

“The Complexity of Truth”

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You may well know the story.

The parable, originally from India, is best told, I think, in this version by the Black, gay writer James Baldwin:

There were once six blind men who stood by the roadside every day, and begged from the people who passed.

They had often heard of elephants, but they had never seen one; for, being blind, how could they?

It so happened one morning that an elephant was driven down the road where they stood.

When they were told that the great beast was before them, they asked the driver to let him stop so that they might see him.

Of course they could not see him with their eyes; but they thought that by touching him they could learn just what kind of animal he was.

The first one happened to put his hand on the elephant's side. "Well, well!" he said, "now I know all about this beast. He is exactly like a wall."

The second felt only of the elephant's tusk. "My brother," he said, "you are mistaken. He is not at all like a wall. He is round and smooth and sharp. He is more like a spear than anything else."

The third happened to take hold of the elephant's trunk. "Both of you are wrong," he said. "Anybody who knows anything can [tell]

that this elephant is like a snake.”

The fourth reached out his arms,
and grasped one of the elephant’s legs....

“It is very plain to me that he is round and tall like a tree.”

The fifth was a very tall man,
and he chanced to take hold of the elephant’s ear.

“[One] ought to know that this beast
is not like any of the things that you name,” he said.

“He is exactly like a huge fan.”

The sixth [... took] some time before
he could find the elephant at all.

At last he seized the animal’s tail.

“O foolish fellows!” he cried.

“.... This elephant is not like
a wall, or a spear, or a snake, or a tree;
neither is he like a fan.

But any [one] with a particle of sense
can [tell] that he is exactly like a rope.”

Then the elephant moved on,
and the six... men sat by the roadside all day,
and quarreled...

Each believed that he knew just how the animal looked;
and each called the others hard names
because they did not agree with him.

Baldwin ends his parable by observing that.

“People who [are able to see] sometimes act [just] as foolishly.”

* * *

As the month of May has approached,
with our worship and Journey Groups theme of Truths & Lies,
I’ve found myself returning again and again to the wisdom of Molly Ivins, the great
American newspaper columnist, who had a particular knack
for decoding the mysteries of Texas politics with her withering wit.

In 1995, I heard her give a speech,
a part of which has stayed with me across the years.

I recently found a video of the speech online,
and was intrigued by the fact that I had somehow remembered
almost verbatim what she had said,
when asked a question from the audience
about the role of reporters in the political process.¹

Her response was about telling the truth.

And she explained that there was deep value
in the formative stage of most reporters' careers,
when their job is to show up to the scene of a car accident
and interview the five bystanders who witnessed what happened,
before then trying to write an accurate story.

She then said that this experience, day in and day out,
gives you a greater sense of the complexity of truth.

Not unlike what those men grasped after
in trying to understand their elephant.

Not unlike what any of us encounters
in our efforts to understand our world.

What Ivins describes is, I think,
nothing less than a spiritual practice.

Especially for this era in which we live.
When so much of the culture we swim in
bombards us with simplified snippets of truths,
boiled down to bullet points and sound bites,
rather than the actual complexity, the actual reality, of a given situation.

There's a market for this, of course.
I mean, who doesn't want their truth

¹ <https://www.c-span.org/video/?63549-1/american-politics>

delivered up straightforward and simple?
Reduced to its essence.
Easy to digest.
No mess.
No fuss.

It must be said, of course, that, fortunately,
there is no shortage of tremendous writers
doing great reporting about the complexity of the world we live in.

But as our attention-spans grow shorter,
and our media siloes, with their intricate algorithms,
reinforce our already-existing points-of-view,
we are, as a culture, it seems,
losing this vital capacity to hold complexity.

To appreciate the layers of nuance.
The shades of meaning.
The different views that fill out a fuller and more accurate picture.

The ability to recognize that
the snake, or rope, or fan, or tree we think we know
may not, in fact, be the whole of the story—
or it may not be the real story, at all.

The ability to appreciate that
the snake, or rope, or fan, or tree our neighbour describes
may well be a vital piece of the puzzle, even if not entirely accurate.

Taken as a spiritual practice,
this notion of engaging with different witnesses, if you will,
to listening to the various voices that may each hold a part of the truth,
is a path that often leads one to a place of humility.

Because it brings us up against our limitations;
we can't know everything, after all.

The quest for truth ends up showing us
that we would do well to have some modesty in our ambitions.

What such a practice offers to us—

a practice I might call having a “holy curiosity”—
is a deepening of our capacity to hold complexity.

To know that there can be many facets to a single truth.
To appreciate that many things can be true at once.
And that these truths can be in conflict,
or even contradiction with one another.

In a word, to discover that the truth can be messy.
The older I get and the longer I serve as a minister
seems only to confirm this.

That’s certainly been true this past week,
as Unitarians across Canada have tried to make sense
of last week’s spontaneous decision,
at the annual general meeting of our delegates,
to adopt an 8th Principle, which affirms our commitment
to the dismantling of racism and other oppressions.

Immediately and in the days that followed,
some were absolutely elated by the bold action taken,
feeling we were living into our principle
of truly honouring the worth and dignity of every person.

Some were confused,
questioning how the decision came about so rapidly,
given that it didn’t seem to accord with our principle
of respecting the democratic process.

Some at the meeting and many who weren’t
were frustrated by the quick timing,
which meant our congregations across the country
weren’t sufficiently engaged in making
such a momentous and historic decision.

And more than a few felt a mix of all these feelings.

A number of people shared that they felt conflicted.

That they are committed to really taking on the work of racial justice,
and that they want our decisions made

in keeping with the best democratic practices.

Needless to say, it's been messy, and complex.

We've had to grapple with the fact that our cherished principles can sometimes come into conflict with one another.

That we can feel strongly about two things at once.

That there can be many truths captured in any single moment in time.

By mid-week, after reviewing the CUC's by-laws, it had become clear that the parliamentarian, though acting in good faith, had made a mistake in allowing the vote to proceed.

As a result, while the clear will of the delegates was to support the 8th Principle, the vote was technically out of order, and will need to be revisited at a meeting in late November.

While this is frustrating and deeply disappointing for many, it also, in the words of the leaders of the CUC, gives us another chance to get it right.

We, like most congregations across the country, will be digging deeper into the meaning of the 8th Principle in the coming months, as we seek to better understand how it calls us to action.

In the meantime, if we're looking for truth, and the larger lessons it has to teach, there has much of it embedded in the events of this past week.

The lesson being that truth often takes time. That it involves twists and turns, and often benefits from the gift of second and third chances.

On a personal level, as we aspire to grow, to deepen on our spiritual path, we come to realize these complications

play out in our own hearts and minds.

That our search for what is true
can lead us to a place of holding,
even within ourselves,
many truths that are in tension with one another—
truths hopefully working their way towards greater understanding.

I think this is what the poet Walt Whitman
was getting at when he wrote:
“Do I contradict myself?
Very well, then I contradict myself,
I am large,
I contain multitudes.”

Indeed, we all do.

* * *

In the world of what is called process theology,
the name Bernard Loomer, if you’ll excuse the pun, looms large.

Process theology, is a movement that believes,
as my colleague Rob Hardies articulates it:
“that the universe is always growing in size and complexity,
and that as the universe grows, so does God and so must we.”

“Loomer saw the increasing complexity of creation
as a glorious blossoming that God was delighted to behold.”

In his later years, Loomer was a member
of the First Unitarian Church of Berkeley, in California.

As Hardies tells it, after services on Sundays, he would frequently lead
his fellow congregants in deeply theological conversations.²

After laying out his vision of the complexity of creation,
he often asked the group, “What is the size of your soul?”

² Rob Hardies, “Love the contradictions,” *UU World*, Summer 2007, 23 July 2007.

By which he meant, “What is your soul’s ability to grow and expand, to stretch when life throws more contradictions your way?”

Size was the defining concept in Loomer’s spirituality.

He almost always wrote the word S-I-Z-E,
with capital letters and dashes,
to better convey the spaciousness that he intended by using the word.

Loomer described the concept this way:
By S-I-Z-E I mean the capacity of a person’s soul,
the range and depth of [their] love,
[their] capacity for relationships.

I mean the volume of life you can take into your being
and still maintain your integrity and individuality,
the intensity and variety of outlook
you can entertain in the unity of your being
without feeling defensive or insecure.

I mean the strength of your spirit
to encourage others to become freer
in the development of their diversity and uniqueness.

I mean the power to sustain more complex and enriching tensions.

I mean the magnanimity of concern
to provide conditions that enable others to increase in stature.

* * *

I leave you with a story, an object lesson of sorts.
A spiritual teaching that invites us to hold complexity.

The monks had been at it for days.

They were painstakingly shaping tiny crystals of coloured sand,
ground from gemstones,
into a visually stunning mandala,
a spiritual depiction of the cosmos.

In his book *Callings*, Gregg Levoy recounts a visit to this exhibit of sacred art from Tibet, where a group of monks travelling with the Dalai Lama were creating the elaborate mandala.

“For nearly a month, they [had] worked silently, bent over the low platform that cradled the growing [image].

“They [had lain] out their intricate geometry of devotion by hand, surrounded constantly by [a circle of] onlookers, who stood sometimes for hours. . . , simply watching: [with their own] busy lives. . . uncharacteristically forgotten.

As a spectacular lesson on the Buddhist teaching of non-attachment, “the monks intended from the very start, [as is the Buddhist practice,] to dismantle [the mandala, to destroy it] after a few months on exhibit and to scatter its remains in the sea.”

“On the day before the final ritual celebrating its completion, just as the monks were putting the finishing touches on the mandala, a woman jumped over the velvet ropes, climbed onto the platform, and trampled it with her feet, screaming something about “Buddhist death cults.”

When Levoy, sitting in his kitchen, read about this attack on the mandala he had just seen being made, he was filled with anger.

But his rage turned to absolute disbelief when he read about how the monks responded.

“We don’t feel any negativity,” one of them said.
“We don’t know how to judge her motivations.
We are praying for her [to know] love and compassion.”

Levoy confesses that, “coming from a long line of avengers—people who have demanded eyes for eyes and teeth for teeth—[he had] always had a difficult time with forgiveness.”

“[He had] hung on to certain betrayals all [his] life,

refusing to let go of things [he had] long ago lost forever.”

Even so, he was completely aghast
when he learned that the museum
was considering pressing charges against the woman.

To do so, he thought,
would greatly dishonour the monks’ gracious gesture,
their demonstration of grace and forgiveness,
“an act,” he said, “that greatly defused the situation,
drained much of the bitterness from it,
and set a very hard example [for the rest of us] to follow.”

* * *

More than half a century ago, the Trappist monk Thomas Merton said:

We are living in the greatest revolution in history—
a huge spontaneous upheaval of the entire human race:
not a revolution planned and carried out
by any particular party, race, or nation,
but a deep elemental boiling over
of all the inner contradictions that have ever been,
a revelation of the chaotic forces inside everybody.

“This is not something, he said, we have chosen,
nor is it something we can avoid.”³

Merton’s words seem to have become only more true in our own time.

Let us then, in our day, and in our many ways,
embrace our contradictions for the great teachers they can be.

Let us find in tension the possibility of greater clarity.

Let us grow our souls—through holy curiosity—
to hold the complexity of truth,
and appreciate the glorious and messy fact
that each of us contains multitudes.

³ Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*.

Blessed Be.