

“Be Right Or Be In Relationship”

Rev. Ben Robins

First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto

Jul 18, 2021

I recently got together with a friend. Hooray! It had been a long time. We met at the Silver Bean cafe here in Peterborough. The Silver Bean has a large outdoor patio overlooking the Otonabee River. As we sat there chatting, we felt the warm sun and the cool breeze. Sunlight glittered off of the river, as the gentle current ran downstream. Families occasionally passed by to buy ice cream cones to eat on the dock. It was idyllic.

And so my friend and I chatted there on the patio. We caught up on the emotional ride of the pandemic. We talked about coping mechanisms. We talked about our favourite new pandemic recipes. We talked about what shows we had binge-watched. And we just chatted, and time passed like a gently-flowing river.

And the topic of conversation came around to vaccines. I had had my first vaccine and was almost due for my second. My friend, on the other hand, was not going to get vaccinated.

My friend explained why he was not going to get vaccinated: He pointed to sources making the case that the vaccines were dangerous. I promised to check out his sources, and I made the case for vaccines.

We were two people, sipping lemonade overlooking the Otonabee River, having an important debate about something that affects us all. We were prioritizing the search for truth. We weren't hiding our disagreement under the rug. We didn't reach an agreement that afternoon, but we did agree that the conversation would continue after I researched his point of view. We cared about truth.

If we had had that conversation two days ago, it would have gone very differently. Two days ago, I was feeling the effects of my second dose. Two days ago, I was sitting at the dinner table, head in hand, eyes mostly closed, trying to stomach as much dinner as I could before crawling into bed. If at that moment my friend had called me, enthusiastic to talk about vaccines, I imagine that the conversation would have gone something like this:

Him: Did you research Ivermectin?

Me: I did, but I'm not up for talking about it now. I'm feeling the effects of my second dose.

Him: You don't want to talk about it!!! Don't you care about truth???

He would have then gone on a 25-minute rant about vaccines, while I sat there with my head in my hand.

I'm just kidding, he wouldn't have done that. But that's how people behave on social media all the time. During a terrible time, they want to have a debate. When children's graves are detected, people highly impacted by it express their grief and cry out for justice. People less impacted start a debate about exactly how bad residential schools were.

"Don't debate me when I'm grieving!"

"Don't you care about the truth???"

"Don't you care about me???"

At this point, the person focussed on the search for truth could double down.

"Truth is important! The truth will set us free! Injustice will be lessened - your pain will be lessened - if we sort out this mess. Bring me the facts! Bring me the studies! Let me poke holes in your point of view, so that you can improve your point of view."

"Stop poking me."

How tempting it can be to go into truth-seeking mode. As a liberal religion, we are wired to use truth to solve problems.

We have a long history of using truth to stand up to tyranny. When a monarch can't justify their use of power, their power lessens.

Liberal religion uses truth to wash aside superstition. Scientific progress swept aside centuries of unfounded beliefs.

The search for truth can open your eyes to something broader than the world you grew up in. The way you knew isn't the only way.

The search for truth is valuable. The search for truth is our sacrament. Simply put, being right is better than being wrong. It's ingrained in us, and it can be so hard to put aside the search for truth.

And how good it can feel to speak the truth, to be generous with your thoughtful opinion. The ecstasy of righteous indignation when you've done your homework, have an opinion, and express it with full voice. Oh the thrill of posting your opinion on Facebook, for the world to see. The self-esteem when you speak the truth as you see it, then you drop the mike and walk away. Our brains can fill with dopamine and serotonin and feel so good when we have something to say.

We can get trapped by the urge to be right.

Last month, weightlifter Laurel Hubbard became the first openly transgender athlete selected to compete in the Olympics. Right away, a crowd of people jumped onto the search for truth, asking all sorts of questions about what the rules should be for transgender weightlifters. A

question was, is it enough to limit testosterone levels for a year before competing? Does that make it fair? Did the International Olympic Committee get the rules right?

A transgender friend of mine, Rachel Clark, was interviewed about this. The reporter asked her, are transgender people getting pushback because of Laurel Hubbard? Rachel said she just has to breathe in the wrong direction to get pushback.

When I read that, I stopped researching Olympic regulations for transgender athletes (Yes, I was one of those who dove into the research. I wanted to be right!). When I was reminded how much pushback Rachel gets, just for going about her day, I realized that I don't need to prioritize being right in the Olympic debate. I realized that I need to prioritize being in relationship with my friend. I moved from my head into my heart.

Consider how often the roles are reversed. How often it is the person with less social power who has to choose between being right and being in relationship. You get together with family or friends to watch the hockey game. To you, hockey is just a game. But to your family, hockey is a religion. So you join in, keep your feelings to yourself, and try to find joy in the athleticism, or at least the company. You join in the cheering. You choose relationship over being right.

If you are someone who tends to have social power - someone who likes hockey, or sees themselves represented in government, or someone who did well in school - consider how often your neighbour has to choose to fit in over expressing their opinion. Your less-privileged neighbour chooses to be in relationship with you over being right. Not all of the time, but some of the time. So return the favour.

It's hard. I spend so much time studying, so that I can understand the world and make it better. If I get things right, maybe I can solve the culture wars! I spend so much time forming an opinion. But sometimes, that is not what is called for. The social activist Ella Baker said that if you want to change the world, the first step is to open your front door and introduce yourself to someone.

Do you know Ella Baker? The song Ella's Song, by Sweet Honey In The Rock, is named after her. "We who believe in freedom cannot rest." Ella Baker said that. She was good with words, she was good with expressing truth as she saw it, but she often prioritized relationship. She would host large gatherings of activists, and her practice was that people could talk for as long as they wanted. It was important that people be heard. If someone spoke for 10 minutes, and 30 seconds of it was valuable, cherish those 30 seconds, while honouring the person for the full 10 minutes. Choose relationship. Ella Baker was a remarkable speaker, and could have held the group's attention herself, but she didn't prioritize being right, she prioritized relationship.

This is actually baked into our Sunday services. We do Joys and Sorrows before we do the sermon. We tend to each other's hearts before we explore something new. We engage in relationship before we search for truth.

Here's a test. Here are 2 questions to ask yourself when you're about to tell your opinion to somebody:

1. Do I know what is in their heart?
2. Can I express their point of view in a way that they would agree with?

If you don't know what is in their heart, your opinion likely won't be received.

And if you don't demonstrate that their opinion matters to you, why should they value yours?

Before sharing your opinion, discover who the person is who is right in front of you. UU Rev. Lauralyn Bellamy asks, "Dare we look into one another's eyes, and discover there a friend?" Don't pry, don't force intimacy. Let the person open up if they want to. It's not: I will create intimacy so that I can provide my opinion. It's: I will welcome intimacy because you matter to me. Let them know, through your interest and attention, "I can handle the fullness of your experience." I am offering friendship. Change happens at the speed of relationship.

If you have a relative who is wrong about something, I can't help you to change their opinion (I'm sorry. I heard from a couple of you about that). But maybe I can help you to redirect your energy. If the relationship is worth it to you, invest in knowing what is in their heart. What need is being met by having that opinion?

If you are someone who wants to make the world a better place, and you realize that you have prioritized being forthright, I have a suggestion for a change in mindset that might help. This comes from UU Rev. Elizabeth Nguyen. When you read about an injustice in the world, don't treat it as news. Treat it as family.

Laurel Hubbard is getting grief for competing as a transgender weightlifter? My friend Rachel is getting grief for it? She's family. She needs relationship, not analysis. Children's bodies are detected? They are family. They need relationship, not analysis.

When you care, there is room for heart and relationship. There is room for understanding.

That's right, you'll probably gain understanding by prioritizing relationship. To have an opinion that takes into account other perspectives, let go of having an opinion; focus on seeing their perspective. Make it a dance of shared living, not a debate to take space in.

And when you are in analysis mode, seeking sources to learn from, and you come across someone's opinion, ask yourself, is this person in relationship with the people they are talking about? Did this social commentator form their opinion while sitting at home on the couch, or do they actually know the people involved?

It's easy to form an opinion based on the story you've been told. It's harder to find out the full story. The full story might not meet your expectations. Put down your opinion, put down the story as you know it, and meet real people in contexts different from your own. Don't trust the

headlines. Don't rely on spokespeople, who may or may not represent voices other than their own. Get involved. Show up. When something unjust is going on in the world, meet multiple people with lived experience of it. The injustice they experience will have something in common with the injustice you experience, but it will also be different, in surprising ways.

Add a new flavour to your life. See the world from another perspective. Choose relationship, and discover broader truth.

I welcome your perspective. I'm at RevBen@firstunitariantoronto.org.