



UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST

CONGREGATION OF FREDERICK
Spirituality · Community · Justice

Maintaining UU Principles When We Can't Agree on Facts

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Part of our Unitarian Universalist heritage is the tradition of a “**free pulpit**” and a “**free pew.**” The *freedom of the pulpit* means that I am encouraged to preach about anything I think will be significant and meaningful for us to consider. The *freedom of the pew* means that you are not expected to believe something simply because it is spoken from the pulpit — not that that is a particular worry at most UU congregations.

That being said, once a year members and friends of this congregation contribute all sorts of items to our annual auction, such as special opportunities, dinners, and trips. And as part of each year's auction, I offer to preach a **sermon on the topic of the highest bidder's choice: “whatever topic you are passionate about, or think would be particularly challenging, meaningful, or provocative”** — a chance for the freedom of the pew to influence the freedom of the pulpit. So if there is a sermon you've been hoping to hear, our upcoming auction can be your chance.

Last year, Jim Langley and Leslie Powell were the highest bidders on the auction sermon, and they chose the topic of “**How Do We Maintain Our UU Principles When We Can't Agree on the Facts?**” More specifically, they said:

The current polarized political climate in general and the provocative rhetoric emerging from the White House in particular are precipitating a further degradation in the level of political discourse, pulling otherwise high-minded people into its vortex. The more good people descend into this ugliness, the more

ugliness itself wins. It is the inverse of, “When they go low, we go high.” I am interested in how the UU First Principle, which calls us to value “the inherent worth and dignity of every person,” can be preserved, especially when we struggle to see the good in people who defend some of even the most heinous words and deeds. **How do we maintain and uphold our political principles, UU principles, and principles of basic decency, even** as we find ourselves wanting to snarl at people whose fundamental assumptions, facts, values and policies seem so antithetical to ours? **How do we hold our ground and avoid “going low” in a world where we can't seem to agree even on the facts that may be used to create law and inform public policy?**

Offering a sermon topic for auction is always a risk. But so far I have found each year’s topic to be a welcome opportunity to explore a subject I may not have otherwise covered. So, thank you, Jim and Leslie for this opportunity to reflect on this timely and challenging topic.

If this sermon leaves you curious to learn more, Oxford University Press has published an excellent and accessible book related to this topic each of the last two years: **Denying to the Grave: Why We Ignore the Facts That Will Save Us** (2016) and **The Death of Expertise: The Campaign Against Established Knowledge and Why it Matters** by Thomas M. Nichols (2017). But as I have reflected on this topic, a third book kept coming to mind: **The Cynic & the Fool** by Tad DeLay, a scholar who writes at the intersection of psychoanalysis, philosophy, and theology. DeLay’s work is an important reminder that if we can’t agree on the facts, how we proceed will sometimes depend on what is going on *underneath* our disagreement. To use DeLay’s categories, **are the facts in dispute because we are engaged with a “misinformed but honest fool”? Or are we dealing with a nihilistic cynic, who does not care about the truth—only about saying or doing what it takes to spin-doctor perception and amass power at any cost** (DeLay 3)?

I suspect we have all watched enough political interviews to have wondered to ourselves periodically whether a given politician “is so *foolish* as to actually believe what he just said or, instead, is just [*cynically*] towing a party line he knows is false” (DeLay 3). Along these lines, the late conservative political commentator William F. Buckley (1925-2008) was famous for

saying, **“I will not insult your intelligence by treating you as if you are as stupid as you pretend to be”** (83).

I wish we lived in a world in which everyone was always acting above board. Unfortunately, we have to pause sometimes and **consider whether the person disagreeing with us about the facts is acting in good faith (“with honesty and sincerity of intention”) or bad faith (“with an intent to deceive”)**. And we know there have been a lot of bad faith actors over time, because we have lots of words to describe this phenomenon: con-man, demagogue, snake-oil salesman, huckster, charlatan, cheat, fraud, sham, swindler. I could go on (DeLay 4).

So when I find myself encountering Orwellian doublespeak about “alternative facts,” I remind myself periodically of the Philip K. Dick line that, **“Reality is what doesn’t go away even when you stop believing in it.”** There is no such thing as an “alternative fact.” A fact is something that is “indisputably the case.” And there may be consequences for one or more parties, as “reality” catches up with the propaganda either in the short- or long-term. But in the meantime, arguing with someone operating in bad faith can be exhausting at best and deeply harmful at worst.

I am also reminded of the line that I find most haunting from George Orwell’s dystopian novel *1984*: **“The heresy of heresies was common sense.... The Party told you to reject the evidence of your eyes and ears. It was their final, most essential command.”** Anytime the powers that be begin to convince significant numbers of people to disbelieve facts, we are in treacherous times. And whenever people in power are promoting “alternative facts,” concerned citizens should leverage political, ethical, technological and other forms of power to replace them with leaders more likely to act in good faith and in accordance with more-reputable information. Of course, history also shows us that promises made on the campaign trail do not always get fulfilled in office.

But I don’t want to spend our whole time on the depressing number of bad-faith actors in our world. What about the other side of DeLay’s formulation—the many who are not cynical nihilists, but merely “misinformed but honest *fools*”? David Dunning and Justin Kruger are two research psychologists at Cornell known for researching this question on the relationship between knowledge and confidence. Their most famous finding is called the “Dunning-Kruger

Effect,” which shows that **the less you actually know, the more confident you about what you think you know**. To quote Dunning and Kruger, under-informed people “not only reach erroneous conclusions and make unfortunate choices, but their incompetence robs them of the ability to realize it” (Nichols 44). Of course, experts get it wrong sometimes too, but if they are good faith actors, they have also spent a lot of time studying common errors and pitfalls in their field. And here’s a related corollary to the “Dunning-Kruger Effect” called the “above average effect”: in almost every area, “everyone thinks they’re...well, above average.” Unfortunately, 50% of us are wrong—and which 50% shifts with the category under consideration.

The truth is that most of us don’t like to be wrong and love to be right. And there is good reason why. **Our brains “get a dopamine rush when we find confirming data, similar to the one we get if we eat chocolate, have sex, or fall in love”** (135). So evolution has given us a strong incentive to maintain our current view—because it feels more pleasurable to do so—irrespective of whether it is right or wrong. Psychologists call a related effect *confirmation bias*, “the tendency to search for, interpret, favor, and recall information in a way that confirms one’s pre-existing beliefs or hypotheses.”

In addition to the strong incentives that evolution has given us to maintain our current beliefs, brain scans have shown that our amygdala (our “fight or flight reaction”) is triggered when we encounter points with which we currently disagree. **“When we hear a disagreeable idea, the body’s chemical reaction is the same as if someone had pulled a knife on us in a dark alley.”** And when the amygdala is activated, brain scans also show a darkening of activity in the rational, prefrontal cortex portion of our brain (DeLay 53). These factors contribute to the all-too-human tendency to persist in believing delusions instead of painfully facing the facts (61).

So, having named some of what we are up against, if you want to increase your odds of changing someone’s mind, here’s a few strategies. **First, make sure everyone involved is relaxed and well-rested.** If one or more people involved is hungry, angry, stressed, or tired, there is a low likelihood of anyone’s mind being changed.

Second, ask the other person if they would be willing to try the following along with you: “(G)o to a quiet place when you are relatively free from stress or distraction and **write down what you know about the arguments on the other side of your belief. Also, write down what**

it would take for you to change your mind.” This practice can potentially expose one of two things for each of you: (1) that potentially there is nothing that could change one or both of your minds, in which case it may be better to stop talking about the subject at hand, if that is possible —(these are what the courts call “irreconcilable differences”), or (2) you may identify the data that would be most likely to convince either or both of you (Gorman 140-141).

A more advanced technique is called “**motivational interviewing.**” There are lots of fascinating examples we could explore in which people disagree on the facts. We could consider the debates over the Raw Milk Movement (Nichols 22-23), Climate Change, Genetically-Modified Foods (Nichols 230), or Preventing Gun Violence (Gorman 4-5) to name only a few examples. But I would like to invite us to spend just a few minutes reflecting on the debate in our society over vaccines. (I should perhaps sub-title this section: ways to potentially make people incredibly angry at me.)

And I will admit that what it would take for me to change my mind about this debate would be for the scientific consensus to shift, which seems incredibly unlikely. The facts, as I understand them, are that:

The vaccine question was up for debate in 1998 when Andrew Wakefield first published his paper. But **17 years and numerous robust studies later, finding absolutely no [statistically-valid association between autism and vaccines], this is no longer a legitimate debate among respectable and well-informed medical experts and scientists.** (Gorman 257)

Moreover, “It was uncovered in 2010 that Wakefield had been accepting money from a defense lawyer to publish certain findings, his paper was retracted, and Wakefield eventually lost his medical license. In addition to obvious conflicts of interest, the paper was scientifically unsound, with only 12 non-randomly selected subjects and no comparison group” (79).

All that being said, here’s an example of what it might look like to experiment with “Motivational Interviewing” techniques around this debate with someone who disagrees with you about the facts:

If a parent tells you that they think vaccines are dangerous and they are thinking of not getting their children vaccinated, the best first thing to say to this statement

is not, “That is not true—there is no evidence that vaccines are dangerous,” but rather to **gently prod the person into exploring their feelings further by saying something to the effect of “Tell me more” or “How did you come to feel nervous about vaccines?”** You can then guide the person through a slowed-down, articulated version of their thought process in getting to the conclusion “Vaccines are dangerous,” and along the way get them to express their main desire, to keep their children healthy....

And that is the turning point of motivational interviewing, finding the deep motivation (i.e., “keeping my children healthy”) beneath the surface fear about vaccines.

After prioritizing *deep listening* over initially disputing facts, you can eventually ask questions that highlight angles this person may not have considered. So you might ask, **“Do you know how many children who are vaccinated are diagnosed with autism within the year?” and “I wonder how many children who are not vaccinated get autism”** (170)? For a fair assessment, the full range of statistical possibilities must be compared.

I also want to make sure I directly address the struggle to maintain UU Principles—especially the First Principle of “the inherent worth and dignity of every person”—even when we can’t reach agreement on the facts. One of the most helpful books I have found recently on this topic is Cultivating Empathy: The Worth and Dignity of Every Person — Without Exception by my colleague The Rev. Nathan Walker. Nate has written:

I once believed that it was powerful to condemn wrongdoers. I believed it right to tear down another’s unexamined assumptions and to vaporize those whose presence was not worthy of my attention. I believed that others were the cause of my aggression, others were to blame for my feelings of despair, disappointment, and righteous indignation.... **I was doing justice...all while being a [jerk]....** (7-8).

For Nate, one of the most powerful tools for cultivating empathy is what he called the *moral imagination*, “the ability to anticipate or project oneself into the middle of a moral dilemma or conflict and understand all the points of view.” Nate writes that,

It is possible for me to understand another person's views...without necessarily agreeing with them or silencing my own voice. Understanding is a prerequisite for empathy.... When we observe oppression, let us develop strategies that free not only the oppressed but also the oppressor.... **Do not let their unjust actions inspire us to cruelty, or else we will soon become what we set out against....**