

MAY 2017

SOUNDINGS



Unitarian Universalist
Church of Charlotte

DISCOVER DEEPER SPIRITUAL MEANING

Depth through reflection

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painting by Edie Gelber-Beechler

The truth may be puzzling. It may take some work to grapple with. It may be counterintuitive. It may contradict deeply held prejudices. It may not be consonant with what we desperately want to be true. But our preferences do not determine what's true.

—CARL SAGAN IN HIS ESSAY “WONDER AND SKEPTICISM”



The Mission of the Unitarian Universalist Church of Charlotte is to inspire children, youth and adults to discover and articulate deeper spiritual meaning evidenced in lives of integrity, compassion and stewardship of the earth.

La mision de la iglesia Unitaria Universalista de Charlotte es inspirar a los niños, jóvenes y adultos para que descubran y articulan un significado espiritual profundo, evidente en una vida de integridad, compasión y en el manejo de los recursos de la tierra

THE DREAM OF TRUTH

by Shawn Morton



Truth is flexible and fluxional. It flows and meanders as unevenly as dream-thoughts. Dreams have their own truth. In a dream you get an email from Jay Leach asking you to write about Truth for *Soundings* and you agree. You ponder the strange unlikelihood of this occurrence and find yourself having coffee with the German philosopher Immanuel Kant. Kant speaks:

“two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and awe: the starry heavens above and the moral law within.”

“Was meinst du bedeuten?” you reply.

“What I mean is there is fact and there is feeling and feeling is as much Truth as Fact.”

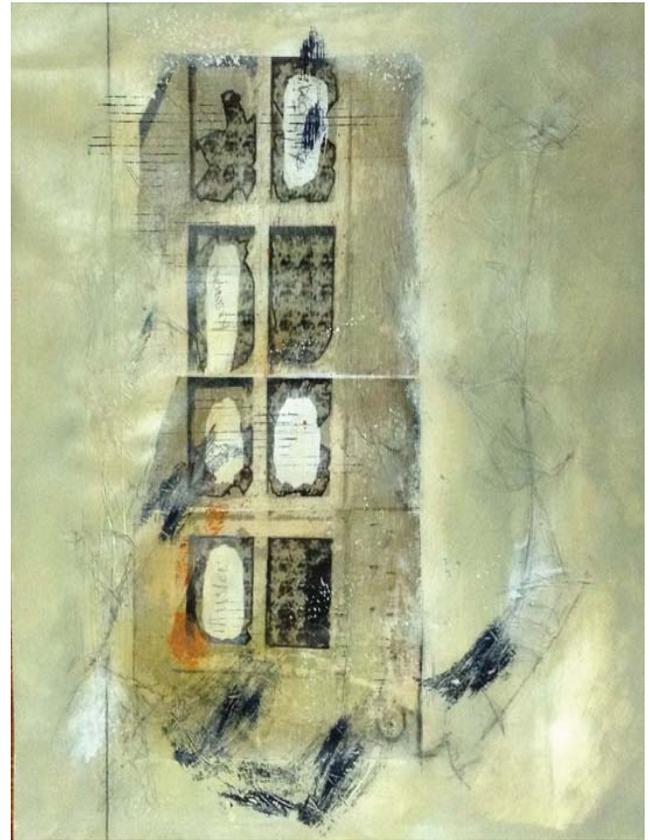
Thoreau joins your table, accompanied by a bear. Kant exits, pursued by the bear. Thoreau does not speak. He opens a journal and writes. He turns the page so you can see his words: “December 16, 1837: the fact will one day flower out into the truth. The season will mature and fructify what the understanding has cultivated. Mere accumulators of facts are like those plants growing in dark forests which ‘put forth only leaves instead of blossoms.’”

“Does this mean that facts are necessary but not sufficient, that Truth is something greater than Fact?”

Thoreau shrugs.

You ride a roller coaster with Herman Melville. Young Herman Melville, the promethean talent, not the tired customs inspector. A clown sitting in the car behind you intones: “from Chapter 94, A Squeeze of the Hand: ‘Oh! My dear fellow beings, why should we longer cherish any social acerbities, or know the slightest ill-humor or envy! Come; let us squeeze hands all around; nay let us all squeeze ourselves universally into the very milk of kindness’....”

“So truth is more about how we relate to other people? It is not something we can know in isolation? Truth requires and involves other people?”



mixed medium art by Patricia Raible

“This is your dream. All objects are but paste-board masks; strike through the mask.”

You run with the bulls, Jay Leach by your side, horns, hooves and violent motion all around.

“Jay, am I getting any closer to Truth?”

“Not really, but you are getting close to 500 words. Hello, Ernest Hemingway.”

Hemingway sits unmoved and immovable at a café. He declaims: “I know only that what is moral is what you feel good about after and what is immoral is what you feel bad after.”

“I understand!” you cry. “Truth is feeling and another word for right conduct towards other people and the community where you live and not a cold or distant fact and you know it when you feel it even if it defies easy description or reduction! There is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so.”

All is silent. A sheep leans on a light-post: “truth is beauty and beauty truth” the sheep bleats.

TRUTH OR FICTION

by Elizabeth Pruett



This past year, Cindy (my partner), and I moved my 93-year-old mother to Charlotte so that we could oversee her care in an assisted living memory care facility. We visit with her most days and over the course of months have come to know the other residents that reside with her quite well. It seems they are living out the last phase of their lives in

a very tiny world. They live and die and are replaced with others but their personalities and stories stick with me.

When I talk with them, they are often seeing me for the first time although I have met them dozens of times before. They ask if I have seen a deceased husband who has not visited today but is expected at any time. Other times someone may have worked a long night shift and be particularly tired. Another resident may be waiting for the last bell of the day to ring so they can go home after a day filled with small, busy children. One resident is madly in love with another and lives out her passion in intricate tales of desire and distrust that involve characters both seen and unseen by everyone around her.

My mother's memory is poor and her communication limited. However, unlike many of the other residents, she seems to comprehend most of what we tell her. A short while ago, her last surviving sibling died. My family and I debated about whether to tell her. "Tot," as she was known, was my mom's closest confidant and best friend. Our families are closely intertwined and have shared life's celebrations and challenges all our lives. We decided that telling her was the best thing to do. Cindy and I sat down with her and explained that her sister had died. I held my mother close while the three of us cried together. She seemed to understand and I was thinking we had made the best decision in telling her the truth. We sat quietly for quite some time. Cindy and I took turns holding her as she looked at us with a long sad stare. Her

sadness suddenly turned to confusion and she was able to form a few short words shaking her head, "now, who has . . . ?" At that moment, I wanted to blurt out nothing is wrong—everyone is ok—but I could not take back my words. When I softly said Tot, she began weeping again. My certainty in the decision was shaken and I have continued to wonder what the right thing to do actually was.

In the digital world we all occupy, we have access to an endless barrage of information. Many of us seem to now know with great certainty what is true and what is not. We know who is right and who is wrong. We have created barriers between friends, family and strangers based on our truth and what we know to be fact and reality. As I spend time with my mother and the other residents, I find myself thinking more and more about truth and fiction. What part of truth is really comprised of my experience, the information I pick and choose and the tiny world in which I reside? If I don't take the time to sit down with someone and understand the life they have lived and their experiences, how can I be so certain of what is true and what is right? Even when I do take time try to understand, I find more and more the less I know to be certain.

"Truth can be stated in a thousand different ways, yet each one can be true."

*Swami Vivekananda
1863-1902*



Elizabeth Pruett and her mother
photograph by Elizabeth Pruett

Michael Shermer's review of Robert Wright's *Nonzero: The Logic of Human Destiny* begins with this assertion:

Humans are pattern-seeking, storytelling animals. We look for and find patterns in our world and in our lives, then weave narratives around those patterns to bring them to life and give them meaning. Such is the stuff of which myth, religion, history, and science are made.



Jay Leach

We, as a species, are very well served by these capacities. That we evolved both to seek and find patterns and to tell stories about the patterns we discover is one of the capacities that distinguishes us from all other creatures.

However, is there a risk that we might become overly reliant upon the very capacities that equip us so well? My philosophy professor and friend James C. Edwards, in his book *The Plain Sense of Things: The Fate of Religion in an Age of Normal Nihilism*, points out the potential problem, admitting:

What we "see" to be so is what we have, by history and need, been accustomed to "see."

How much of what I "see" is based on what I have come to expect to "see"? A *New York Times* article offered an example of "bias" in our "seeing." It reported:

Culture can affect not just language and custom, but how people experience the world at stunningly basic levels—what they see when they look at a city street, for example . . .

Western culture, [brain researchers] have found, conditions people to think of themselves as highly independent entities. And when looking at scenes, Westerners tend to focus on central objects more than on their surroundings.

In contrast, East Asian cultures stress interdependence. When Easterners take in a scene, they tend to focus more on the context as well as the object . . .

To use a camera analogy, "the Americans are more zoom and the East Asians are more panoramic," said Dr. Denise Park of the Center

for Brain Health at the University of Texas in Dallas. "The Easterner probably sees more, and the Westerner probably sees less, but in more detail."

Not surprisingly, the article goes on to assert that "The older people get, it seems, the more pronounced those cultural differences become. . . ." Our ways of "seeing" become reinforced over time making it harder to "see" something that we are not accustomed to "seeing."

This raises one of the deepest of all challenges where "truth" is concerned. What is "true"? If an unconscious bias can affect the way I perceive a street scene, how much more might it shape what I accept as "true"? How might what I think of as "truth" be conditioned by what I have come to accept as "true" primarily because



photograph by Laura Hamilton

it fits a pattern that has become a predictable and comfortable one for me?

What happens, then, when I'm challenged to accept as "true" something that doesn't fit my pattern or align with the story I've been telling? What happens when what I've accepted as "true" is disputed by someone whose experiences, world views, core beliefs, or deeply held values incline them to dispute my "truth" claims?

What can be quite challenging on an individual level becomes all the more difficult in a communal or national realm. Whose declarations of "truth" are the ones we've become accustomed to accepting? Whose stories are most likely to ring "true"?

In our "free and responsible search for truth," we'd do well to keep in mind the title of an engaging TED talk by the Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie: "The Danger of a Single Story."

Our spiritual journey begins at birth and continues throughout our lives. We invite parents to use the material presented in LET'S DIVE IN! to engage their children in this journey.

LITTLE TURTLE'S QUESTION

by Belinda Parry

Little Turtle had a question. She asked her parents, "Where did everything come from?"

Little Turtle's parents said, "We don't know."

"I'm going to find out," Little Turtle said, and she kissed her parents goodbye and set out away from her home.



photograph by Elsa Lafferty

Little Turtle moved slowly on her journey. She didn't want to miss anything that might help her answer her question. As she walked, she looked all around. She saw the wind moving the leaves in the trees; she saw the water in the river flow swiftly in some places and more lazily in others; she saw animals of all kinds running and eating and playing and resting.

"Where did all of this come from?" she asked a squirrel she met on the edge of the forest. "The river and the trees and the wind and the animals and everything. How did it all get here?"

"God made it," said the squirrel. "He gave life to everything and watches over it all."

Little Turtle had never heard of God, but before she could ask the squirrel another question, a snapping branch startled it and it ran off. Little Turtle continued her journey.

A little farther along, Little Turtle met a fox and asked, "Where did all of this come from? The river and the trees and the wind and the animals and everything. The squirrel said God made it. Is that true?"

The fox shook its head. "Oh no," it said. "That is not true. Everything you see came from a great egg that split in two. One part formed the heavens and the other became the earth." Just then, a rabbit skittered past. The fox was hungry and took chase, leaving Little Turtle before she could ask another question.

Little Turtle was confused. The squirrel and the fox had given her different answers to the same question. Which answer was true? She continued her journey along the road.

When Little Turtle saw a snake snoozing in the sun, she said to the snake, "I am trying to find out where all of this came from. The river and the trees and the wind and the animals and everything. The squirrel said God made it, but the fox said it all came from a big egg. Which is the truth?"

"Neither," hissed the snake. "This all began a very long time ago. There was nothing, and then—BANG!—there was something. It just happened. And ever since then it's been growing and changing and it'll keep on growing and changing forever." Then the snake yawned and went back to sleep and would not wake up to answer any more of Little Turtle's questions.

Everywhere Little Turtle went, she heard different stories about how everything came to be. Some stories were similar; some stories weren't like any other. Some stories sounded unbelievable to Little Turtle; some stories seemed like they could be the truth.

Finally, Little Turtle returned home and told her parents everything she had heard. "How do I know what is true?" she asked.

Little Turtle's parents said, "You've really given us a lot to think about. How about if we keep asking questions and paying attention and finding our own truth together?"

Talk About It:

- Have you ever had a question that you needed help to answer? What did you do?
- Do you think every question has one true answer? Why or why not?
- How do we know when something is true?

“The Real Truth”

“There are three sides to every story: your side, my side and the truth” (Robert Evans, most likely)

“Truth? What is truth anymore?

In this rabble, scrabble, shoot-from-the-hip world
of story-makers and 15-minute famers?

We bend and bow it, ebb and flow it -

each entitled to our own facts, our own reality—right?”

They’ll say (you know – “them” the pontificators and pronouncers)—

They’ll say “It’s gotten so that you can’t turn a corner

without running into a new truth - a better truth

splashed across the alley wall like some gaudy mural.”

But here’s the thing, here’s the clincher

to tie you up in the ring and rabbit punch your rose-colored kidneys:

Truth has always been the pipe-cleaner of our beliefs, bent endlessly to suit our needs.

But today, man – c’mon! Today we just do it bigger, faster, on a colossal scale—

in a crashing wave of pixels that beats ceaselessly upon us—

twenty-four-by-seven.

Can I be honest with you—truthful, perhaps?

Facts matter (yes, really, they do),

But without a story they are just so many scattered dots on canvas,

Not the graceful picture seen from a distance, blended together into a textured whole.

Lay out your little dominoes of truth, ready to tumble into one other,

but don’t expect anyone to fall for them, to change their minds

Until you can tell a story to believe in,

one that grabs us by the soul and shakes us,

Compelling us to loosen our ironclad grip on our own truths...

Just a little bit.

—David Flynn



photograph by George Weir

Truthity

Each day we have countless opportunities to point out farfetched numbers, outright lies, deceitful talk, fake news and alternative facts – to focus on untruth. I get lost in my live news stream searching for things that are false to prove I was right. I'm at the ready to point out untruths to family members who don't see examples of injustice.

But my eagerness to point out errors and wrongdoing also serves as a shield. It's easy to say what is false about everyone and everything else. It's more difficult to face up to what lies and stories I might be telling myself. What turn of phrase do I use to justify things I need to look at dead on but would really rather not.

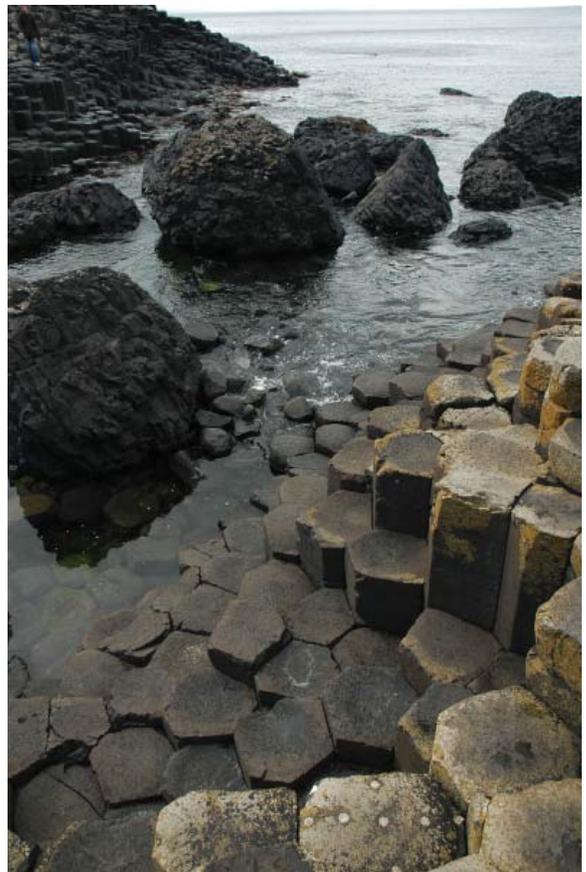
As long as I'm a busy member of the fact police, I don't have time to sit quietly and dig into deep questions about truth and my life and how I'm living it. I think we're called as Unitarian Universalists to turn the tables on ourselves every once in a while to ensure we're not getting snarled in the vicious cycle of finger pointing and unaccountability. For every untruth I revel in, maybe I should take a quick glance at the person in the mirror.

If truth in the world is going to start with me, then I should probably lower my pointing finger and get busy.

—Courtney McLaughlin



photograph by Laura Hamilton



Giant's Causeway in Northern Ireland, it's one of the natural wonders of the world. Legend says it was created by giants, but science says it was created by volcanic eruption 60 million years ago.

photograph by Denise Weldon

FOR FURTHER ENGAGEMENT

Below you will find a list of books, reflections, movies, lectures and much more for further engagement on the subject of Truth

BOOKS:

Adult

- Seeker After Truth*, by Idries Shah, 1992
- The Story of My Experiments With Truth*, by Mahatma Gandhi, 1993
- “*The Honest Woodman*” in *The Book of Virtues*, edited by William J. Bennett, 1993
- Seeking Truth: Living with Doubt*, by Steven Fortney, Marshall Onellion, 1997
- “*The Abandoned City*” in *One Hundred Wisdom Stories from Around the World*, by Margaret Silf, 2003
- The Happiness Hypothesis: Finding Modern Truth in Ancient Wisdom*, by Jonathan Haidt, 2006
- Seek Truth (Poetry and Imagery)*, by Kathy L. Augustine, 2010
- Truth, Beauty, and Goodness Reframed: Educating for the Virtues in the Age of Truthiness and Twitter*, by Howard Gardner, 2012
- The Power of the Second Question: Finding simple truths for complex lives*, by Chris Skellett, 2014

Preschool

- Fish King’s Power of Truth*, by Lama Mipham, 1990
- A Big Fat Enormous Lie*, by Marjorie Weinman Sharmat, 1993
- The Boy Who Cried Wolf*, by B. G. Hennessey, 2006
- The Empty Pot*, by Demi, 2007

Elementary

- The Three Questions*, by Jon Muth, 2002
- Old Turtle and the Broken Truth*, by Douglas Wood, 2003
- Gandhi’s Truth*, by Greta Anderson, from UUA Tapestry of Faith Curriculum: Riddle and Mystery, 2010 <http://www.uua.org/re/tapestry/children/riddle/session10/gandhis-truth>

Parents

- 10-Minute Life Lessons for Kids: 52 Fun and Simple Games and Activities to Teach Your Child Honesty, Trust, Love, and Other Important Values*, by Jamie C. Miller, 1998

DOCUMENTARIES:

- Baraka*, 1992 (Documentary) <http://www.documentarytube.com/videos/baraka>
- What the Bleep Do We Know!?*, 2004 (Documentary/Drama)

MOVIES:

- The Matrix*, 1999 (R)
- Big Fish*, 2003 (PG-13)
- Into the Wild*, 2007 (R)
- The Danish Girl*, 2015 (R)
- Viva*, 2016 (R)

SHORT VIDEOS:

- The Danger of a Single Story, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story
- Say Your Truths, Elizabeth Lesser, https://www.ted.com/talks/elizabeth_lesser_say_your_truths_and_seek_them_in_other
- Helio Fred Garcia talks <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hROW12CWSLA>
- Marco Tempest: The Magic of Truth and Lies (and iPods) http://www.ted.com/talks/marco_tempest_the_magic_of_truth_and_lies_on_ipods.html

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

- “Fire, Water Truth and Falsehood” UUA’s Tapestry of Faith curriculum <http://www.uua.org/religiouseducation/curricula/tapestryfaith/toolboxfaith/session3/sessionplan/stories/109499.shtml>
- “The Truth About Santa,” <http://www.uuworld.org/ideas/articles/6569.shtml>

THIS MONTH'S CONTRIBUTORS OF ART, POETRY, AND READINGS:

David Flynn

David has lived in Charlotte for over 13 years. He, his wife Debbie and daughters Samantha and Rachel have been members of the UUCC for the past eight years. In addition to participation in UUCC Habitat activities, David has been a CYRE (Children and Youth Religious Education) and OWL (*Our Whole Lives*) teacher for the past six years and is a passionate believer in the OWL program. When he is not involved with the church, he spends time with his family and works in IT in the finance industry.



Elsa Lafferty

As far back as Elsa can remember she has felt a longing to capture the beauty around us. Colored pencils, paints, were a constant part of her school years. Photography opens up endless possibilities. Traveling, stopping whenever something interesting appears. She is fortunate to be in a place of her life where she has the luxury of truly being in the moment, waiting for the light or an expression, for a flower to open, a wild animal to stop and look at you. A sunset, a moonrise...to capture that moment makes her heart sing. To be able to share it with others only enhances the sweet experience.



Edie Gelber-Beechler

For Edie painting is all about color. Mixing colors, choosing just the right ones, excites her. For instance, if she puts a tiny line of blue somewhere where it just has to be, and it makes that one-inch section perfect, then she's thrilled—even if the rest of the piece doesn't work that well! Painting reinforces her spiritual

path when it takes her out of time. All she knows is the moment, the canvas, the paint, the brushstroke. That's all that matters.



Laura Hamilton

Laura first started with her first point-and-shoot: a Kodak Baby Brownie. In the many decades since, she has enjoyed capturing pictures that are both interesting and pleasing. Transforming a 3-D vision into a 2-dimensional image is challenging and satisfying for her. She looks for curious perspectives, different angles, unusual designs, or fun situations. For Laura, photos provide great memories and wonderful entertainment.



Courtney McLaughlin

Courtney McLaughlin's passion for writing was sparked by the gift of a typewriter she received from her mother at age eight. She has been a freelance writer and editor for over 15 years. Her world and passion grew when she joined UUCC's Writing Your Spiritual Journey group in

2011. Through their support, friendship and sharing, she is constantly challenged to explore new ways of interpreting and experiencing the world using her love of words.



THIS MONTH'S CONTRIBUTORS OF ART, POETRY, AND READINGS:

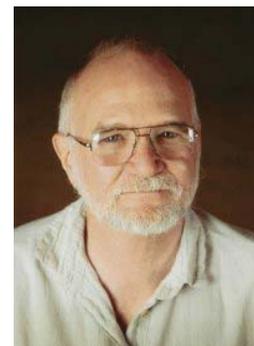
Shawn Morton

Shawn Morton grew up in Vermont as a Unitarian Universalist and moved to Charlotte from New York City with his wife, Emily, in 1997. He has been a member of the UUCU since 2007. The three Morton boys—Thomas, William and Jack—are also active in the church.



George Weir

George will photograph almost anything that stays still more than 1/1000 of a second, depending on the light. For George photography is a useful tool to remind himself to slow down and look at the world around him. He finds photographing children especially challenging but gets lots of practice as camp photographer for Chameleons Journey, an overnight grief camp for children ages 7-16 who have lost someone important in their lives.



Elizabeth Pruett

Elizabeth has always been a passionate defender of the environment and animals of all sizes.

Her career in health care has taken her from patient care, to technology and back around again. Through her experiential learning she is not going back to her roots, which is one of advocating for those in our society with a diminished voice. Her new focus is on healthcare advocacy and navigation, in assisting seniors through transitions in care and to work for social justice reform for the elderly. She spends her time with those in need and volunteering for Hospice.

Patricia Raible

Patricia Steele Raible is a contemporary abstract artist working primarily in mixed media. Her first introduction to art was an elective course in college where she immediately became entranced. An alumni of the McColl Center for Art + Innovation in Charlotte, NC, Patricia's work has been collected and exhibited throughout the South and Mid-Atlantic regions in solo and juried shows. She and her husband Michael have been members of the UUCU for about eight years.



Denise Weldon

Denise began photographing in high school in her small hometown in Upstate New York then pursued it with the academic route in the Midwest. She's photographed weddings, bar and bat mitzvahs and created images for newspapers, publications, universities. A day with the camera is a day off now. Her collection of vintage Kodak and Ansco cameras continues to grow along with other collectibles and vintage photography publications.

SOUNDINGS

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