

# Truth Telling

The Reverend Dr. Barbara W. Merritt  
Service of the Living Tradition  
Rochester, NY  
Sunday, June 28, 1998

What an extraordinary congregation has assembled here in Rochester this morning! New energetic ministers eager to begin their service! Old, tired ministers eager to begin their vacations. Lay leaders from all corners of the continent and the world who have served faithfully on an astonishing number of committees and are still willing to do the work of strengthening religious community.

We have gathered in an unusual cathedral: one equipped with high-tech "Truman Show" television screens and great distances between one side of the sanctuary and the other. Within this larger-than-life convention center, we search for what is holy, what is true, what is sustaining and real. In the very largeness of the auditorium and this assembly, it is easy to feel lost. One can become disoriented and confused looking for Ballroom A or Reception Room 6,732.

Even though my own father grew up in Rochester on Avenue E., (the last time I visited I was 5 years old), this week, I, like most of you, have had to ask for help, directions, guidance. It was only because a colleague told me where to look that I walked the few short blocks from here to the glorious waterfalls.

It was because of the advice from a guide book that I wandered up to the George Eastman Museum of Photography. It was in Rochester, a little over a century ago, that Eastman developed the technology for flexible film and the Kodak Box Camera. These inventions meant that no longer would photography be limited to professionals with heavy equipment. Now everyone could have their own camera, their own lens, their own capacity to see and frame what mattered to them.

When you go to this wonderful museum, you will see exquisite photographs of natural beauty, historic photographs and hilarious photographs. Each one helps you to see something true about this world. The photographers insist on showing us all of life; the overwhelming desolation, and alienation, as well as the breathtaking beauty.

The photograph that touched me most deeply is entitled "Lunch Box" by Hironi Tsuchida. It is in fact, a photograph of an open, silver, beautifully engraved, slightly damaged lunch box. Printed on the bottom of the photograph is the explanation:

The boiled peas and rice inside the box have been "carbonized." The lunch box was owned and carried by a 15-year old girl who was helping on a

school project in Hiroshima, the day the bomb was dropped. She was only 500 feet from the epi-center. Only her lunch box was found.

In one photograph, the artist brought tears to my eyes and brought into focus for me the price of human violence; he did it more effectively than all the books I have ever read on the subject. That one truthful image is now a part of how I will make my way in the world.

All of us need guidance and help from those who see clearly. This is especially true when we set out on a religious journey. We need the assistance of those who understand the territory, the dangerous detours, the places where it is easy to get lost.

One of my most faithful guides has been the 13th century Persian saint, Rumi. Often called the "Shakespeare of Spirituality," Rumi's extensive use of sarcasm, irreverence and brilliant insight into the workings of the mind, seems to me to make him especially attractive to the Unitarian Universalist temperament. How odd and wonderful that an ancient Islamic poet has been the one who seems to understand me, a 20th century woman; my fears, my confusions, my joy.

Eight hundred years ago, Rumi warned his listeners that finding your way, knowing what was true and real and trustworthy, would not be easy or simple. To the contrary, there would be some people who would purposely try to get you to go in the wrong direction. You could be confident that you would meet liars and deceivers, people with bad maps and impossible directions. In Coleman Barks' contemporary translation of Rumi, we are given a partial list of lies that we are bound to hear when we set out on a spiritual path: "Some people say:

"The one you love is unfaithful."

Have you heard that lie?

"Your night will never end in dawn."

Have you heard that lie?

People who are themselves lost, crawling around, wandering in the underbrush, say --

"There is no path to the mountain--and no mountain *either*."

Have you heard that lie?

They say --

"If you try to go too far, or too high with your stubby love wings, you will drop to the ground like a stone."

They say --

"What human beings do is insignificant anyway. God doesn't care what we do!"

People love to tell lies!

So, if someone says *to you*,

"No communion takes place without words."

Just say, "I've heard that lie!"

In all ages and in all cultures, there are those who would try to persuade us to ignore our longing, to put aside our aspirations, to betray what we have experienced as most true and most real.

But the dangers posed by these deceivers and false guides and illusionists are relatively small, compared with the threat of the lies we tell ourselves. The delusions I carry within my own heart, mind and soul are the ones that most often lead me astray. It is my own self-deception that is the hardest to uncover and correct.

And the lies that we Unitarian Universalists tell ourselves are the lies that pose the greatest danger to the health of the free church. At the Service of the Living Tradition, and indeed throughout the General Assembly, we are invited to focus on the truth and the illumination of our religious movement.

In order to do that effectively, we must understand and name what the resistance is. What causes us to forget? Where are we getting sidetracked? What makes us feel lost? I know of three lies that have detained me, over and over again. The First Lie: What Unitarian Universalist churches and fellowships have to offer, is not all that important.

This lie grows out of a powerful secular culture. In such a view, a church can be appreciated simply as a nice social gathering or a convenient place to organize politically or a place to baby-sit the kids. Who, in a polite secular society, is allowed to admit to having deep spiritual hungers, or to openly acknowledge the absolute necessity for living in religious community as a pre-requisite for spiritual growth?

Sometimes I think I will scream if, when I am planning a funeral with a family, I hear, yet again, the words, "He was a Unitarian Universalist his whole life, but he never actually attended a church."

A few years ago, when I was asked to deliver a commencement address at a Catholic college, someone from their administrative offices called me in order to compose a brief biographical paragraph. They wanted my resume. The conversation went something like this: the man asked, "Tell me what exactly you do?"

I told him that for almost 20 years I had served as a parish minister. He replied, "No, I need to write down some important work that people will understand. What else do you do?"

I said, "Well, the other thing that I do with my husband is to raise two children."

Silence. In a secular world that respects power, wealth, and fame, parenting is even less impressive than ministry! He asked, "have you taught any courses, been involved in social action projects, served on any governing boards?" Finally we patched together a biographical paragraph composed largely of extracurricular activities.

When even a Catholic college has a hard time valuing the spiritual enterprise, you can be sure that the secular culture is alive and well and continually saying to us that the only thing that matters is money and numbers and real estate.

That lie is especially strong in my own ministerial head around about the time of the church pledge campaign. Last week I was at my desk, obsessing about projected income and unexpected expenses and attendance figures, when a member of my board said gently to me, "Barbara, statistics don't tell the whole story." Professional wrestling tournaments "have excellent attendance and they rake in huge amounts of money. The church has more important work to focus on."

The truth is that our religious path gives people life! This movement saved my life when I was in 5th grade. A forever nameless Sunday School teacher at the Cedar Lane Church in Bethesda, Maryland, using a Sophia Fahs curriculum, taught me at the age of 10, that I could enact the part of a Japanese Goddess and fall out of the sky and create a new world. I recall vividly that Unitarian Universalist Sunday School was the one place where I knew I would be taken seriously, respected and affirmed. This is no small accomplishment. We can do this for our children, for our teenagers and hopefully, for our adults. What a gift it is to know that you will be taken seriously. Your truth will be respected. Your being and your spirit will be affirmed.

What our churches and fellowships have to offer can be compared to what the ancient cities of the Hebrews had to offer. As a Rabbi told me, these Biblical cities were known to be places of abundance, of diversity, these cities had walls and gates, and the best cities were able to offer refuge and sanctuary.

We stand in a tradition of abundance. We have said for centuries that there is room in our religion for every kind of seeker and sojourner. We are called to embody a generosity of spirit, an open and optimistic view of God and of life, that claims that everyone is included; skeptics and poets and scientists are welcome here. Non-conformists and shy and uncertain folk, and all manner of smart people and foolish ones. I believe that our restlessness and doubts have divine origin and are a sign of grace. And that our love of truth is to be understood as the holiest of gifts and our means of deliverance.

The ancient cities were also known to be places of strange and wonderful diversity. Unitarian Universalists are not afraid of diversity. I hope we understand that everyone is a child of God. And yet we still have challenges before us. There are all kinds of diversity. Ask yourself, "In my parish, is someone who has dropped out of high school, and someone with a doctorate, welcomed with equal warmth and enthusiasm? Can a conservative Republican and a liberal Democrat receive equal respect for their integrity and sincerity? Does our governing board meet and share ideas with the governing boards of other congregations, or do we continue, as a system, to function in the old isolated feudal model, where every parish is a kingdom unto itself?"

Even as we open our hearts and minds and souls to one another, we would do well to remember that the ancient cities knew the necessity for walls and gates and clear boundaries. A system without boundaries cannot stay healthy for long. We need to know who is not welcome in our communities. My list of those who need to be excluded would include terrorists: people who hate diversity. People who think that their way is the only way. People who try to silence those who disagree with them. You can temporarily silence someone, with intimidation and ridicule; but you have not vanquished their knowledge of what is true.

If necessary, people will leave cities and religious communities when their experience of reality is not respected or taken seriously, which brings me to the other requirement of the holy city: that we be a place of sanctuary and refuge. We have the capacity to feed hungry souls and to comfort those in sorrow. Our churches are sometimes places of healing and strength. When our congregations are places of abundance and diversity, functioning with healthy boundaries, and offering genuine sanctuary, we do the work of the spirit and offer a life-giving blessing to the world.

Which brings me to the second lie: That Unitarian Universalists do this spiritual work alone. Sometimes I can get so enthusiastic about what I perceive to be our special genius concerning tolerance and inclusivity and opening up the religious imagination, that I become blind to the reality that many people, in many religious traditions, are doing this same opening work of the spirit. It was Loren Meade, the Episcopalian priest who founded the Alban Institute, who wrote that the word "mission" is simply the theological equivalent of the political school of domination known as imperialism. As soon as you claim that you have a unique mission, a unique truth to bring to the ignorant, inferior and invalid assumptions of the rest of the population, you have adopted a "top-down model," where "I have it and you don't. I'll give it to you, by force, if necessary. I will reform you, whether you want to be reformed or not."

Meade challenges us to adopt a new way of understanding the world, a world in which the work of the spirit is "already, everywhere at work seeking to bring healing and peace, seeking to overcome all forces of enslavement and poverty."

Everywhere at work. Allow me to introduce to you my friend and colleague Wally, a minister in Worcester who happens to be a fundamentalist. His theology tells him that I am a child of Satan because I am not a born-again Christian. My theology tells me that

Wally is wrong about the Bible, misguided in his understanding about God, and especially mistaken about women in the ministry!

And yet Wally and I find ourselves in a most unlikely friendship because we have experienced something about the work of the spirit.

One raw spring day, in the pouring rain, Wally and I participated in a Earth Day clean-up of a dirty urban downtown street. He and I landed up as the team assigned to pick-up an abandoned and trash-filled parking lot. Equipped only with a shovel and a few large trash bags, Wally and I spent hours taking turns picking up used hypodermic syringes and used condoms. Allow me to tell you, that once you have done this work in a cold driving rain with another human being, a friendship is born that transcends theological differences.

When Pontius Pilate asked Jesus, "What is truth?" he was asking for all times, and for all peoples. Jesus remained silent. I cannot help but wonder whether the reason Jesus gave no recorded answer to that question was because he didn't need "to speak about what was true." Jesus was living the truth. He was living with such courage and integrity and clarity that it was his being, his living, that was his eloquence and his power.

I don't believe that it is the words we Unitarians use, or the truth we tell, that will ultimately matter. It is how we are with one another--what we do for our sisters and brothers. It is the truth we live that will save us. Loren Meade believes that genuine ministry is not about telling people what you believe, not about organizing people to do particular tasks. Instead, we are to release people, to work alongside of all in this world who labor to make this creation a place that is more loving, more open, more life-giving. Loren Meade says we are being sent, "to see that no pain is unshared, no hurt unnoticed, no hunger untouched, no loss grieved alone, no death unknown, and no joy uncelebrated."

Which brings me to the third and final lie that Unitarian Universalists sometimes tell ourselves: We say that this holy life-giving work of ministry is principally the task of the ordained professional clergy. In this the Service of the Living Tradition, where we especially celebrate the gifts and the strengths and the dedication of our professional ministry, it would be good to confess that ministry is what we do together. All of us. Every Unitarian-Universalist contributes to this ministry. The priesthood of all believers is not just a slogan.

A few years ago when my parish was looking for an assistant minister, the search committee was composing a list of qualities they were hoping for in a candidate. I admitted at their committee meeting that I was not especially good at pastoral visiting. The search committee turned to me, and in one voice replied, "Barbara, this is not exactly a news-flash."

In that moment, I understood in a new and profound way that these people knew me: my weaknesses, as well as my strengths; my flaws and my gifts. A minister is only one person, with all the limitations of one personality, one experience of the world, one

partial grasp of what is holy and real. The miracle of a congregation is that together we can forgive one another, stretch one another, encourage one another, walk alongside one another.

It is a great privilege and honor to be invited into a pulpit, to speak the truth as you understand it. But you never enter a pulpit alone. It is crowded up here. You come to this place with all of your teachers, with your colleagues and family and friends, with every member of every congregation that you have been a part of, past and present.

Especially in this worship service, we are given the privilege to openly acknowledge the truth that we have been blessed. We have been blessed by those whose names are spoken in the roll-call. We look expectantly at the faces of those receiving preliminary and final fellowship, and know that without their energy and talents and enthusiasm, this precious free religion of ours could not survive. In this vast assembly, everyone has been given gifts and ways of seeing reality. We are all of us called to serve a truth larger than any convention hall, larger than any general assembly, larger even than liberal religion.

This work is important.

This association is important.

We serve a spirit that is already, everywhere in the world.

And if someone says to you:

"There is no path to the mountain -- and there is no truth that will set you free,"

You say:

"I've heard that lie before,"

And go on with your work, your praying, your music, and your ministry.