

THROUGH THE DOOR SIDEWAYS

A Sermon by Kathy Fuson Hurt
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One of my favorite classes in seminary was about preaching, but not in the usual way. Instead of studying sermon construction, we learned how to carry ourselves in the pulpit, how to speak, use gestures, inflect our voices. The class was taught by the University of Chicago theater director (a new experience for him), and he regarded preaching in terms of the stage, as a rather exotic form of acting.

In working with us seminarians, the director would listen to a couple of paragraphs of a sermon, and then proceed with his critique and suggestions. He reinforced his points often by mimicking the more extreme traits of the hapless preacher. Some students were caught preaching in a drone or a singsong voice; others gestured too often and too wildly; all of us were strenuously and tiresomely earnest. When my turn in the spotlight came, the director found me (no surprise here) overly serious and ponderous, to the point of being, he said, “lugubrious.” To get past my naturally lugubrious bent, he advised humor, and a willingness to use throwaway lines, to avoid weighting my every utterance with deep meaning.

Though I still struggle, not always successfully, to lighten up, I do believe I became a better preacher as a result of that class. And I also learned then a valuable spiritual lesson: being straightforward, being truthful, is not necessarily a virtue (at least in a preacher).

Jesus nailed to a cross, wearing a crown of thorns, his side pierced by a spear, blood gushing down

The cities of Sodom and Gomorrah destroyed in a rain of fire and brimstone; the citizens of Jericho crushed to death when the city walls came tumbling down

Blessed is he who dies a martyr, for the attentions of virgins await him in paradise . . .

Prometheus chained to a rock, while an eagle comes daily to tear out his liver . . .

Bound to the wheel of *samsara*, subject to multiple births, we live for ages in misery and illusion . . .

Women, be obedient to your husbands. . .

Celibacy is a gift and a holy calling

Much of the cruelty and foolishness in the world can be traced directly to the inspiration of religion. Note that I did not say religious *people*, or individuals *motivated* by religious beliefs, but *religion*. The harsh, silly, and

grotesque images and ideas of religion have given rise to a great deal of the harsh, silly, and grotesque conduct manifested by humankind over the centuries of our existence. With gods who behave badly, prophets who judge wrongly, priests and ministers who counsel misguidedly, and teachings that defy rational thought, religion fails too often in making us better persons—and too often succeeds admirably in messing us up.

This observation will not come as news to many of you here today. In fact, it is precisely this experience of religion's errors and harmful influences that drove you from the traditions of your childhoods and through the doors of a Unitarian Universalist church. And having seen too well the dark side of religion, you come to Unitarian Universalism with expectations of an honest, no-nonsense version of religion. You seek clarity and comprehension in place of obscurity and illogic; you seek directness instead of evasion; you seek straight truth, presented straightforwardly. Anything less simply perpetuates the problems you found in religion in the first place.

This drive for straight truth in matters of religion has had a powerful shaping effect on our UU traditions. Under its influence, all manner of scriptures, doctrines, images, ideas, rituals have been jettisoned, boiling down the essence of the liberal path to the handful of phrases that constitute our Purposes and Principles. In the interest of straight truth, we light a

chalice but seldom use incense or ring bells or recite prayers or stage rituals. A preference for straight truth has resulted in our never developing a set of scriptures or holy days, and our traditions tend to have verifiable, historical foundations. In short, Unitarian Universalism is a demythologized religious system, to use a term from Christian theology, in that we deal with this-world ideas in a this-world fashion, with scant recourse to stories or images. Ours is a religion of “just the facts,” straight truth, told straightforwardly, a dish of plain vanilla ice cream without so much as a dollop of hot fudge sauce or a sprinkle of nuts to confuse the taste. This love of clarity is echoed in our own BUC sanctuary, with its unadorned walls and spare chancel furnishings; we have no stained glass, no holy objects, no altar draperies (and our altar is not an altar but a table).

The question is, how engaging, how appealing, how motivating, is plain vanilla ice cream spirituality? It may be that all the wild, exotic imagery, the overheated language, all those fantastic stories and supernatural goings-on of traditional religions served a beneficial purpose despite the distraction and destruction that resulted. And our own stripped down, no-nonsense version of spirituality, our own Unitarian Universalism, may be unable to fulfill that same beneficial function, a function that can only be accomplished through stories and images, ritual and mystery, potent language and sacred texts and

ceremonial gestures. We gained the straight truth we sought—but I wonder if we lost something crucial along the way.

Tell all the Truth but tell it slant—
 Success in Circuit lies
 Too bright for our infirm Delight
 The Truth's superb surprise
 As Lightning to the Children eased
 With explanation kind
 The truth must dazzle gradually
 Or every man be blind—
 (Emily Dickinson)

Artists of all sorts have always understood the method of communication that Emily Dickinson advocates in her poem, “Tell all the Truth but tell it slant,” namely that the most effective, the most powerful, the most truthful expressions go at things sideways. Rather than make bold statements of fact, artists dress their truths in images, metaphors, symbols in order to ensure that “the Truth’s superb surprise” is not lost on us. Dickinson seems to believe that such a style of communication is necessary because we are not equipped to take in truth, in all its splendor and power, and too direct a presentation of truth is likely to leave us “blind,” uncomprehending.

Along with artists, many therapists have also known that a sideways approach to insight, slanted truth, is more likely to be assimilated by a client than interpretations presented straightforwardly. The reason for this response, say the therapists, can be found in a natural human reaction to any

idea that seems to suggest things are not exactly as we believe them to be: we resist, balk, deny, defend, dig in our heels, turn away—or, in Dickinson’s words, we go blind, walled-off and inaccessible to the truth being presented to us. In order to overcome our innate resistance, these therapists resort to the approach Dickinson advocates: they use a sideways style of communication, embedding therapeutic insights in stories, paradoxes, anecdotes. For instance, if I complain of working too much and having insufficient time for family and relaxation, so that my life is out of balance, a therapist would not have me rework my schedule but might instead tell me a story about a woman whose boat capsized, and how she was able to right it and make it safely home in heavy seas. Ideally, the client leaves the office pondering the therapist’s words until the truth finally “dazzles gradually” and breaks through resistance to reach a deeper level of understanding.

Tell all the Truth but tell it slant—
Success in Circuit lies

. . . .

The truth must dazzle gradually . . .

I wonder about those of us who came to Unitarian Universalism intent on finding straight, hard, plain vanilla, unvarnished truth. Do we, over time, grow blind, walled-off and immovable, as a result of too much head-on examination of religious ideas? Has our preference for demythologized Sunday worship blunted our spiritual growth? Did we lose some of the

grace and beauty in a spiritual path because of a heightened concern for purity in thought and language? Has our appreciation for nuance and complexity been overtaken by an excessive reliance on concrete terms, concretely defined? Is it possible that too much straight truth for too long could strengthen our resistance, narrow our focus, and cause us to miss out on creativity and spontaneity? Perhaps we have been wonderfully successful at ferreting out the hard nuggets of spiritual truth—but at what cost?

As often happens when we are deprived of satisfaction in one area of our lives, we rely on obtaining too much satisfaction in another area. I find it curious that all the UU congregations I have served, including now BUC, where one might describe a lack of indirection in matters of the spirit, engage in an excess of indirection in matters of the heart. Our congregations are invested in a decidedly indirect, sideways style of communication. For instance, a member comes to me as minister sometimes to express a complaint or a concern (or sometimes a positive feeling) about another member of the congregation. This is done, I believe, with the expectation that I will serve as a messenger, dutifully relaying the complaint or concern or positive feeling to the other person in question—thereby relieving everyone of any responsibility for the communication. Why not tell one

another these things directly, in that straightforward, non-nonsense style so valued by Unitarian Universalists? If you like something he did, if you dislike something she said, why tell the minister instead of the individual? While these indirect communications could be interpreted as evidences of psychological issues, I prefer to interpret them as evidences of a spiritual challenge: without symbol and subtlety in our path, we are forced to manufacture it in our interactions, setting up triangulated relationships, talking *about* one another instead of talking *to* one another.

In my seminary preaching class, the instructor hoped we fledgling ministers might come to realize that simply standing up and proclaiming the truth was not enough, would not guarantee a good sermon, would probably not hold our congregations in rapt attention. He wanted us to pay attention to our style and delivery, to the manner in which the truth was presented. No truth could stand up to the bludgeoning of poor, uninspired preaching.

Whatever is most precious to us, whatever has moved us and transformed us, did not come to us from the buckets of steam shovels, was not dumped on us from front-end loaders, did not bulldoze into our lives. The truths we hold dear, that stay with us all our days, slant in on us from the corners of our eyes while our thoughts are elsewhere. Spiritual truth flashes sudden in a shaft of sunlight, rises and falls between two waves of the sea. Truth

seeps, insinuates, teases and twists through consciousness, slipping past habitual defenses, hides inside images and metaphoric language and fantastic stories.

And ours is a way of the spirit well-suited to handling truth on a slant. Because Unitarian Universalists are not fettered by creeds or canons, we are not limited to finding truth in certain guises, in specified ways. We come to this church in search of plain truth, weary of the obfuscations and evasions of the more traditional paths. But in time, we may realize that subtlety in matters of the spirit has much to commend it. As everyone knows, in order to bring something large and important into the house, you have to carry it through the door sideways.