

Speaking Your Own Truth

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Our theme for today is “Speaking Your Own Truth.” And when I talk about speaking your own truth, I’m talking about honesty and integrity. I’m talking about being authentically who you are, and expressing that through your interpersonal interactions.

So what exactly are the alternatives to speaking your own truth? One would be to speak for someone else; that is, to speak what you perceive as their truth on their behalf. Another would be to let someone else speak for you. Yet a third possibility is to speak as your truth something that isn’t really yours, but that comes from some other source, that you adopt as your own without, perhaps really owning it for yourself.

Those are some of the things I want to spend some time talking about this morning, along with a couple of other related issues. For instance, how do we determine in the first place what our truth is? Does it matter how that truth is delivered? And what is our responsibility concerning listening to – and hearing – someone else’s truth?

Let me begin by saying a few words about the importance of not speaking for someone else, or letting someone else speak for you. Speaking for someone else is a psychological cop-out. What you’re saying is that these thoughts aren’t really mine, and therefore I’m not responsible for them. I can’t be held accountable. And beside the fact that you can’t be held responsible, it’s not really fair to hold responsible the person you purport to speak for, since you may be misrepresenting their thoughts.

Speaking on someone else’s behalf, or allowing someone to speak on your behalf, is a way of hiding, of not revealing yourself, who you are. Truth is power, and owning your own truth and expressing it authentically gives you power – the power of self-realization and of self-revelation. Relationship is what gives life meaning, and at the heart of relationship is the mutual sharing of our own truths.

I can speak from experience about the power inherent in such human exchanges. One of the most reliable ways of experiencing the power of human interaction is to share personal stories. That’s one of the things I love most about my job. I get to have that experience with some regularity. Next Saturday the Membership Committee is sponsoring another UU101 class. We do them about three times a year. We gather a group of ten to twenty people, most relatively new to our Fellowship, and one of the first things we do is each tell our story – how we came to be here now.

Sometimes the story is fairly straightforward and matter-of-fact. Sometimes it gets into deeper levels of emotional and spiritual experience. But in virtually every case, my experience is one of receiving a gift. A gift of each person’s self. It’s real; it’s authentic; it’s true; it’s powerful. Much more so than if I heard the story from a third party. When it comes to forming real human connections, I think autobiography beats biography just about every time.

In fact the other context in which I regularly have that experience is through classes I lead in writing a spiritual autobiography. That invariably leads deeper than the more abbreviated UU101 exercise. As the class proceeds, participants are encouraged to dig back into their past and recollect experiences that didn’t necessarily seem spiritual, but that in retrospect help them construct a more coherent understanding of who they are and where they come from. What has shaped them, and what gives their lives some kind of meaningful framework. Again, it is a precious gift to be allowed to witness that process of unfolding. To hear someone finding and

expressing their own truth. I encourage you to share yourself with others that way – speaking your own truth.

Now, in that kind of situation, speaking directly out of your own experience, it seems fairly straightforward. That is, if you experienced it, then for you it is as true as can be. But much of our “truth” is about things that we don’t necessarily experience firsthand. We pick up an enormous amount of information from talking with other people, listening to the news, reading books and magazines, and observing the world around us. And then we apply our interpretive abilities to make sense of it all. All of that contributes to the entire package of what we might call “our truth.”

As religious liberals we affirm and promote a free and responsible search for truth and meaning. In his book, *Hymns to an Unknown God*, Sam Keen talks about how the path to personal freedom involves the terrifying steps of questioning and overthrowing authority. He writes:

Church, cult, and state easily imprison believers within a self-sealing system of self-defined authority. . . All authorities claim: We are the repository and guardians of the Truth; therefore we are the Authority. If you question Authority – Truth (Us) – it is evidence that your mind is clouded, your faith is weak, and you stand in Error.

To question the authority of pope, bible, synod, guru, or party, a believer must leave the security of the group-mind, venture out onto the quaking ground of personal doubt, and issue this declaration of independence: Henceforth my experience of life will be the jury, my mind and heart the judges, that will determine what is true and sacred. I am the author and the authority in my own life.

But questioning authority responsibly requires more than simple knee-jerk skepticism or cynicism. The free and responsible search requires gathering and evaluating evidence. It requires checking to see whether your core beliefs are consistent with known facts. It requires us to respect complexity. It calls on us to hold our beliefs in an open, flexible, even light-hearted manner. And most important, in the context of today’s message, it calls on us to engage in deliberation, dialogue, conversation.

At any given moment, “my truth” does not equal “the Truth.” But if I follow those guidelines of responsibility, I’m likely to approach ever closer, and to build better relationships along the way. Especially if I listen well to the “truths” of others, and speak my “truths” to them in a spirit of love and respect. As Sam Keen writes: “Conversation creates community and compassion. Monologue creates dissension and fanaticism.”

It’s not only a gift to hear the stories – the lived truths – of others. It’s also a great gift to have your truth heard by another. And that’s a gift you can give to others through the practice of deep listening. John Fox, who speaks his truth through poetry writes:

When someone deeply listens to you
it is like holding out a dented cup
you’ve had since childhood
and watching it fill up with
cold, fresh water.
When it balances on top of the brim,

you are understood.
When it overflows and touches your skin,
you are loved.

When someone deeply listens to you,
the room where you stay
starts a new life
and the place where you wrote
your first poem
begins to glow in your mind's eye.
It is as if gold has been discovered!

When someone deeply listens to you,
your bare feet are on the earth
and a beloved land that seemed distant
is now at home within you.

Sometimes, how well someone listens to – and really hears – our truths, depends on how we express them. We may speak the truth in a way that makes it unattractive, unpleasant. Especially if it includes criticism of the one to whom we speak. One challenge that I have faced over the years has been accepting and making constructive use of criticism. My natural tendency is either to discount, or refuse to listen to criticism because it's too painful, or even more likely, to take it at face value and assume that it must be true, rather than evaluating it against other sources of evidence and then acknowledging the extent to which it's valid.

Yes, it hurts to receive criticism, but I'm much more likely to hear it and take it seriously if it's spoken in love. Speak the truth in love. I can receive another's truth if I feel they have a positive regard for who I am, if I can tell they care about me.

There are at least two components to speaking the truth in love. The first is motivation. Why do we want to speak the truth to someone? Is it because we want to shape them? To hurt them? To build up our own ego? To indulge our own need for satisfaction, revenge, justice? Or is it because we want to benefit the other person? The real power of truth occurs when we speak it because we care for another person. This allows the truth to impact the heart of the hearer, especially if we pay attention to the second component: our manner of expression.

If you want to be heard, you must consider the impact of your words and your manner. It's good to be honest, but brutal honesty is still brutality. With respect to libel and slander laws, truth is taken to be a sufficient defense. That is, you can get away with saying something as nasty as you like about someone, as long as it's factually correct. But when it comes to living together in community, I think we need to set a higher standard. The truth must be delivered with civility, respect, and gentleness. Even hard truths can be conveyed gently.

The Rev. Richard Gilbert puts it this way:

Let us be gentle with one another. . .

Who of us can look inside another and know what is there
of hope and hurt, or promise and pain?

Who can know from what far places each has come
or to what far places each may hope to go?

Our lives are at times so fragile. . .
And others are as vulnerable as we are,
And feel as we feel,
And hurt as we hurt.

Life is too transient to be cruel with one another;
It is too short for thoughtlessness,
Too brief for hurting.

Life is long enough for caring,
It is lasting enough for sharing,
Precious enough for love.

Let us be gentle with each other and with all whom we encounter,
This day and each day.

The other half of speaking hard truths in love is when you are on the receiving end. I spoke earlier about the gift of receiving the experienced truth of others through their stories. Well, even the hard truths of criticism or “constructive” feedback can be embraced as gifts.

“Imagine that every person in the world is enlightened but you,” Buddha says. “They are all your teachers, each doing just the right things to help you learn patience, perfect wisdom, perfect compassion.” [*Spiritual Literacy*, p. 432]

That’s the same premise as that expressed in a book I have in my library, called *Thank You for Being Such a Pain*. To elaborate on that point, I’d like to share the following story told by Anthony De Mello in *The Heart of the Enlightened*:

There was once a rabbi who was revered by the people as a man of God. Not a day went by when a crowd of people wasn’t standing at his door seeking advice or healing or the holy man’s blessing. And each time the rabbi spoke, the people would hang on his lips, drinking in his every word.

There was, however, in the audience a disagreeable fellow who never missed a chance to contradict the master. He would observe the rabbi’s weaknesses and make fun of his defects to the dismay of the disciples, who began to look on him as the devil incarnate.

Well, one day the “devil” took ill and died. Everyone heaved a sigh of relief. Outwardly they looked appropriately solemn but in their hearts they were glad for no longer would the master’s inspiring talks be interrupted or his behavior criticized by this disrespectful heretic.

So the people were surprised to see the master plunged in genuine grief at the funeral. When asked by a disciple later if he was mourning over the

eternal fate of the dead man, he said, “No, no. Why should I mourn over our friend who is now in heaven? It was for myself I was grieving. That man was the only friend I had. Here I am surrounded by people who revere me. He was the only one who challenged me. I fear that with him gone, I shall stop growing.” And as he said these words, the master burst into tears.

If we receive someone else’s truth with love, regardless of how it is delivered, it is an opportunity for us to grow. But if we feel the need to speak our truth, if we hope to be heard, we will speak with love and gentleness. We are all beautiful creatures, but we can be very fragile. So please – let’s be gentle with one another.

So may it be.