

In the Interest of Fairness
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A fable tells us that Truth and Falsehood once met on the way to the lake where they went to bathe. After they had greeted each other, Falsehood asked Truth how everything was going with him. "How goes it?" replied Truth, "Life has been terrible; fewer and fewer people even acknowledge that I exist. Why, I'm ready to fall over from hunger and neglect."

"I can see how bad it is for you," Falsehood exclaimed, as they undressed. "Look at how thin you are; I can see every one of your ribs! And how weak, too, you can barely climb into the water!"

"It is true," said Truth, "I haven't eaten for days."

"Well, my friend, you have only yourself to blame, I must say; I always have enough to eat and am in the peak of health," teased Falsehood. "I shall take you to lunch after our bath, and you will see how easy it is." With that, Falsehood climbed out of the water and, after drying himself, dressed in Truth's clothing instead of his own. Truth trudged weakly out of the water and found only Falsehood's clothing on the shore. Not wanting to wear them, he found some rags left by other bathers and dressed in them instead.

Truth and Falsehood walked together until they came to the city, and entered the lobby of a fine hotel. The hotelkeeper looked in distaste at the rags Truth was wearing but, seeing Falsehood dressed in the clothes of Truth, mistook him for Truth himself, and she graciously led them to a table for lunch. "Now," Falsehood said, "I shall pay for a fine lunch for us both, but you must promise not to contradict anything I say during our meal." Against his better judgment but faint with hunger, Truth agreed.

And so Falsehood ordered course after course of marvelous food, and regaled Truth with tales of all of his exploits – lying, cheating, bullying, stealing – all of the ways in which he had made himself prosperous. Hearing these exploits left every morsel of food tasting like sand in Truth's mouth, but

remembering his promise not to criticize Falsehood, he choked it down and remained silent.

After hours had passed and every plate had been picked clean, Falsehood rapped imperiously on the table for the hotelkeeper. She came immediately and asked what else they desired.

"We have been sitting here for quite some time," scolded Falsehood. "How much longer must I wait for my change from the \$50 bill I gave the boy who brought our food? I have important people to meet this afternoon, and I don't want to be kept waiting!"

The hotelkeeper called the boy, who claimed that he had never been given money for the meal. Falsehood grew angry and began to shout, saying that he would never have believed that such a hotel would try to rob its customers, much less rob Truth himself, but that he would certainly keep that in mind if he were ever tempted to dine there again. He dug another \$50 bill out of his purse and threw it at the hotelkeeper, saying, "Now make sure I get the change from this one, at least."

Almost to tears with embarrassment, the hotelkeeper refused to take another bill from Falsehood, but instead gave him the change from the reputed first \$50 bill. The serving boy continued to protest his innocence, but the hotelkeeper trusted Truth implicitly, and she boxed his ears before pulling him back to the kitchen, where she could be heard scolding him quite harshly. Sobbing, the boy cried out loud enough for the diners to hear, "Oh Truth, where are you? Have you forsaken me to be accused falsely?"

Truth gritted his teeth at the table and said nothing. His heart ached for the boy, but he remembered his foolish promise to Falsehood, and shame burned in his cheeks. The boy must fend for himself, and Truth hoped that he would not be punished too cruelly.

As they left the hotel, Falsehood laughed aloud. "You see, how I contrive to get us delicious lunch? I do the same for clothing, for a fine place to live, for a circle of powerful friends, everything I want. The world is your oyster if you but know how to use it!"

Truth was mortified at what had been done in his name, and his voice shook with emotion. "Better I should die of hunger, and dressed in rags, than do the things you do." And so they parted, to meet again another day. But that, my friends, is another story.

Reflections

One of the qualities that's so distinctive about Unitarian Universalist congregations is the diversity of perspectives and journeys that go into making up each of these communities. Although this variety is not something we strive for, it is an important -- and, I think, exciting -- side-effect of what we do pursue, which is the religious freedom at the core of who we are as a movement. Because of this freedom, our members and friends discuss the events of their lives and the larger world from the perspectives of earth-centered religion, Judaism, atheism, Christianity, Buddhism, agnosticism and others, and somehow we manage to make it all work. You might imagine that it's not an easy thing to put together worship services each week that reach out to such a broad variety of beliefs, but as I remind our New UU classes, the real work of holding together such a diverse congregation is not that of the ministers alone, but is an intentional openness that we all make possible together. As important as it is that members hear welcoming and inclusive messages from the pulpit, the message that really matters is the one conveyed in how we treat one another -- there's where people really see whether we're serious about our ideals.

Something I also tell our New UU participants is that the work we do of living in diversity within these walls strengthens our ability to do the same in the larger world. At a time when humanity finds so many reasons to be at war with ourselves, when our deepest beliefs have pitted faith against faith in the Middle East, in Northern Ireland, in Nigeria, indeed around the world, this learning to live in diversity is among our most important work. Our own nation's culture remains an uneasy mix of values and opinions, and different constituencies here too compete for resources and influence in institutions like government, the courts and public education.

For example, I was reading about a controversy this summer with the University of California, which is being sued by Calvary Chapel

Christian High School for refusing to grant credit for their courses in history, English, social studies and science taught from what Calvary says is a Christian perspective. A spokeswoman for the University responds that the point of contention is whether a course is primarily academic, or instead promotes a specific religion as its first priority. In the case of science, legitimate study is accomplished when we do experiments to learn something from the result, not to validate an answer that we've already decided upon. One biology textbook in this court case is clear about which of the two approaches it favors, explaining in its introduction, "The people who have prepared this book have tried consistently to put the Word of God first and science second." In light of this educational approach, the University is willing to accept such textbooks only as supplemental reading, not as the primary text for a credited course. The tension between a community's values and the role of educational institutions is an issue that arises again and again in our pluralistic society, but one of the morals that I draw from this case is that science is not determined by public opinion, thank goodness.

In this and other examples from our nation's news, radical conservatives are framing their questions as issues of fairness and equality. Now, clearly, I take religion seriously as a legitimate cultural force, but I don't agree that religious versions of each field of study are deserving of the same recognition. It's also clear that proponents of "equal time" are only talking about equal time for their religion. For all their concern about fairness, we don't hear about full access for Judaism or Islam or Buddhism or paganism. The agenda behind these conversations is, almost without exception, about conservative Protestants wanting equal standing with non-religious institutions in our society. (Incidentally, I'll start believing their rhetoric about "equal time" when they give science equal time during their Sunday School classes.) In the past few decades, journalists have felt increased pressure to give more coverage to lobbyists for the Religious Right, science textbooks have been rewritten to present creationism as a fair alternative to evolution by natural selection, and political decisions have been made with a patently sectarian agenda. Judges and other leaders are occasionally able to see through these attempts, as in last year's decision *Kitzmiller vs. the Dover (PA) School District*, in which the court harshly scolded creationist activists for their

dishonesty and exploitation of citizen goodwill. However, many encroachments upon public institutions proceed unimpeded, partly out of our inability to see them for what they are and mount an organized response.

This topic is not primarily about political conflicts, although I'd feel irresponsible to overlook that obvious dimension of it. What I actually find more interesting is this issue of so-called equal time as a threat to intellectual integrity. There's a basic problem of rationality when we're obliged to treat as equals those things which are not equal.

Philosophers call this a false analogy, while in everyday conversation we say that we're comparing apples and oranges. Language like "equal time" and "fair and balanced" appeal to our sense of fairness, and who wouldn't want to be fair? Fairness is, after all, one of the values we cherish most highly. But to contrive situations that treat fundamentally different concerns as if they were equivalent is to enshrine bias, to institutionalize inequity. When groups use the language of fairness to establish an unfair advantage, that strikes me as a fundamental violation of the rules of public discourse, and a betrayal of our trust in a shared commitment to honesty.

These tactics may take other forms as well. Another intellectually dodgy approach is called the false dichotomy; you're no doubt familiar with it in the form "you're either with us or against us". The trick of the false dichotomy is that, if we don't whole-heartedly support the discussed agenda, we have to be able to think pretty quickly to be able to recognize and respond that this doesn't obligate us to be utterly opposed to the speaker. This contrivance gives us two choices, but conveniently fails to mention that they are not the only options. A close relative of the false dichotomy is the false dilemma: "if you don't support X, you must be a Y". Of course, a current incarnation of this is recognizable when we are told, "you can't be a patriot if you don't follow our agenda".

Perhaps what bothers me most about these false choices, and motivated me to preach about this issue in the first place, is that other people are cynically limiting our options under the guise of being helpful; the language of fair play and objectivity is being used as they further unbalance our public conversations. And I want to be clear that I'm not singling out conservatives in my complaint about these word-games -- there are plenty of

progressives who have done the same to reinforce their own agenda. As in the fable I told earlier, any of us can allow Falsehood to walk among us as Truth or, if not Falsehood, at the very least Ideology. It takes an intentional effort and a certain degree of skepticism to see past others' attempts to disguise their biases as Truth, and resist being fooled by their manipulative tactics to usurp public discourse.

Of course, I wouldn't speak about this without acknowledging the serious repercussions of false choices on our lives as seekers, too. We are regularly confronted with the most strident religious spokespeople telling us that, if we don't buy completely into their doctrine, the circle of religious legitimacy -- and therefore moral legitimacy and all possibility of goodness -- is closed to us. Although I believe that the doctrinal structure of Christianity is especially vulnerable to this sort of rhetoric, the same my-way-or-the-highway mentality also exists in fundamentalisms of every kind. Radical Orthodox Jews attacking those who drive cars on the Sabbath; extremist Muslims assaulting women they feel are immodestly dressed; and radical secularists carelessly dismissing all religious people as intellectual Neanderthals -- every ideology is susceptible to the same kind of rigidity. Yes, Unitarian Universalists, too; I've heard people say out loud that you can't be a UU if you believe in God, for example, ironically unaware that they themselves would have been drawn outside the circle only several decades earlier. Because certainty is such a compelling condition, many of us fall prey to the temptation of false choices.

Fortunately, many of the other values we uphold are resources to resist this carelessness. I want Unitarian Universalists to learn to think big about what is possible for each of us as individual seekers, and for us as a movement, to envision ourselves as larger than what others tell us we can be. An example of this that I'm fond of is the work of Marcus Borg, a progressive Christian theologian, who has written several outstanding books, including *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*. Borg has his own lifelong struggle with the promise and the limitations of Christianity, and has made his peace with his membership in a conflicted and contradictory faith. One of the gifts that has come out of his seeking is commitment to a new expression of what it means to be a Christian. Not long ago, I heard him on a radio program discussing this, in

which he said, “To be a Christian is to take the life and work of Jesus seriously.” He didn’t say that it means that you have to accept the Christ as your savior, taking on all of the baggage of original sin and innate depravity that this doctrine entails; he said you merely have to take the life and work of Jesus seriously. I suspect that a lot more Unitarian Universalists would take Christianity seriously if this were the message we heard from Christian church leaders.

While the work that more traditional religious movements need to do is to rethink how they’re drawing the circle that shuts others out, perhaps our own work as religious liberals is to turn to our heretical heritage as we envision a larger circle. You might remember that “heretic” comes from the Greek word *haireîn*, which means “to choose”. Each of us in the Unitarian Universalist movement chooses the tools and toolbox best suited to our place in this community and on the journey toward a life of meaning and purpose. Rather than have others decide for us what the path must be, or even what the options are, I want to encourage us to think big, and not let others’ lack of vision limit what’s possible.

I believe that our next steps are to watch and listen closely to what’s being said to us, and to be less naïve about the word-games that people may use to distort public conversations. We will have to be bold and persistent in demanding that engagement be in the service of truth, rather than deteriorate to the goal of defeating one’s opponent at all costs. Above all, this task calls us to hold fast to the value of integrity, that we not sacrifice our deeply-held principles to the temptations of certainty and political expediency. We have created together a place where each of us may learn how to respond to diversity without losing our integrity, where we may each learn and exercise the virtues we affirm, and become able to see more clearly and choose more wisely. Together, we can build lives that are meaningful and a world that is more beautiful -- may it be so.