

“Exploring a Deeper Truth”

Sermon by Rev. Duffy Peet

Shared with the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Bozeman on October 4, 2020

Our Fourth Principle invites us to affirm and promote “a free and responsible search for truth and meaning.” From my conversations with many of you, I know truth and meaning are important to you just as they are to me. But truth seems to be in short supply these days. Or maybe truth is simply too troubling or inconvenient for some people. The truth may be so troubling or inconvenient for some people that they do their best to obscure or deny what is true. Sometimes stories are used to advance an alternative to the troubling or inconvenient truth. Stories play an important role in our lives. Stories, in and of themselves, are neither good nor bad. They can reassure us, affirm us, inspire us, and motivate us to action. On the other hand, stories can also blind us, disempower us, and immobilize us. Today there are too many stories being told which attempt to divert our attention away from finding truth. I still yearn for truth just as our reading stated. But unlike what is stated in our reading, I do not view truth to be a romantic illusion or an unreachable goal.

This morning, I will share some thoughts and stories by two people who explore the issue of truth. The two people are Parker J. Palmer and Robin Wall Kimmerer. Both Palmer and Kimmerer have earned Ph.D.’s. Palmer’s Ph.D. is in sociology, and Kimmerer’s is in Botany. Palmer is an American author, educator, and activist who focuses on issues in education, community, leadership, spirituality and social change. He also identifies as white and a Quaker. Kimmerer is a mother, plant ecologist, writer and SUNY Distinguished Teaching Professor at SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry in Syracuse, New York. She is an enrolled member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation. Both Palmer and Kimmerer have perspectives that challenge some of the stories I was taught and internalized as a youth. Both invite all of us to seek a deeper truth by considering that the stories we learned may not allow us to know all or at least as much of the truth as possible. Both assert that a responsible search for truth involves relationship—the relationship between ourselves and that which we are seeking to learn about.

Our reading this morning spoke of the importance of relationship in a search for truth. Robin Kimmerer also addresses the issue of relationship and its connection to truth in her award winning 2013 book, *Braiding Sweetgrass*. In the “Asters and Goldenrod” section of the book she writes: “The questions scientists raised were not “Who are you?” But “What is it?” No one asks plants “What can you tell us?” The primary question is “How does it work?” The botany I was taught was reductionistic, mechanistic and strictly objective.” Plants were reduced to objects; they were not subjects.”

A few pages later she takes this thought thread further when she writes. “My natural inclination was to see relationships, to seek the threads that connect the world, to join instead of divide. But science is rigorous in separating the observer from the observed, and the observed from the observer. Why two flowers are beautiful together would violate the division necessary for objectivity.”

I want to note here that Kimmerer is a scientist. She appreciates and respects what science can offer. She also recognizes that science is not, and should not be, the only approach we use to seek the fullness of what is true. Attempts at objective observation may create a lens through which aspects of what is true are obscured. It may be important for us to learn to listen deeply with an open heart and mind in order to expand our capacity for discovering truth. Listening in this way would be appropriate and even expected in a relationship that is very important to us. By listening deeply there is a chance for us to discover aspects of the truth that we might otherwise miss.

In the sources that Unitarian Universalism draws from we find an appreciation and respect for science as well as other ways to seek and discover what is true. The Fifth and Sixth Sources can be found in the Bylaws of the Unitarian Universalist Association. Here is what each states. “Source Five: Humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit. Source Six: Spiritual teachings of Earth-centered traditions which celebrate the sacred circle of life and instruct us to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature.”

These sources offer two different perspectives from which to seek truth. If each of these was one of our senses, we might consider one to be our eyes and the other our ears. When we are able to both see and hear, we have access to more of what is needed in our truth-seeking endeavors.

Palmer speaks to what can occur when we seek truth from only one perspective or through only one approach. He states, “Objectivism tells the world what it is rather than listening to what it says about itself. Subjectivism is the decision to listen to no one except ourselves. But truth requires listening in obedience to each other, responding to what we hear, acknowledging and recreating the bonds of the community of truth.”

The “community of truth” speaks to the importance of relationship in seeking what is true. The significance Kimmerer places on relationship in the quest for truth is connected to her Native background. The ancient teachings of her people lift up the importance that relationship can play as we humans seek to discover our place in the circle of life. She writes, “In the Western tradition there is a recognized hierarchy of beings, with, of course, humans being on top—the pinnacle of evolution, the darling of creation—and plants at the bottom. But in Native ways of knowing, human people are often referred to as “the younger brothers of Creation.” We say that humans have the least experience with how to live and thus the most to learn—we must look to our teachers among the other species for guidance. Their wisdom is apparent in the way that they live. They teach us by example.”

Throughout the book Kimmerer writes about the origin stories of the Anishinaabe People. Her tribe, the Potawatomi, is one of several that make up the Anishinaabe People. Late in the book she shares Anishinaabe stories of the original human, whose name was Nanabozho. These stories are quite different than what science tells us. And they are quite different than the stories of the dominant religious tradition in this country, namely Christianity. Here is a short snippet of one such story about the original human.

As he continued exploring the land, Nanabozho was given a new responsibility: to learn the names of all the beings. He watched them carefully to see how they lived and spoke with them to learn what gifts they carried in order to discern their true names. Right away he began to feel more at home and was not lonely anymore when he could call others by name and they called out to him when he passed, “*Bozho!*” —still our greeting to one another today.

In such Anishinaabe stories, we find the importance of listening to, and learning from, all other beings, not as a being who is superior but as a being who is connected to and dependent upon those who came before.

And then Kimmerer tells us how these stories influence her as she walks in a part of the country she is unfamiliar with. She writes, “...I see many species I recognize and many I do not, so I walk as Original Man may have done, seeing them for the first time. I try to turn off my science mind and name them with a Nanabozho mind. I’ve noticed that once some folks attach a scientific label to a being, they stop exploring who it is... Most people don’t know the names of these relatives; in fact, they hardly even see them. Names are the way we humans build relationship, not only with each other but with the living world. Given who I am and what I do, I can’t know what that’s like, but I think it would be a little scary and disorienting—like being lost in a foreign city where you can’t read the street signs.”

As I think about the trials and tribulations we are currently facing, I wonder if what Kimmerer states here might be an appropriate metaphor for where we find ourselves. What if we are lost in a foreign city where we can’t read the street signs. What if we can’t read the street signs because we have put so much importance on being objective. And what if our focus on being objective, an outside observer so to speak, has diminished our abilities and our capacity for being in relationship, especially right relationship with all life.

I invite you to ponder this possibility. As we ponder this we might ask, “How can we possibly find our way then?” What can guide us on our journey and in our search. I don’t have a definitive answer but these words by Palmer may be able to guide us on the path.

“If truth is personal and communal, then our search for truth—and truth’s search for us—will neither actively suppress nor passively concede our differences, but will invite them to interact in faithful relationship...”

“Here is where the bond of obedience, of respectful listening and faithful responding, becomes critical. In a pluralistic natural world, the way to truth is to give voice to mute objects and dumb beasts

so that they can speak of their relatedness to our lives. In a pluralistic society, the way to truth is to listen attentively to diverse voices and views for the claims they make on us. The bond of listening holds the cosmic community together—careful, vulnerable listening for how things look from this standpoint and that and that, a listening that allows us not only to know the other but to be known from the other’s point of view.”

“The bond of listening holds the cosmic community together.”

Kimmerer shares yet another element that may help us find our way. She lifts up something that is often present in relationships where a close bond exists, namely love. In typical Native style, she tells a story to convey the importance love can play in seeking truth.

I sat in a graduate writing workshop on relationships to the land. The students all demonstrated a deep respect and affection for nature. They said that nature was the place where they experienced the greatest sense of belonging and well-being. They professed without reservation that they loved the earth. And then I asked them, “Do you think that the earth loves you back?” No one was willing to answer that... So I made it hypothetical and asked, “What do you suppose would happen *if* people believed this crazy notion that the earth loved them back?” The floodgates opened. They all wanted to talk at once...

One student summed it up: “You wouldn’t harm what gives you love.”

Knowing that you love the earth changes you, activates you to defend and protect and celebrate. But when you feel that the earth loves you in return, that feeling transforms the relationship from a one-way street into a sacred bond.”

In our ongoing search for truth and meaning it would be beneficial both for us and for all life to seek ways to build sacred bonds—bonds that will support us, nourish us and inspire us on our path. In closing, I share one final passage by Parker Palmer from *To Know As We Are Known*.

“We may bring truth to light by finding it and speaking its name—but truth also brings us to life by finding and naming us. As we allow ourselves to be known by that which we know, our capacity for knowledge grows broader and deeper.”

In our responsible search for truth and meaning may we strive to listen deeply that our capacity for knowledge may grow broader and deeper as we allow our relationships to expand and enlighten us.

May it be so.