

Speaking Truth
November, 2014
Hastings on Hudson, NY
Rev. Peggy Clarke

Opening Reading
The Invitation
By Oriah Mountain Dreamer

It doesn't interest me what you do for a living.
I want to know what you ache for
and if you dare to dream of meeting your heart's longing.

It doesn't interest me how old you are.
I want to know if you will risk looking like a fool
for love
for your dream
for the adventure of being alive.

It doesn't interest me what planets are squaring your moon...
I want to know if you have touched the center of your own sorrow
if you have been opened by life's betrayals
or have become shriveled and closed
from fear of further pain.

I want to know if you can sit with pain
mine or your own
without moving to hide it
or fade it
or fix it.

I want to know if you can be with joy
mine or your own
if you can dance with wildness
and let the ecstasy fill you to the tips of your fingers and toes
without cautioning us to
be careful
be realistic
remember the limitations of being human.

It doesn't interest me if the story you are telling me
is true.
I want to know if you can
disappoint another
to be true to yourself.
If you can bear the accusation of betrayal
and not betray your own soul.
If you can be faithless
and therefore trustworthy.

I want to know if you can see Beauty

even when it is not pretty
every day.
And if you can source your own life
from its presence.

I want to know if you can live with failure
yours and mine
and still stand at the edge of the lake
and shout to the silver of the full moon,
“Yes.”

It doesn't interest me
to know where you live or how much money you have.
I want to know if you can get up
after the night of grief and despair
weary and bruised to the bone
and do what needs to be done
to feed the children.

It doesn't interest me who you know
or how you came to be here.
I want to know if you will stand
in the center of the fire
with me
and not shrink back.

It doesn't interest me where or what or with whom
you have studied.
I want to know what sustains you
from the inside
when all else falls away.

I want to know if you can be alone
with yourself
and if you truly like the company you keep
in the empty moments.

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Speaking Truth
Rev. Peggy Clarke

Once a month I join other UU ministers for worship. When we first started this practice, a good number of years ago, the idea was that ministers rarely get to experience worship, so we agreed to provide that for each other. When we started, we all brought our best stuff, things we were proud of, things we thought would impress this hard-to-impress crowd. Over time, though, things have shifted. It started with the insight that we needed to be ministering to each other, not impressing each other. Rather than re-using our best, we started reworking things with a mind toward what we thought would need to be heard. It's a process similar to how we pastor to our congregations on Sunday mornings. We write sermons asking ourselves, "What do they need?" Does this congregation seem tired, anxious, lonely? Are they getting complacent or even detached from the world? Have there been deaths or births or other life events that are affecting a good percentage of people? Is something going on in the world that people seem to be carrying with them in their personal lives? Those are the things I generally

ask when I'm planning worship and as ministers, we started to ask ourselves those same questions when planning worship for each other.

But things shifted again. We've come to love and trust each other very much. And with that, we have started to ask ourselves a different question when we plan worship in this unusual and small circle. We ask ourselves, "What do I need to say?"

That's a powerful question. And it's led to some powerful worship. "What do I need to say?"

Recently, a minister brought the deepest parts of himself. This is a man who has suffered a lot of death and loss in the last year. More than most of us have had to handle in a lifetime. I expected him to bring his grief and maybe the struggle of ministry during times of personal loss. But there was something deeper he needed to bring us, something more vulnerable he needed to share about himself, something this time has opened up for him, a truth he has not been able yet to speak.

This colleague of mine brought his faith in God. A real and abiding faith in a God who created him and is present to him and loves him and accompanies him during difficult times. He brought African-American spirituals from his birth tradition that claim a powerful creator God, an abiding God, a loving God.

That was his truth. He was afraid of speaking it. He said he knew we'd be polite and wasn't sure he could take that. Polite can be so cold. Nice is often the worst response. He was terrified we'd be polite.

We weren't polite. We were completely taken and totally engaged by his confession. Together we shifted into a very deep place, almost a private place that we created by leaning in and speaking softly and slowly, looking carefully at each other, in some way seeing each other for the first time. A curtain was wrapped around us and in that private space we talked for hours, no one wanting to break the circle to answer a phone or go to the bathroom or get some coffee; we were fixed in our seats as we bore witness to this man, this minister's revelation about his own theism. I had this image when he was talking that his UU Minister Rational Self was the adult, the parent and his Christianity was the child hiding, with arms wrapped around his legs peeking from behind, wondering if it was safe to come out. And like we all do when a child does that, we each caught his gaze and smiled reassuringly. We see you. It's safe to come out.

The challenge of the listener when someone speaks their truth is to hold that person's truth as gently and lovingly as your own, even if it's quite different. I'm not a theist; I'm a deist. Theologically and experientially, there are significant differences. In our minister's group there are other deists and several polytheists and some atheists. There may be one or two other theists, and at least one of them is a Christian, although it's possible more will come out of the closet over time. I could have had problems with the theology he was presenting as his own had I engaged that part of my brain that likes to be right or needs to get clarity around the facts. I didn't engage that part of my brain; I engaged my heart. My colleague, my friend, broke himself open and we cupped our hands to hold those parts of himself he was pouring out.

We didn't shift into our heads until we wondered together what would happen if he made this confession to his congregation. Then we lamented the limitation of too many UU congregations where some truths can't be spoken. Faith in God, in a Creator, All-Powerful, All-Knowing and Living Monotheistic God is one of them. At some point in our history, we shifted into a fundamentalist atheism that has been difficult to shake. We're getting there, but there's still work to do.

Our 4th Principle declares that we Covenant to Affirm a Free and Responsible Search for Truth and Meaning. That colleague of mine invited us into his search for truth and in that, we all found meaning. We have different personal truths, but his willingness to let us in to his struggle and into his clarity about himself, opened up new truths for us both about our individual selves and about our shared life as ministers and as Unitarian Universalists.

Sometimes we don't have to search for truth. There are some truths we have about ourselves that we know, but have not yet spoken. There are things we carry, sometimes our whole lives. These might be hurts or broken places in ourselves. Victimizations others – or we – have perpetrated. Sometimes our secrets are only kept because of cultural norms or expectations like being gay in the rural south or being transgender, really, anywhere these days.

Faith is often one of our secret lives. I was a college chaplain for a decade and I recognized a pattern quickly. When college students were beginning to trust me, they'd tell me about their sex lives. The second stage of trust was when they told me about their families – not the happy stories you tell on first meeting, but the real stories that people begin to speak when they first move away from home. But all that seemed to be a test to

determine if they can talk about spirituality. I'm defining spirituality here as the search for meaning, for deeper life, for more life. Spirituality is the way we face the great mystery of human existence as individuals. (Religion is the way we do that collectively.) My students wouldn't speak that truth, the truth about their search for meaning, about what they held to be most true, until they had tested the waters and found them to be warm and safe.

The search for meaning, the search for deeper life, the way we discover who we are at our core and put it into context of the world- that's The Work. The spiritual task. It's the search that drives us to make music and poetry and write plays and climb mountains and blog and prepare meals for each other and worship and feed the poor and gather with friends and family whenever we can to talk and talk and talk. But it can be difficult to talk about. Maybe that's why we do all those other things; we are finding ways to express our own core messages, our own deepest truths in whatever ways we can.

I had the joy yesterday of going to the District Defying Gravity Leadership Day with four members of our congregation. Our President and Vice President, April and Gina were there as were newer leaders Ken Perry and Brooke White. I go every year, usually because I have been asked to create a workshop, but this year I was able to be a participant. The keynote was done in two parts. The first was on civility. The second part specifically addressed the Unitarian Universalist habit some of us have gotten into, assuming that liberal religion is the same as liberal politics. One of the speakers suggested that in a UU congregation, coming out as Republican is a challenge. She told the story of her own parents who had loved their UU congregation in Connecticut, that is until their membership in the Republican party made them feel like outsiders.

All that talk made me wonder about truths other than the spiritual or emotional we might be holding back. What about political truths? Can you come to this congregation – or any UU congregation – and be a defender of Open Carry Laws or oppose other gun-control regulations? What about being pro-life? Or if you believe in significant reform in welfare laws, limiting access to traditional assistance? Or believe that undocumented workers should be deported? What if you don't vote at all – you prefer not getting involved in the political process?

Are there truths that cannot be spoken here? We certainly have Republicans in our midst; how open can they be about that status? I imagine there are other truths that are difficult to speak, things that have as little to do with our shared faith as political affiliation. What if you don't like piano music or lay lead services or the traditional Protestant liturgy we practice weekly? (In case you aren't sure, the Protestant character of our liturgy defines the talk-sing-talk-sing dynamic as well as the 20 minute sermon.)

Of course, those are mostly just opinions, unless they speak to something more profound about who you are. I just know that even in a community that articulates openness, there is a culture that puts limits on what you can and cannot express.

What's interesting to me about that is that we are very intentionally in a community that has affirmed a desire for a variety of opinions, a variety of ways to live, a variety of ways to uncover truth and even a variety of truths. While it is in no way accurate to say that Unitarian Universalists can believe or do believe anything, it is accurate to say that we remain open to the understanding that truth continues to be revealed. We have not unearthed all of what can be claimed as true. There are plenty of laws of the universe undiscovered, plenty of laws of the human psyche as well. And there are plenty of things about ourselves and each other we have yet to discover.

I've started Tuesday Teas at noon on the third Tuesday of every month. My hope is to discover each of you, and to be present enough with no agenda so you can discover me if you want to. This kind of intentional interaction, this agenda-free gathering is a good way of being open to deeper life and relationship. It's a good way for me to find out what you feel hopeful about. What good news you're carrying around or what sadness you experienced in a fleeting moment of the day or the loneliness that accompanies you when you awake each morning. There are other things I want to know about you, like "What are the things you believe that you can't prove?" Or "What big idea defines your life?" or "What big idea have you changed your mind about – something that used to define your life but you've since decided against?" Or maybe you can tell me "What your most dangerous idea is."

When I think of speaking truth, I am asking us all to consider who we are at our core. Who are you in the dark when you are alone? Who are you in the first moments of waking? Who are you when you hear a baby crying or a when a filthy man smelling of alcohol asks you for help? Who are you when no one's looking? Is it the same as when everyone is looking? Do you notice people looking?

We covenant to affirm a free and responsible search for truth and meaning. *What is your Truth?* Does it bring you meaning? Will speaking it help someone else to find meaning or to name their own truth?

I am opening up the question without expectation of an answer. Or at least not today. Today I ask only that you consider your own voices, and those things you have yet to speak.

What is Your Truth?

What Do You Need to Say?