truthfulness

Even though there have always been liars, lies have usually been told with hesitation, a dash of anxiety, a bit of guilt, a little shame, at least some sheepishness. Now, clever people that we are, we have come up with rationales for tampering with truth so we can dissemble guilt-free. I call it *post-truth*. We live in a post-truth era. Post-truthfulness exists in an ethical twilight zone. It allows us to dissemble without considering ourselves dishonest. When our behavior conflicts with our values, what we’re most likely to do is reconceive our values. Few of us want to think of ourselves as being unethical, let alone admit that to others, so we devise alternative approaches to morality. Think of them as *alt.ethics*. This term refers to ethical systems in which dissembling is considered okay, not necessarily wrong, therefore not really “dishonest” in the negative sense of the word.

Even if we do tell more lies more than ever, no one wants to be considered a *liar*... That’s why we come up with avoidance mechanisms: rationales for dishonesty, reasons why it’s okay to lie, not nearly as bad as we once thought, maybe not so bad after all. The emotional valence of words associated with deception has declined. We no longer tell lies. Instead we “misspeak.” We “exaggerate.” We “exercise poor judgment.” “Mistakes were made,” we say. The term “deceive” gives way to the more playful “spin.” At worst, saying “I wasn’t truthful” sounds better than “I lied.” Nor would we want to accuse others of lying; we say they’re “in denial.”

A direct admission of lying is rare to nonexistent. (“I lied.”) Those willing to make such a bold statement cast doubt on anything they have said in the past and anything they will say in the future. This is why, rather than open the floodgates and accept lying as a way of life, we manipulate notions of truth.

Dishonesty inspires more euphemisms than copulation or defecation. This helps desensitize us to its implications. In the post-truth era we don’t just have truth and lies, but a third category of ambiguous statements that are not exactly the truth but fall short of a lie. *Enhanced truth* it might be called. *Neo-truth*. *Soft truth*. *Faux truth*. *Truth lite*. Through such aggressive euphemasia we take the sting out of telling lies. Euphemasia calls up remarkable powers of linguistic creativity.