

***Say Only What Is True, Kind, and Necessary
(or at least 2 out of the 3)***

Bellingham Unitarian Fellowship
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Rev. Paul Beckel

There are very few human beings who receive the truth, complete and staggering, by instant illumination. Most of them acquire it fragment by fragment, on a small scale, by successive developments, cellularly, like a laborious mosaic.

Anais Nin

To criticize is not to reject. This point must be emphasized, for it is the dividing line between the free mind and fanaticism. It is the doorway to a universal religion that rigorously seeks the truth, and yet is also inclusive and welcoming to all.

Ken Patton

It is useless to hate or to love truth—but it should be noticed.

Cynthia Ozick

Sometimes, surely, truth is closer to imagination—or to intelligence, to love—than to fact? To be accurate is not to be right.

Shirley Hazzard

The truth invariably arrives several years after you need it.

Mary Kay Blakely

GATHERING SONG *For All that is our Life* #128

CHILDREN’S FOCUS Two African Folktales

Have your parents told you, “Always tell the truth?” Well I have two stories today which may cause you to think a little harder about telling the truth.

“The Pig’s Flat Nose and the Baboon’s Bare Buttocks”

Summary: The pig and baboon live together at peace until one frigid day they get testy. Baboon says, “It’s cold enough to freeze the nose right off someone’s face...so that nothing’s left but an ugly stub.” Pig returns, “Yeah, cold enough to freeze the hair right off someone’s buttocks, so that nothings left but a bare dry patch.” They leave on another in a huff and never speak again.

“The Coming of Peace”

Summary: Jackal tries to talk hen down from the haystack, telling her about “The Great Peace” that everyone has agreed to – that no longer will animals catch and eat one another. Hen, staring off into the distance, mentions that a pack of dogs are coming this way. As jackal runs off he explains, “I don’t think the dogs were at the meeting.”

ANOTHER AFRICAN FOLKTALE (for after the kids leave)

“Even God Cannot Catch a Woman in Love”

Summary: A father, worried about his daughter, locks her into the house each time he goes to the fields. She finds a lover anyway. The suspicious father demands a trial by ordeal, so they agree to travel to the divine rock. She arranges for her lover to meet them by the side of the road, dressed as a beggar with a donkey. On their trip to the divine rock, as they are approaching the beggar, she trips and turns her ankle. Her father hires the beggar to carry her the rest of the way on his donkey. “O father,” she whispers, “something terrible has happened: while I was climbing onto the donkey the wind blew up my skirt and this man saw what he should not see!” Upon reaching the divine rock, she prays and makes her oath: “If I should tell a lie, may I swell up and die. No man has seen my nakedness but this raggedy donkey man here.”

INTERLUDE from Don Giovanni

MESSAGE

Do our folktales and operas suggest that truth-telling and lying are ethically arbitrary? The pig and the baboon, who told each other a truth, never heard from one another again. While the hen who lied to the jackal saved her feathers.

The woman locked in her own home told her father the truth: that no one but the donkey-man had ever seen her naked. But this truth doesn't seem to have resolved all their issues.

And Don Giovanni and Zerlina, honestly felt a passion toward one another that was so intense that it was hard to deny. And yet was it right to confess this to one another? To let their feelings to take over their sensibility? Just to be authentic?

My message today is not that honesty is an arbitrary ethical principle. But whether we are determined to lie or to speak the truth, either way we can find ways to avoid responsibility. Or, take responsibility. With lies or with truth we can avoid responsibility, or take responsibility.

Responsibility for ourselves. Responsibility for interpersonal relationships. Responsibility for our larger relationships with the many layers of community within which we dwell. And within each of these layers we might ask, “How much truth can I deal with?” “How much reality can I accept?” “How much responsibility am I ready to take-on?”

Anais Nin suggests that “There are few human beings who receive the truth, complete and staggering, by instant illumination. Most of [us] acquire it fragment by fragment ... like a laborious mosaic.” My message today is that truth-telling is complicated, often frightening, and frequently abused. So instead of dismissing the truth altogether, or blasting it out thoughtlessly, it's best, it's honest, realistic, and self-aware when we piece it together as a mosaic made of broken shards of illumination.

In this way, day by day, we can face more truth about ourselves, more truth about our relationships. We can face more truth about the world in which we live. I don't know that any of us could give up avoidance and denial altogether. But we can keep adding to the frighteningly beautiful array. We can keep growing in truth.

I'd like to talk first about interpersonal honesty...and then about honesty on a larger scale: honesty with ourselves and each other about our place within this interdependent web of all existence.

In any of these relationships we can lie, or abuse with the truth, out of malice; we can lie, or abuse with truth, to take advantage, but perhaps the most common reason to lie, or abuse with truth is that we are afraid. One author put it this way: "Cowards are not invariably liars, but liars are invariably cowards." [Minna Thomas Antrim] We may deceive ourselves and one another when we fear consequences or responsibilities.

I know that I will become the person I want to become only as I become honest. And that can be terrifying.

For some of us as children, especially those who came from violent homes, dishonesty or abusing with truth was a useful coping mechanism. But when we continue to use that strategy in adulthood, "protecting" ourselves in this way only gets us in deeper trouble. Alison Crane writes, "Getting honest after years of cover-up and self-deception is the emotional equivalent to purposefully leaning backwards off a cliff. Everything in your body tells you this is a dangerous thing to do."

Yet when you are rappelling a mountain, that is precisely what you have to learn to do — trust the ropes and lean backwards, blindly, off a cliff. You do a lot of praying the first time. And, like rappelling, being honest about who I really am becomes less strange and causes less stress each time I do it."

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When I become more honest with myself, I also become more honest (and more effectively, lovingly honest) with other people. When I'm more honest with myself, I communicate better, and if there are decisions to be made, they'll turn out better when based on better information, and better relationships.

It would not have been honest for the farmer to tell his daughter that she could not be involved with a man. That certainly wasn't true because she obviously found a way to do so. It would have been honest to say, "I feel upset about you seeing a man," or, "I will abandon you if you see a man."

But instead he tried to create a physical barrier to an emotional matter – which was neither responsible nor effective.

Refusing to take responsibility for his own feelings and needs, he placed the responsibility upon his daughter. I won't say that he got what he deserved, but he certainly didn't get what he wanted.

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To become honest with myself I need to admit the tricks I play to avoid responsibility. You speak in the second person. I mean I speak in the second person. I trick myself with my words, saying things like, "I feel that Fred is a jerk." Or, "I feel that I'm being cheated." But if I'm

honest I admit that these aren't feelings, but judgments about someone else's character or intentions.

Virginia Woolf writes, "If you do not tell the truth about yourself you cannot tell it about other people."

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We aspire to make this place a place where we can tell the truth about ourselves – silently reflecting on who we are and who we are becoming. And even speaking our truth aloud.

And then, perhaps (though this will be rare) if we have come to know the truth about ourselves, and if we have dared to say the truth about ourselves, AND IF we have succeeded in building a relationship or two based in trust and mutual concern, then we can also be honest with other people about our relationship.

But let's face it: until we have such a solid relationship, tact is as important as honesty to effectively communicating our truths.

And even when we have a strong relationship, there are limits to appropriate truth-telling. Being honest does NOT mean telling people things that they don't need to know. I will not break a promise of confidentiality for the sake of being honest. And though I may share with you many joys and sorrows, there are private matters that I will not confess just for the sake of being honest.

How often do we mutter, "I was just being honest!" to cover up being dishonest about our intentions? Using honesty as a blunt instrument, thereby relieving ourselves of responsibility for the effect of our communications.

We do not have to share everything we think or feel, or even that which we "know for certain" in order to be honest. On the contrary, words that blame, criticize, or analyze one another are often a way to throw responsibility off our own backs and onto others.

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Let me tell you the story of this little box that I keep in my office. It's kind of like a fire emergency box with a little hammer on the side to conjure up the familiar phrase, "In emergency break glass." Behind the glass is a stone. And etched into the glass are the words, "The First Stone, John Chapter 8 v 1-11"

I got this curio from my friend, Phil, in Wisconsin. Phil was the director of a women's reproductive health clinic, where there were always protestors outside his window. When I admired a box just like this that I saw in his office he was kind enough to make one for me. It's a little cryptic. Here's what I understand it to mean:

In the gospel of John a story is told about a crowd bringing to Jesus a woman who had been caught in the act of adultery. They said, "According to the Law of Moses we must stone her. What do you say?" And Jesus replied, "You who have not sinned may throw the first stone."

It is so tempting, when we feel righteous, to want to effect maximum impact with what we know to be true. Especially when something is important to us, or pressing on us urgently. To me this box is a cautionary reminder about the natural human temptation, when I feel desperate, like I have no other options, to grab that first stone of truth in order to crush some other guilty party.

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A minute ago I said: words that blame, criticize, or analyze others are often a way to throw responsibility off our own backs and onto others. But this does not mean we can never criticize. There are times that it is necessary to call others to own their responsibilities. For to criticize is not to reject. There are ways, when it is necessary, to tell hard truths with love. But as the Chinese proverb reminds us: "Don't remove a fly from your neighbor's face with a hatchet."

I've found that a useful tool for sorting through this thicket is the phrase, "Say only what is true, kind, and necessary... or at least two out of the three."

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Still, anything as complex as honesty cannot be flawlessly condensed into a simple formula. Another Chinese proverb reads: "There is no dipper which never strikes the kettle." I take this to mean: if you're dipping for truth you are going to bang up against the person who is holding it. We have to accept that about each other, and tolerate one another's periodic blunders.

Flora Lewis writes: Truth is the hardest substance in the world to pin down. But the one certainty is the awesome penalty exacted sooner or later [when we] stop trying.

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This points us to the reality that honesty is not simply an issue in one-on-one relationships, but a matter of broader social intercourse.

Any attempt I make at preaching the truth is going to be affected by my ability to be honest with myself. And if I talk about anything that goes beyond my own experience, it becomes much more complex. It becomes function of who you are – both how honest you want to be with yourselves, and about who you are experientially -- what awareness we bring collectively. If we were all middle class middle aged introverted straight white American males, we would bring together a fairly slender segment of the truth. And our conversations with one another would at least to some degree reflect that homogeneity. So saying what is true, kind, and necessary gets increasingly interesting, pertinent, and rich as the community context grows larger and more complex.

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Which brings us to the whole world. How much truth, for example, is it necessary to know about global affairs, and the oceans and the skies and the earth and our relationship with each and all? The environmental movement has sometimes lost support by delivering so much truth, so much concern. I know that some truths have led me to paralyzing despair at times. On the other hand, being clobbered with reality has also led many Earthlings to take our situation seriously.

I admire those who can take-in all of the frightening truth and remain motivated, and then step up to take responsibility and implement changes. I also acknowledge those who need to let the truth dawn upon them fragment by fragment, because there is always another angle that can deepen our understanding as we gradually take more responsibility...as we deepen our relationship-with and our commitment-to the larger truth that exceeds our grasp.

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At times it is our responsibility to analyze and to criticize that which is deceitful or counterproductive. And yet, to be honest, our greatest influence exists within the sphere of our individual behavior – our personal lives of consumption and expression. And so, bit by bit, day by day, we can know more, we can understand more, we can hope more if we invest more of ourselves... if we open ourselves to what is true, kind, and necessary.

I think we can be more relaxed when we are honest. We are more relaxed with ourselves when we are honest with ourselves. We are more relaxed with one another when we are honest with one another. And I find that I can be more relaxed within the cosmos when I step into the park, field, or stream... as I become more honest and more responsible in regard to my impact upon the Earth.

For many of us nature is a place of intimacy and ultimacy. It is a place that we can relax and find solace and understanding. This can be more and more true as we face and take responsibility for ourselves, for our communities, and for the places we love.

SHARING OUR GIFTS

SENDING SONG

For the Earth Forever Turning

#163

BENEDICTION

Prayer of St Francis of Assisi

May a peace beyond understanding live through me.
Where there is hatred let me sow love;
Where there is injury, I will bring pardon.
May a peace beyond understanding live through me.
Where there is hatred, I will sow love;
Where there is sorrow, joy.
And may I seek comfort less than I give comfort.
May I seek not just to be understood, but to understand.
And not so much to be loved, as to love.
For it is in giving that we receive,
It is in pardoning that we are set free,
And in yielding, our needs are met, at the end of the day.