

“The Search for Truth and Meaning”©

Sermon by Rev. Duffy

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Nicolai, the boy in our Story for All Ages today, was on a search. He had three questions and he was seeking the answer to each one. He was convinced that if he could just find the answers to his questions he would “always know what to do.” His search though wasn’t just about the three questions. It was much larger than that. In actuality, his three questions were a representation of his search for truth and meaning. And while it might not seem evident at first, his three questions were based on an answer he had already come to about the meaning of his life. He had already answered how and who he wanted to be. He wanted to be “a good person.” His three questions then arose from his quest to be the best person he could possibly be.

It is doubtful that any of us here today had the same three questions as Nicolai when we were young. And I am reasonably certain that none of us took a hike high into the mountains to seek the answers to our important questions from an old turtle. But while we may not have had the same questions, or embarked on a similar journey, each one of us, just like Nicolai, has struggled with our own questions. Each one of us has undertaken our own search for truth and meaning. And while Nicolai found the answers he was seeking, I would suppose that his search did not end. It simply changed, with new questions arising as they always seem to do in life.

After choosing the story of Nicolai for today I began recalling some of the big questions I struggled with when I was a child. Questions like, is Santa Clause a real person. Today that question seems irrelevant but at one time it was important and I really wanted to know the truth. And then there was the question that I think my mother struggled with more than I did. When I was five she was pregnant with my younger sister. You probably already know my question. “Where do babies come from?” Both of these were questions that could be answered. The first, about Santa, requires a simple “yes” or “no.” The second question, as my mother knew all too well, is complex. And the answer can be more complicated. She decided to keep it simple and tell me that babies came from the hospital. The full answer, as we all know, is certainly more involved than that. More involved than a five year old needs to know.

A third question I recall pondering was on a very different level. Around the age of ten I remember sitting on the edge of our front porch looking up at the stars and wondering where does space end. I sat for what seemed like a very long time trying to imagine the end of space. I didn’t find the answer that night and still haven’t found it to this day. Recently, as I read the chapter titled “How Little We Know” which contains today’s reading, I found consolation in the following lines. “At the beginning of the twentieth century, physicists believed that there were only a few unresolved problems in the Newtonian system before our knowledge of the universe would be complete. But a mere twenty years later quantum mechanics exploded old certainties and unveiled a universe that was indeterminate and unknowable.” While the answer to just where the end of space lies eluded me, the experience of considering the question caused a significant shift in my perception, a shift in how I thought of myself and the significance I have in the scheme of all that exists. The experience left me with a sense of curiosity

and wonder that is now fundamental to my continuing search. I am grateful that, like space, I am unable to comprehend when, where, or how my search might end or even if it ever will.

The living tradition of Unitarian Universalism draws from many sources including “the guidance of reason and the results of science” as well as “wisdom from the world’s religions which inspire us in our ethical and spiritual lives.” As Armstrong points out in our reading this morning, science asks questions and seeks to find definitive answers. She claims that the questions more closely associated with the humanities and the arts, questions such as “How do we live with our mortality?” are difficult if not impossible to answer. She then goes on to assert that “Religion is at its best when it helps us to ask questions and holds us in a state of wonder—and arguably at its worst when it tries to answer them authoritatively and dogmatically.” It seems to me that what she puts forth here goes together very well with our Fourth Principle of “a free and responsible search for truth and meaning.”

If we were to agree with Armstrong that religion is at its best when it helps us to ask questions and holds us in wonder, then we might ask if there is a proper way to undergo our search. It seems to me that while every person’s search is unique, there are certain elements that are common to the search process. As Armstrong points out, it is not the answer that is most important. Instead, it is finding oneself held in a “state of wonder.” Albert Einstein would very likely concur with her conclusion here. He once proclaimed:

To know that what is impenetrable to us really exists, manifesting itself to us as the highest wisdom and the most radiant beauty, which our dull faculties can comprehend only in their most primitive forms—this knowledge, this feeling is at the center of all true religiousness. In this sense, and in this sense only, I belong to the ranks of devoutly religious men.

The level of importance Einstein placed on this type of knowledge, this feeling which Armstrong identifies as wonder, can be found in his assertion that “he to whom this emotion is a stranger...is as good as dead.”

Here again I think back to my experience of sitting on the porch gazing into the night sky and trying to imagine where space ends. I can still recall the incredible sense of awe and wonder that I felt. For me this sense of wonder is like a star that guides us on our truth seeking journey.

There is a second element that I believe is also present in every search for truth and meaning. It is an element that isn’t stated specifically in today’s reading by Armstrong but is present throughout her book. It is also a key ingredient in the story of Nikolai and his three questions. It is the element of relationship. Each of the answers Nikolai received to his three questions was centered on the concept of relationship. One involved his relationship to time. “The most important time is now.” The other two involved his relationship to another living being. I find the answer to his third question, “What is the right thing to do.” very interesting. The answer focuses primarily on who, not on what; “the most important thing is to do good for the one who is standing at your side.”

Here is where this story of Nikolai, Armstrong's statements, and the prophetic religious teachings of Jesus and the Buddha come together. A key element of a beneficial search for truth and meaning involves our way of relating, and specifically how we relate to those we encounter in our journey through life. Our search for truth and meaning begins in relationship—the relationship we have with those who love, nurture and support us—and continues with the relationships we establish with each person, with each object, whether animate or inanimate, and even with the concepts, ideas and values we encounter. Parker Palmer writes about the connection between truth and relationship in his book *To Know As We Are Known*. He writes:

The English word “truth” comes from a Germanic root that also gives rise to the word “troth,” as in the ancient vow “I pledge thee my troth.” With this word one person enters a covenant with another, a pledge to engage in a mutually accountable and transforming relationship, a relationship forged of trust and faith in the face of unknowable risks.

To know something or someone in truth is to enter troth with the known... To know in truth is to become betrothed, to engage the known with one's whole self, an engagement one enters with attentiveness, care, and good will. To know in truth is to allow one's self to be known as well, to be vulnerable to the challenges and changes any true relationship brings. To know in truth is to enter into the life of that which we know and to allow it to enter into ours. Truthful knowing weds the knower and the known; even in separation, the two become part of each other's life and fate...

...truth involves entering a relationship with someone or something genuinely other than us, but with whom we are intimately bound. Truth contains the image we are seeking—the image of community in which we were first created, the image of relatedness between knower and known that certain philosophies of science now affirm.

For Palmer, truth is not found through detached observation. Instead, it is only found as we are immersed in relationship. Truth then is not merely knowing facts. The search for truth requires that we engage deeply and intimately with factual information or experiences. Truth requires us to become actively involved in the process of connecting what we engage with in a manner that has meaning for us and that gives meaning to our life. I believe that is what the Fourth Principle of our religious faith tradition call us to do.

Every religious tradition I am familiar with has some version of a search for truth and meaning. Each one also has, as part of the search, an element of seeking connection with something that is greater than oneself. As Armstrong states, “At their most insightful, the religions have insisted that the core of each man and woman eludes our grasp and is transcendent. This is where we discover Nirvana, Brahman, and what the German-born Protestant theologian Paul Tillich called the very Ground of Being; we find the Kingdom of Heaven within us and discover that Allah is closer to us than our jugular vein.”

I want to return now to our Story for All Ages. As the old turtle shared with Nicolai, the most important time is now. And right now each of us has the opportunity to

experience the wonder that is present in every single person in this room. While we are each on our own separate path searching for truth and meaning, we are all sharing in the journey. So as we encounter each other along the way, may we look to one another for encouragement and support. Let us seek to share our questions, our perceptions, and our experiences as we search for truth and meaning. And may we remember that in those times when the answers are beyond our grasp, it is the wonder that can sustain us as we journey on. In your journey of life, may you behold the wonder that is present in every moment, in every person and in every living being you encounter.

So may it be.