

Wisdom Circles
Truth, May 2013

How Do We Know What's True?

When I first entered the ministry there was a bumper sticker that was popular among UUs. It said: "To Question Is The Answer." I don't agree with that bumper sticker in the sense that I don't think questioning by itself is sufficient. But I do think that questioning truth statements we hear (or even think ourselves) is a vital part of the UU way of being religious. We are not asked to leave our minds at the door. Many of us have rejected other faith tradition because they required unquestioning beliefs in certain doctrines, even if those beliefs were contrary to our education, reasoning or experience. Yes, Unitarian Universalism is a religion that encourages questions. I'm just saying that hopefully this exercise will result in some reliable answers.

There are so many ways that we delude ourselves into thinking that some things we want to believe, or that we have always believed, are true. Some of them are quite unconscious. Younger people who watch the popular television program Mad Men really can't believe that men could be as sexist and homophobic as portrayed on that show. But those of us who were alive in the late 50s and early 60s know that these dismissive attitudes towards women and gays were quite the norm, a norm that few people questioned. In our culture, people who are part of the white majority culture are quite shocked at the unconscious privileges we enjoy over minority people without even being aware of them. So many factors influence our misperception of the way things are – our experiences, our birth order, or parents, our families and our upbringing, to name just a few.

An older UU perspective is that we could find solid truths by empirical reasoning. For many years now social scientists have known that this is simply not true. We do use reason, but only to argue for a position we have arrived at by more emotional and unconscious means. As Helio Fred Garcia, the creator of the Standing On The Side of Love campaign writes: "We connect with others by feeling, not by thinking. In the 20 years since mirror neurons were discovered, there has been a revolution in biology, philosophy, linguistics, psychology, neurophysiology, and other fields to figure out how humans actually work... A consensus is emerging that historically we've given the human brain more credit for rationality than perhaps we should." Richard Restack, a neurologist argues, "We are not thinking machines, we are feeling machines who think."

Does that mean that questioning has not place in our lives? Not at all. A part of spiritual experience is to learn to hold our opinions lightly, to discipline ourselves to truly listen to others' arguments and to be willing to change our minds based on experience and reasoned argument. Finding the truth is a matter of subtracting our delusions without adopting new ones.

A professor of mine in graduate school used to say that we live in mentally furnished apartments. We usually obtain our ideas, like pieces of furniture, when we are young adults. And too often we get used to these ideas and this world view, not noticing how shabby some of them have gotten, how cheap some of them were in the first place, not to mention the dust bunnies and pizza boxes underneath them. Is it time to redecorate?

Spiritual Exercise

This month's spiritual exercise will take about a half hour or so. Pick a deeply held opinion you hold. It can be a political opinion, an opinion about the nature of people or a particular person, a spiritual or religious opinion or any other opinion. Write it down. Then ask yourself the questions, "How do I know if this is true?"

Write down all the reasons you think your opinion is true. Then go back and look at your reasons. Where did you first encounter those reasons? Have those reasons stood an empirical test of some kind? Do they come from a trustworthy source? What makes those sources trustworthy? Really examine your reasons for holding your opinion.

Did this exercise confirm you in your opinion or did it prompt you to hold your opinion more lightly?

Questions to Wrestle With

Have you changed your mind about something you have believed strongly in the last five years? The last ten years?

What was the most important change of opinion in your life? What were the consequences of that opinion?

How do you know if something is true?

Words of Wisdom

Cherish your doubts, for doubt is the attendant of truth. Doubt is the key to the door of knowledge; it is the servant of discovery. A belief which may not be questioned binds us to error, for there is incompleteness and imperfection in every belief. Doubt is the touchstone of truth; it is an acid which eats away the false. Let no one fear for the truth, that doubt may consume it; for doubt is a testing of belief. The truth stands boldly and unafraid; it is not shaken by testing: for truth, if it be truth, arises from each testing stronger, more secure. Those who would silence doubt are filled with fear; their houses are built on shifting sands. But those who fear not doubt, and know its use, are founded on rock. They shall walk in the light of growing knowledge; the work of their hands shall endure. Therefore let us not fear doubt, but let us rejoice in its help: It is to the wise as a staff to the blind; doubt is the attendant of truth.

Robert T. Weston

Our task is to seek the Truth, whithersoever it will lead us. And in the end we are well assured, that the truth which has set us free will make us glad also.

Felix Adler

We don't get to choose what is true. We only get to choose what we do about it.

Kami Garcia

What can be asserted without evidence can also be dismissed without evidence?

Christopher Hitchens

We do not see things as they are. We see them as we are.

Talmud

70% of everything you hear is crap.

Arvid's crap quotient

The only way to tell the truth is to speak with kindness. Only the words of a loving man can be heard.

Henry David Thoreau

Every generalization is dangerous, especially this one.

Mark Twain

Not every quote you see on the internet is reliable.

Abraham Lincoln

Resources

You may want to check out Karen Armstrong's book 12 Steps to A Compassionate Life <http://www.amazon.com/Twelve-Steps-Compassionate-Karen-Armstrong/dp/0307742881>, especially Step Seven, How Little We Know.

Helio Fred Garcia talks (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hROW12CWSLA>) about how we form opinions and what that means for leadership in The Power of Communication. <http://www.amazon.com/Power-Communication-Inspire-Loyalty-Effectively/dp/013288884X>

Please suggest other articles, downloads, videos or audios on this topic.