

The Truth Will Set You Free

A sermon for All Faiths Unitarian Congregation

Delivered by the Rev. CJ McGregor

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John Chapter 8 verse 32: “Then you will know the truth and the truth will set you free.” This quote has been used for various purposes in our past and present. Over the past four centuries it has been used most in academia. It’s common to find an academic institution with a version of the quote over its doors or in its mission, as academia believes knowledge as truth will set you free. In John Chapter 8 verse 32 we are promised a spiritual freedom. A release from the life of unrighteousness. This idea can easily be translated into Unitarian Universalist speak, but I have a couple of questions, questions we will be focusing on this morning. How do we know what the truth is when the truth changes and is subjective? What are we being released from when we hold the supposed truth? In the age of fake news and alternative facts how do we discern the truth? How do we know reality?

In addition to the authors of John, I prefer the philosophy of Gloria Steinem. She writes, “The truth will set you free, but first it pisses you off.” More about that in a minute. I returned to an article in the December 2010 New Yorker that I had flagged long ago knowing I would use it sometime. The article titled, *The Truth Wears Off*, asks if there is something wrong with the scientific method. It seems we can no longer trust what we thought to be true. The article reminds us how difficult it is to prove anything. The columnist Jonah Lehrer writes, “We like to pretend that our experiments define the truth for us, but that’s often not the case. Just because an idea is true does not mean it can be proven, and just because an idea is proven does not mean it is truth.” Let me say that again, “Just because an idea is true does not mean it can be proven, and just because an idea is proven does not mean it is truth.” He continues, “When the experiments are done we still have to choose what to believe.”

What happens when what we believe is truth can no longer be replicated? Here is a good example from the article: “Jonathan Schooler was a young graduate student at the University of Washington in the nineteen-eighties when he discovered a surprising new fact about language and memory. At the time, it was widely believed that the act of describing our memories improved them. But, in a series of clever experiments, Schooler demonstrated that subjects shown a face and asked to describe it were much less likely to recognize the face when shown it later than those who had simply looked at it. Schooler called the phenomenon “verbal overshadowing.” The study turned him into an academic star. Since its initial publication in 1990, it has been cited more than 400 times. Before long, Schooler had extended the model to a variety of other tasks, such as remembering the taste of a wine, identifying the best strawberry jam, and solving difficult creative puzzles. In each instance, asking people to put their perceptions into words led to dramatic decreases in performance.

But while Schooler was publishing those results in highly reputable journals, a secret worry gnawed at him: it was proving difficult to replicate his earlier findings. “I’d often still see an effect, but the effect just wouldn’t be as strong. It was as if verbal overshadowing, my big new idea, was getting weaker.” At first, he assumed that he’d made an error in experimental design or

a statistical miscalculation. But he couldn't find anything wrong with his research. He then concluded that his initial batch of research subjects must have been unusually susceptible to verbal overshadowing. "It wasn't a very satisfying explanation," Schooler says. "One of my mentors told me that my real mistake was trying to replicate my work. He told me doing that was just setting myself up for disappointment."

Such anomalies demonstrate the slipperiness of empiricism. Although many scientific ideas generate conflicting results and suffer from falling effect sizes, they continue to get cited in the textbooks and drive standard medical practice. Why? Because the ideas seem true. Because they make sense. Because we can't bear to let them go. And that is why what is called the decline effect is so troubling. Not because it reveals the human fallibility of science, in which data are tweaked and beliefs shape perceptions. And not because it reveals that many of our most exciting theories are fleeting fads and will soon be rejected. The decline effect is troubling because it reminds us how difficult it is to prove anything. We like to pretend that our experiments define the truth for us. But that's often not the case. "Just because an idea is true doesn't mean it can be proved. And just because an idea can be proved doesn't mean it's true. When the experiments are done, we still have to choose what to believe."

The truth is subjective, can be wrong, and changing or fluid. With this in mind let's think about ourselves. Remember what Gloria Steinham said? Richard told me of a recent film where the robot in the film explained that it was programmed to not tell people the truth. What does this say about us? The truth may set us free but first it makes us miserable. You may remember a film from the 1990's called *A Few Good Men* with Tom Cruise and Jack Nicholson. There is a naval court scene where Tom Cruise is an officer interrogating Jack Nicholson. Nicholson is not that forthcoming with the truth and Cruise says, "I want the truth!" Nicholson replies, "You can't handle the truth!" That is the truth. We can't handle the truth. I've shared with many of you that denial is a lovely place to visit. Denial serves its purpose but we can't live there. It will surely deplete and destroy us.

What happens when the truth we craft about ourselves or our world can no longer be replicated? There is a quote attributed to the Talmud, a book of rabbinical discussions about many things Jewish, "We don't see the world as it is. We see the world as we are." Psychologist William Berry tells us that this quote "summarizes the idea that truth that one perceives is illusory and inexact." We have long been taught to seek the truth, but what if there is no absolute truth. What, then, are we chasing? What if the correct truth hurts us? What if there are degrees of truth that we tell ourselves, which isn't absolute truth and may fall into the category of lies? Berry writes, "Meaning is created in life. Neutral events are made subjective by interpreting them through the lens of perception. 'Truth' is merely a product of perceptions; perceptions are colored by experience, which is then filtered through the current state of mind and altered even further. By the time the neutral event is processed in this manner, it is little more truth than fiction. Yet personal truth is accepted wholeheartedly."

We are often not only wrong about the truth, we are unaware of the truth. When we become aware we are the creator of the truth and the story. How do you write yourself into your story? In my creation of my truth, my story I am younger, thinner, stronger, have glorious locks, and the rest. When I become aware of my truth through minor health episodes, reminders that my locks were lost down the drain ages ago, and my metabolism is lethargic, I am miserable and you know, I sometimes can't handle the truth. I like being unaware of my truth when writing my

own story. Who wouldn't? But, it's illusory, changing, and not real. As the creator of my truth I am not free. Being set free from our subjective truth will detach us, set us free, of suffering. Now, if you are willing to suspend your truth for a moment, and to even momentarily accept that much of what you believe may only be your version of the truth; or that what you believe is not the absolute truth, you may wonder how this is helpful to your state of mind. Despite an initially discouraging reaction to finding you are not as in touch with truth as you had believed, the benefit to this understanding is substantial.

Becoming aware we are the creators of the story, fashioning the meaning of events that construct the meaning of life, can thereby help reframe thinking. The ability to step back from thinking, to actually think about the thought process, is a cornerstone of cognitive therapy. In cognitive therapy clients are taught to step back from their thinking, evaluate it objectively, determine if it is possible their thinking is distorted, and challenge the distortions. Finally, they are to reframe the event in a more rational and productive manner. The ability to be neutral and objective can be of great benefit in finding or producing happiness.

That ability is also a cornerstone of Buddhism. In Buddhism one works at being objective, at being detached from events in life. In understanding you are creating the meaning of events, and in practicing the ability to step back from your "truth," one is closer to a detached, and objective, position. According to Buddhism, this is a path to enlightenment, and perhaps, even before becoming enlightened, to happiness. Once the awareness that meaning is generated from within grows, the ability to challenge thinking and create a more profitable meaning is available. That allows us to design more happiness in our lives, or to at least eliminate some of our suffering. That is not to say we should lie to ourselves, nor is it a call to lie to others. Honesty is essential in evaluating one's beliefs. It is also essential in dealing with others, especially those considered close. In overcoming self-hate, the Dalai Lama discusses how when one has honest and compassionate motivation, even failure should not affect one's self worth. It requires the ability to honestly evaluate one's motives, and to be honest with others.

Detachment and the challenging and reframing of thoughts and meaning are meant to procure a happier existence, and to allow for less conflict in one's life. It is not a panacea. It takes great effort to detach from one's beliefs and thoughts, challenge them, reframe them, and develop new, healthier beliefs. But with practice, which begins with an awareness of one's thoughts as well as an understanding that meaning is applied to events, not inherent in them, one can achieve a happier, more peaceful life. Let us be aware. Let us see the truth and understand its changing nature. Let us set ourselves free and release ourselves from self-induced suffering of not knowing or being able to handle the truth. Let us understand that truth evolves and let us evolve with it.

May it be so.