

White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church

Inventing the Truth

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WHITE BEAR UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH
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READING

A Poem Made of Water

Ibtisam Barakat (Palestinian American)

The biology teacher said that people,
all people,
are made mostly of water.

And I understood that all of us,
like water,
have been through so much:

Fell from the sky,
spent nights in the middle of a dark ocean,
cleaned dirt out of clothes,
and dishes of all kinds.

Like water, we had to
freeze in winters,
and simmer under covers,
and be put in cubes that are
hit countless times
on kitchen counters,

And I understood why
when someone's tears fall
I feel.

Inventing the Truth

When I was small, when I was very young, maybe 6, maybe 7, maybe 5 -

- maybe it was in the fall one year, on a September day very much like this day, when I picked up my Mary Poppins lunchbox, put on my squeaky shoes and stepped into the sharpened-pencil, blackboard-ready, workbook-wonderland of school -

one year (one day?) when I was really young, something shifted for me, as perhaps it did for you at some point, something shifted in the way I understood the whole entire universe, and suddenly I became extremely interested in truth, the capital T Truth. I who had loved stories and singing and make-believe, and putting on plays and poems, and imaginary worlds within the world, beyond this world, and dress up and fables and mythology, I suddenly wanted the Truth, *just the facts, ma'am*, not the alternative facts that grown-ups are constantly spinning.

Where do babies come from, where do planets come from, where does cereal come from, and cars, and why are there so many kinds of dogs?

Someone, a teacher, probably, told me that the world is round, not flat; old, not young; made of tiny atoms in a vast cosmos - and I believed the way a convert to a cult believes, but not that way, because I wanted to know why. I fell in love with arithmetic because I loved that things add up, that you could show your work, prove why or why not something could or could not be. I loved the true Truth, or what as a little child I imagined truth could be. I became an insufferable literalist, as most humans do for a little while in our lives. I loved true Truth, and nothing but the truth, and my sense of it extended beyond natural sciences where it naturally belongs, into the anthropological experiment that was our family, and into ethics and religion. In Sunday school I strutted in and proclaimed my little Sermon on the Mount:

Either Jesus died or he didn't. (This was probably second grade).

Either God is one person or God is three persons, but God can't be both - and I should know, because I've taken half a year of second grade math.

I became a formidable jurist.

If you the parents say an action is wrong, that these are the consequences, and then my brothers go and do that thing, well, then they must be punished to the full extent of the law, no mercy and no questions asked.

I was disappointed many times by their bleeding heart, wishy-washy liberalism. I had not yet heard of concepts like "mitigating circumstances," "moral relativism," "grey area," or compassion, and if I had they'd have broken my little concrete heart.

We all grow up. We get bigger for sure, and maybe we get wiser, more nuanced, over time. Doubt catches up with us and travels by our side, and that's a good thing. Faith appears from the shadows, comes into the light, and travels on our other side, navigating fearsome places. Wonder comes back in with its big, wide, childlike eyes; humility takes hold, if we're lucky, and mystery shows up again, the way the full moon shows up, benign and old and silent in the clouds. Truth reveals its complicated nature, whispering, "I am a journey always, not a destination." At this point now in my continuing education in the great public school of how to be a human being, mystery feels like ground water to me, saturating everything and flowing invisibly into the open ocean that surrounds us. My knowledge, once vast, is now just a chain of little islands, sometimes sunny, sometimes swamped and sometimes just emerging. I still love math and proof and truth, but I know now that some things that I know, *some things that we know*, cannot be proven, only lived.

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-Ibtisam Barakat

Some things that we deeply know cannot be proven, only lived.

Some truths by which we live came exploding out of atoms when this whole world was made. There are immutable laws that we cannot break, and we deny them at our peril - but there are other truths we make ourselves, truths we make ourselves which are not lies (that's a different enterprise)- but truth we choose to claim and amplify, the truths out of which we construct by hand and by heart a livable shared life, a hopeful, hope-filled, helpful, grateful, generous, life. This is how we co-create creation.

You have heard it said that we are a people divided, a country ripping itself to political pieces even as the fires rage, the winds are howling, the ground breaks open and the waters rise. You have heard it said, or said yourself in recent months, that this must be the end of time, that things are so ugly and so bad, the damage done by greed and ignorance and arrogance cannot ever be undone.

There is truth to this. But what about the mattress guy? The businessman in Houston whose furniture store was ruined in the storm, but who still had many mattresses and couches, stuff he could have salvaged, could have sold, but instead he opened wide the broken plate-glass door and told his neighbors, strangers, anyone without a place to just come in and rest. *Just sleep here till you're strong again. I don't care about the mattress.* This he did even as a church in that city, a big, strong, dry, wealthy, white, famous congregation closed its door. The truth I choose to live by is that love prevails. It's not foolish, it's not wasted. Love prevails, and saves us.

What about those bakers, who brought in extra flour, extra yeast and salt, knowing that the city would be hungry in the morning, and though it cost them dearly, they gave bread to everyone?

The truth I choose to live by that creative compassion, and crazy, playful, wild imagination are part of our survival instinct; that generosity is not just nice, it's part of our survival instinct. We know on a cellular level that none of us survives alone. We must rise together, and we will. That is an invented truth, but it saves my spirit, saves my life, and I depend on it the same way I depend on gravity. This is the law of kindness.

You have heard it said that in scary times we must look out for ourselves. We should close the borders of our country and the borders of our hearts, that immigrants and refugees are terrorists and they are everywhere; they hate our freedom, take our jobs, they sneak around the edges stealing everything they can and we cannot afford the risk of hospitality. But what about Antonio Guillen, the young DJ in south Texas who gathered his friends, hitched a trailer to his car and drove through the night, launched his little boat in the streets that now were rivers, and brought stranded people – brown, white, black, native people, everybody he could find - to higher ground? He rescued dozens, maybe hundreds of people, this young man who was protected under DACA because he was brought here as a child. He never heard the news on Tuesday morning, the news that he's a criminal and targeted for deportation, because his little boat capsized in the flood and he was drowned. The truth I choose to live by is that we are surrounded in this life by heroes, angels whom we sometimes never see. There are heroes like his mother, who rescued him from poverty and gave him a brave heart, a spirit filled with love and an impeccable sense of duty; not bravado, but moral courage. His mother, who lives in Mexico now, was stopped at the border last week and not allowed to cross to see the body of her son and bury him. She said, "It's okay, because he is with God and with God there are no borders." The truth I choose to claim here is that we are surrounded by heroes, and we most sorely need them. The truth we shape by hand, which can't be proven, only lived, is that hatred is not only cowardly and evil and lacking in imagination, it is also reckless in these times. Hatred is reckless, when we need everyone on board, the whole beautiful family of us. We so need these Dreamers who know better than most of us how cruel this country can be, and also how beautiful, who hold to its bright promise with this fierce, proud faith that we need to remember and reclaim.

You have maybe heard it said that we are distracted here by a thousand separate little liberal causes, raging and righteous identity politics angrily spinning from black lives in the street to brown lives seeking sanctuary, from trans bathrooms to Standing Rock, from gun control to climate change, never focused, never grounded, it's all scattershot and kneejerk – but the truth I see everywhere emerging, and in this house all the time, is beautiful and old, and though it does play out politically, **for us it is religion**: that these struggles are one struggle, just as the smaller more intimate struggles of our little local lives, our private fears and failings, our sorrows and our hopes, cannot be held alone but only in community. All boats rise together, on our little blue-boat planet made of atoms, made of dreams. There isn't time in this life, there isn't room, for anything except larger, braver love and deeper, older truth, reimagined, reawakened and reclaimed, just as long as we have breath.

From Mason Bolton, who identifies as a queer, trans Unitarian Universalist poet, comes this prayer, called **Benediction for the heavy heart**:

*Good morning. I missed your “good” in this “good morning”
because a plane, because a truck, because a gun,
because a cop,
because a government,
because a people suffering,
because too many people suffering,
because war, because famine,
because some mornings it is so hard
to rise, to wake, to be a self.*

*There is a pause here.
There is a deliberate cessation.
I want a cessation to the noise in my head, to the ache in the collective
heart of this world.
When I was young this seemed possible.
When I was young how hope seemed to spring eternal.
I want to write about butterflies,
about the cracked edges of tree bark pressing
like a holy mother into palms.
I want to write about the joy of children’s cries,
about birth,
about the arch of your smile,
how I could lose myself in the corners of your
sweet and grinning mouth.
This “you” is you reading this.
I want for your joy,
want to lose myself in you.
I want your mornings “good,”
your evenings “good,”
all the late-nights and sunrises and afternoons
and moments pressed against the ticking glass of your life “good.”*

*Breathe. For yourself. For each other.
Let us breathe in when others cannot.
When we can do nothing else.
Let us stretch ourselves open to embrace our friends,
to extend our bodies open to anyone willing to meet us,
or even to meet those we think may not.*

*Let us hold each other for this moment.
For this blink of human existence.*

AMEN