

“Such a Lonely Word”

Rev. Shawn Newton & Lynn Harrison
First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto
11 May 2014

N.B. – These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship – supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer – and that it is but one part of an extended conversation that occurs over time between a minister and a covenanted congregation.

Reading “On the Death of a Colleague” – Stephen Dunn

She taught theater, so we gathered
in the theater.
We praised her voice, her knowledge,
how good she was
with *Godot* and just four months later
with *Gigi*.
She was fifty. The problem in the liver.
Each of us recalled
an incident in which she'd been kind
or witty.
I told about being unable to speak
from my diaphragm
and how she made me lie down, placed her hand
where the failure was
and showed me how to breathe.
But afterwards
I only could do it when I lay down
and that became a joke
between us, and I told it as my offering
to the audience.
I was on stage and I heard myself
wishing to be impressive.
Someone else spoke of her cats
and no one spoke
of her face or the last few parties.
The fact was
I had avoided her for months.

It was a student's turn to speak, a sophomore,
one of her actors.
She was a drunk, he said, often came to class
reeking.
Sometimes he couldn't look at her, the blotches,
the awful puffiness.
And yet she was a great teacher,
he loved her,
but thought someone should say
what everyone knew
because she didn't die by accident.

Everyone was crying. Everyone was crying and it
was almost over now.
The remaining speaker, an historian, said he'd cut
his speech short.
And the Chairman stood up as if by habit,
said something about loss
and thanked us for coming. None of us moved
except some students
to the student who'd spoken, and then others
moved to him, across dividers,
down aisles, to his side of the stage.

Sermon - “Honesty Is Such a Lonely Word”

Part I – Shawn

Sometimes, it just has to be said.
A truth needs to be named.
An honest observation put on the table, for all to see.

There are times when the emperor’s new clothes require comment.
When someone needs enough courage
to say what everyone else is already thinking.

That’s what the brave, lone speaker did at that memorial service.
He named the inconvenient truth that had not yet been spoken.
He pointed out what was perfectly obvious
to any and all who had been paying attention:
that the person they had come together to mourn
had died a slow sad death, right before their very eyes.

It’s worth asking why honesty, in that moment, was such a lonely word.

On a fundamental level, it’s because it felt impossibly hard.

That student’s willingness to speak the truth
obviously made everyone else deeply uncomfortable.
Surely part of that discomfort was rooted in the recognition
that such honesty—if, perhaps, spoken much earlier—
may well have saved that beloved teacher’s life.

Now, it should be said that the grip of addiction
can hold a relentless power over a person’s life—
and that there are times
when no amount of intervention is going to compel
someone to take up the path toward healing.

We only have to look to the headlines
of the past couple of years in our city
to see how difficult it is for a hard truth to be heard,
even when it’s spoken by the editorial page of every newspaper in the city,
by an almost unanimous city council,
and by countless people concerned for the mayor’s well-being,

including Jimmy Kimmel, who by imploring Rob Ford to get help—
on television, no less—may have spoken
the most direct and public truth of all.

I believe Rob Ford needs and deserves privacy and compassion
as he sorts through the meaning of his behaviour
for himself, his family, and our city.

But I bring forward this example from our shared civic life
because it already looms so large.
I imagine more than a few of you thought of the mayor
as I was sharing the poem earlier.

Last Sunday, in Family Chapel, in fact,
Angela Klassen, our Director of Lifespan Religious Education,
led the children of our congregation through a conversation
about this month's theme of what it means to live an honest life.

When she asked the kids to share examples of dishonesty,
they immediately brought up Rob Ford.

This melodrama playing out before us and, in many ways, affecting us all
offers a useful tableau for grappling with questions of honesty and truth-telling.

After getting over the initial surprise
of hearing news about crack pipes and drunken stupors,
I'm guessing and hoping that we moved to a place,
even in our exhaustion with the story, of concern and compassion.

Because there is at the centre of this story, after all,
a human being so dishonest about his own suffering
that he has, unfortunately, spread that suffering around.

I don't really know what the turning point was—
and I'm not completely convinced that he (or we) are there yet.
But I'm pretty sure that when and if it comes, if it hasn't already,
it will be because of someone (or many someones)
having had the courage and compassion
to confront the mayor with the truth of his situation—
and the mayor finally being able to hear what's been said.

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Being honest, even sometimes painfully so,
can be one of the most loving and life-giving things we ever undertake,
whether it's speaking truth to power, to our loved ones, or to ourselves.

It must be said that being honest or truthful
isn't the same thing as lashing out or seeking revenge.
Instead, it's about caring so dearly for someone or for something
that we're willing to risk the consequences
that might arise from speaking the truth.

That means that telling hard truths is and rightly should be... hard.

Because it can be incredibly difficult
to be on the receiving end of a painful truth.

It can sting like crazy.
It can cause us to recoil and want to lick our wounds.
It can also make us angry and ready to retaliate.
I'm guessing we've all had that experience at least once!

But if the words that come our way contain a nugget of truth,
isn't there something to be said for taking it in,
wrestling with its meaning, and maybe, even,
coming to see it as the gift it was intended to be?

It's easier said than done, I know.

But, why is that?

It's so easy to take in the truth when someone yells "fire"
and clears a theatre full of people from impending danger.

Or when a bystander warns a fellow pedestrian
against stepping into the path of an oncoming bicyclist.

Or when we instruct children that they'll truly be happier
if they don't touch the hot stove again.

Why is it that speaking such truths are considered helpful, admirable, even,

while warnings of other great dangers to our health and wholeness are so often less warmly received?

What allows us to readily hear the truth in one circumstance and resist it—or deny or dismiss or disparage it—in another?

One of my all-time favourite cartoons is of a woman emerging from a worship service. As she shakes the minister's hand, she complains to him that his sermon was too... preachy!

It turns out, from our religious lives to our personal lives, we can be quite averse to hearing hard truths.

And, yet, if we can't learn to hear them and we can't learn to speak them, what does that mean for a world that, in so many ways, is going to hell in a hand basket?

If you've ever received an email from me, you may have noticed the words from William Sloane Coffin at the bottom.

They are meaningful words that remind me of the deeper, spiritual value of finding the courage to be boldly honest, even when I'd rather not speak up or speak out.

"The world," he says, "is too dangerous for anything but truth and too small for anything but love."

My hope, given the stakes, is that we will risk telling the truth as graciously as we can out of a deep love of life and those with whom we share it.

Reading "The Danger of Neon Vision"

There is an unprecedented spiritual hunger in our times. More and more people are awakening to the inner world. A thirst and hunger for the eternal is coming alive in their souls; this is a new form of consciousness. Yet one of the damaging aspects of this spiritual hunger is the way it sees everything in such a severe and insistent light. The light of modern consciousness is not gentle or

reverent; it lacks graciousness in the presence of mystery; it wants to unriddle and control the unknown. Modern consciousness is similar to the harsh and brilliant white light of a hospital operating theatre. This neon light is too direct and clear to befriend the shadowed world of the soul. It is not hospitable to what is reserved and hidden. // It is interesting that the word “revelation” comes from re-valere...literally, “to veil again.” The world of the soul is glimpsed through the opening in a veil that closes again. There is no direct, permanent or public access to the divine. // The soul was never meant to be seen completely. It is more at home in a light that is hospitable to shadow. Before electricity, people used candlelight at night. The ideal light to befriend the darkness, it gently opens up caverns in the darkness and prompts the imagination into activity. The candle allows the darkness to keep its secrets. There is shadow and colour within every candle flame. Candlelight perception is the most respectful and appropriate form of light with which to approach the inner world. It does not force our tormented transparency upon the mystery. The glimpse is sufficient. Candlelight perception has the finesse and reverence appropriate to the mystery and autonomy of the soul."

- John O'Donohue: *Anam Cara: A Book of Celtic Wisdom*

Part II – Lynn

What a kind and evocative image the late Catholic poet John O'Donohue offered in this reading.

“The neon light is too direct and clear to befriend the shadowed world of the soul.”

It's taken from a book called “Anam Cara” which means “soul friend.”

It's a lovely and compassionate statement.

But how does it square with our need for honesty?

With the high value we place on personal integrity?

Don't we need the neon light of honesty to reveal our faults...
to illuminate what we need to improve in ourselves and others?

Without the bright light of constant honesty, aren't we diminished somehow?

If we are not always perfectly truthful, are our lives less true?

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There's no question that many, if not most of us, see honesty as a fundamental part of ethical living.

Many of us would say that we want to be honest with those we care about, and that we want them to be honest with us.

As Shawn said, sometimes there is no getting around it. The truth must be told.

But there are also times when “honesty” can hurt or wound... when it does not “befriend” our soul. I'll share with you just a few examples.

We've all been on the receiving end of “honesty” which was hurtful. It happened to me just a few weeks ago.

A good friend opened a conversation by saying,
“Are you in a good place right now? Feeling good about yourself? Because I want to tell you something I've noticed about you lately.”

When my friend made her “honest” comments, some honest comments of my own came immediately to mind!

But I'm glad I decided not to share them, because it wouldn't have served our friendship.

Her comments reflected her candid opinion, it's true.

But they did hurt a little. And I'm not sure they benefited either of us. In his popular book “The Four Agreements,” based on the ancient Toltec religion, author Don Miguel Ruiz teaches us to be “impeccable with our word.”

He cautions us against using our opinions—as real as they seem to us—in ways that can hurt.[1]

Here's another situation where honesty must be handled with care.

Twelve Step recovery programs, such as A.A., Narcotics Anonymous and Gamblers Anonymous, call their members to be very honest about their addictions...and to take a searching and fearless personal inventory of themselves.

Such a program of rigorous honesty can be profoundly healing and transformative.

But the 9th Step calls people in recovery to make “direct amends to people [they have harmed]—except when to do so would injure them or others.”

In other words, total disclosure is not always appropriate.

Instead, what’s needed is careful discernment about what must be revealed and to whom.[2]

There are times when we must hold the tension of knowing something we cannot share.

Times when our “honesty” must rest with ourselves.

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In every life, there are areas that will be shadowed.

Indeed, there are areas that *must* be shadowed, at least for a time.

There is a well-known story, in which an eager young child, finding a cocoon, blows on it to assist the butterfly in emerging.

Hurried into the sunlight too soon, the butterfly is not ready for the open air...and so it struggles and then it dies.

The reading we heard earlier reminds us that the flickering light of a candle is gentle on the soul.

It allows the soul to come forward gradually, in its own time.

We grow in the gentle embrace of both light and shadow...which is so much kinder than what John O’Donohue called “tormented transparency.”

I wonder how many of us would light candles every Sunday,
if we had to reveal exactly why we were lighting a candle.

There may be times when we even don't know.

When we're not sure what "honesty" or "truth" even is.

And there are times when we hold a painful awareness
closer to our chest than we scarcely can bear.

During those times, we are no less human, no less worthy.
In those times, the candle flame—like any gentle presence—
can hold our imperfection in a loving light,
rather than a harsh and unforgiving one.

Sometimes, our "honesty," to whatever degree we can muster it,
must take place in a private interchange between our self and
our soul...our self and our Inner Teacher...our self and our God.

It's notable that in Unitarian Universalism, we don't have
a formal ritual of confession.

In the Roman Catholic tradition, it's the only setting in which
certain kinds of honesty can take place.

Our joys and concerns ritual may, at times and in some ways,
serve as a substitute for confession.

As well, confidential pastoral care from ministers, and non-judgmental
listening from trusted friends, can create an atmosphere that
does not demand honesty...but that may invite it.

Such an atmosphere of sacred trust is necessary for a soul to be revealed...
to herself, and then to others.

I'm not sure that honesty is a "lonely" word...but I think it may be
a misunderstood word at times.

Honesty is not about expressing whatever opinion we happen to hold.

Nor is it usually about revealing all of ourselves, all at once...

as if we even knew what “all of ourselves” might be.

I think at the heart of things, honesty is about holding responsibility...
for our own lives and our part in our relationships.

Honesty is about telling the truth that must be told.

And it's also about holding the tension between what is revealed...and what is not.

What is seen, and what is shadowed.

Holding that tension can be very difficult to do.

As we honestly observe ourselves wrestling with that reality,
it seems to me we grow toward spiritual maturity.

And we grow in compassion and kindness toward others as well.

Part III – Shawn & Lynn

Shawn: So, Lynn, it's been very interesting to give ourselves the challenge and the opportunity this week to preach a sermon together. What's it been like for you?

Lynn: I really enjoyed it, and I was honestly surprised at how differently we could approach the topic.

I also thought that perhaps, by inviting each other to come from our own perspectives, we revealed more about the subject than we could have done, alone.

Even though we came at the subject differently,
I didn't feel we were on opposite sides in any way...just looking at the subject of honesty from different angles.

I'm glad that we didn't try to “harmonize” our views too much or make them too similar to each other's...the benefit seemed to be in the differing perspectives. (How very Unitarian!)

As a sermon topic, “honesty” was not a “lonely word” at all, because we talked about our readings and reflections much more than we usually do on a Sunday.

In some ways that was harder...because it really did require us to be cooperative and in dialogue...even if it meant late-night phone calls and emails to make sure this would work!
And how’s this experience been for you?

Shawn: I’ve also found it fun!

It was a really rich experience, in part to see, as you say, our different ways of coming at the question of honesty.

It’s reminded me what a vast topic it is, as it involves aspects of truth and truth-telling, but also, as you so beautifully named, the need to honour that our hearts are tender things, and that not every truth can be spoken and heard.

For all my talk of championing the truth, I think we’re actually very much on the same page. I agree that every truth comes with its own timing.

And it seems to me that we’re both saying there’s always a need to weigh the potential for harm.

To ask ourselves what’s worse, the harm that could come from keeping quiet, or the harm of saying something painful that can’t be taken back?

That brings me back to the line from William Sloane Coffin, that: “The world is too dangerous for anything but truth and too small for anything but love.”

It’s not either/or, but both/and.

We need all the truth we can find and all the love that we can summon.

Living with the tension of needing to find the proper balance is the challenge we all face.

It takes discernment to know when to speak what feels true,
and when it's the better part of valour to keep our thoughts to ourselves.

Any last thoughts?

Lynn: Simply the hope that we might all commit ourselves
to living as honestly as we can,
with ourselves and with each other.

That we might be tender in our handling of truth,
and led by love in all things.

Amen?

Shawn: Amen

[1] Miguel Angel Ruiz, *The Four Agreements: A Toltec Wisdom Book* (San Rafael: Amber Allen, 1997), 29-50.

[2] Richard Rohr, *Breathing Under Water: Spirituality and the Twelve Steps* (Cincinnati: St. Anthony Messenger Press, 2011) 78-79.