READING FOR SESSION 1

We begin our exploration of truth and authority with this excerpt from *The Star Gazer* by Hungarian novelist, Zsolt de Harsanyi. Galileo wrestles with his friend Cremonini over their understanding of the truth.

> "Listen, Galileo," said Cremonini, "The science of the world was built on the pillars of Aristotelian wisdom. For two thousand years men have lived and died in the belief that the earth is the center of the universe and man the Lord of it. All that we know today, from logic to medicine, from botany to astronomy, is Christian and Aristotelian. A glorious structure of the human mind, every stone of which fits perfectly into the others. The greatest minds for 2000 years have worked upon it, till they have made it a perfect and splendid whole. My life has been spent in the service and admiration of this structure. Learning and teaching have brought me peace and happiness. Now I'm an old man with little time left. Tell me, why are you so cruel as to want to shake my belief in all that I love? Why do you want to poison my few last years with doubt and conflict? Leave me my peace of mind: I refuse to look into that tube!"
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> "But Cremonini," said Galileo, "the truth, the truth—doesn't that mean anything?"
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> But the trembling Cremonini still fought him off. "No, I need my peace and happiness!"
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> "I understand," said Galileo, "How strange! To me peace and happiness have always meant one thing: to seek truth and admit what I found. I suppose that really the whole world consists of us two, Caesare—of Cremoninis and Galileos. You keep the world back, we urge it forward. You're afraid to look at the sky because you may see there something which disproves the teaching of your whole life. I understand. Our task is heavy. And, unfortunately, there are many like you . . . *but it's only we who can triumph*."
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> Cremonini countered: "And even if you do manage to prove that our earth is only a miserable little star like thousands of others, and that mankind is only a multitude of chance creatures on one of these stars? Do you really want to do that? Do you want to abase man, made in God's image, to a wretched worm? Is that what you and Copernicus and Kepler want? Is that the true purpose of astronomy?" A long silence—
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> "I never thought of that," Galileo answered. "I seek the truth only because I'm a mathematician, and I believe that whoever admits truth is nearer to God than those who build up their human dignity on senseless errors. And I shall go on. I must continue my path. God bless you, Caesare."
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> Cremonini responded: "And God keep you. *And I stay where I am!*"

Those two, who see the world so differently, stand hesitant, unable to take leave; they face each other and suddenly embrace. Their friendship has transcended their philosophical differences.

We religious liberals, in our creedless approach to truth, confess we are not always sure. The Truth eludes us. Generally we say we affirm belief "in the authority of truth known or to be known" as it was stated in the 1935 Universalist Church of America's Avowal of Faith.

One Sunday after a sermon on truth and authority entitled, "Honk If You're Not Sure," a congregant presented her minister a hand-made bumper sticker with those words.

By what authority do we claim Truth or truths? Traditionally the authority in the Western tradition has been ecclesiastical; churches have evolved creeds that purport to be the essence and sum of religious truth. Truth has also been understood to come directly from God through revelation or sacred scriptures. Historically, we have been "heretics." (*Heresy* means "to choose.") Many of us have argued that this kind of revelatory truth claim is merely a projection of personal preference on a cosmic screen.

Our liberal religious tradition has placed great emphasis on reason in religion, regarding thought processes, logic, and rational reflection as the road to religious truth. Many among us hold applying the scientific method to the religious quest in high esteem. However, it seems to some that there are truths about human existence that cannot be reduced to objective categories. Ralph Waldo Emerson reacted against these claims, positing human intuition, the individual's direct

apprehension of the divine, as the surest road to truth. He protested against the "icehouse" or "morgue" of nineteenth-century Unitarianism and said we must "convert life into truth."

More recently, practioners of experiential theology have developed a more existential approach to religious truth. That is, truth is more a function of what we have learned from our experience than of what we have inherited from tradition or can learn by rational processes. They ask, "What is true for you?" Others among us say that truth seeking is a process grounded in the community and that we are, like Protagoras, the measure—or to be more accurate, the measurer—of all things. We are co-creators of religious truth that we discover in community.

In a time when today's scientific truth becomes tomorrow's quaint mythology, when the global village brings multiple perspectives into communication, and when major world religions clash openly about moral issues, the nature of truth and how we arrive at it are crucial issues.

Galileo faced up to this issue as he confronted the power of the papacy. As a scientist he was compelled to tell the truth as he discovered it; as a religionist he knew his science undermined the comforting religious assertions of the day. The Biblical God created humanity and placed it on a globe at the center of the universe—supposedly to be admired as the chief of creatures. The heresy that our earth and its inhabitants were peripheral was a mighty challenge to the "truth" of the Biblical message. It could not be allowed to stand, but in this case it triumphed. Only in 1992 did the Roman Catholic Church officially pardon Galileo for his heresy

We are truth-seeking animals, tortured by our passion for certainty, tormented by the many truth claims about us; tempted to take the easy way out—to simply buy into someone else's truth, to refuse to look into Galileo's telescope. It requires courage to resist seduction by those who would relieve our anxiety about the truth. We are competing religiously with those who presume to know it already. It takes courage to admit that sometimes we do not know for sure. Would we know a truth if we saw one?

Unitarian Universalist theologian James Luther Adams tells a delightful story about the Unitarian Universalist church school teacher who had a rabbit in class. Naturally, the subject of whether it was a girl or a boy rabbit came up. Finally, after some discussion, the teacher said, "I'll tell you what we can do. Let's take a vote." Is truth nothing more than consensus? Is it nothing more than what I feel it to be? Is it nothing more than the results of a lab experiment? Unitarian Universalists have a hard time coming to grips with truth and the authority for claiming to have found it. Some would suggest there may be no ultimate truth and that even if there were, nobody could find it. By what authority do we speak?

Unitarian Universalist theologian William Jones is instructive here. He points to a maxim of the Greek sophist Protagoras: "Man is the measure of all things." We might modify that axiom to read, "People are the measurers of all things." To say we are the measure of all things is to elevate finite humanity to the status of divinity. It would be idolatry to deify humanity by claiming we are the cosmic ultimate. However, we do claim that we are the measurers of all things, the final arbiters of values, the final judges of human meaning, the determiners of right and wrong. Not only are we the measurers of all things, we must be. This is not an assertion of human arrogance but an admission of human finitude. We are the ultimate seat of authority. It is through our sunglasses that the brilliant and often blinding truth of the cosmos is perceived. Furthermore, human nature is such that these sunglasses are permanent; we cannot remove them. An analogy is in order here: A decree of the Supreme Court is ultimate and final in the sense that it is not subject to appeal. However, the court is an interpreter of the Constitution, not its creator.

We did not create the order of things—the Earth, the moon, the stars and galaxies, photons and electrons, the evolutionary web that spun us into existence. However, we are the interpreters of this reality; we try to make some sense of it all. We seek to wrest meaning from the Earth we have inherited. While astronomically we are negligible in the cosmos, astronomically speaking, we are the astronomers.

Jones tells the Genesis story of Abraham and Isaac to dramatize the point. Abraham has been commanded, presumably by Yahweh, to take Isaac into the wilderness and slay him as a sacrifice. At the last moment a voice intervenes and tells Abraham not to slay his beloved son. How does Abraham know if the voice is that of Yahweh or of Moloch, the deity who demands human sacrifice? Abraham cannot look elsewhere for author-

ity; he must make the final decision. As Jean Paul Sartre says, "Even if I think it is God that I obey, it is I who decided it was God who spoke to me."

But there are a few truth propositions that enable us to accept our predicament. We increasingly come to trust our own experience. No longer must we proof-text all our conclusions by reference to some holy text (secular or sacred) or some heroic guru. We honor the accumulated wisdom that inheres in the world's scriptures and in the prophets of the human spirit. But we have the task of grasping whatever slivers of truth they have chipped from the tree of knowledge.

Truth seeking is best done in community. Of course, there is no substitute for one human being thinking about, feeling, and measuring life. No one can do it for us. But there is genius in a community of individual souls who are willing and eager to share their being, thinking, feeling and measuring with others. Most of us cherish being part of a congregation with whom we can speak about the great mysteries and meanings of life. Truth emerges from a community of inquiry and dialogue. For this community, religious values are not "dead truths embalmed for posterity" but living "candidates for truth," as Ralph Waldo Emerson suggests. We have learned that revelation is not sealed in the ancient words of a self-disclosing deity; the revelation of truth is continuous. Our truths are not imprisoned in creeds but are ideas out on probation. We do not say, "Come, we have found the truth and would pass it on to you" but "Come, we seek truth and welcome you to our quest."

Perhaps it could be said that we have learned to have the courage of our confusions. When we are asked by some young truth-seeker if there is life after death, if we will avoid nuclear holocaust, if kindness in the world is on the rise—we will not be embarrassed to say simply, "I don't know." And so we live somewhere between "ecstatic confidence and despairing doubt." Somewhere between the courage of our confusions and the vacillations of our certainties we take our bearing.

In a time when our uncertainties are challenged by those who would relieve our anxiety about the truth, when there are many who would unburden us of our creative insecurities, when unquestionable answers to unanswerable questions are flung at us, we may attach our figurative bumper sticker, "Honk if you're not sure," to our truth-seeking vehicle.

But how do we seek truth? The nineteenth-century Unitarian Henry David Thoreau says, "It takes two to speak the truth—one to speak and one to hear." Our movement began as a rejection of the creeds and dogmas of the orthodox Christian Church in both Catholic and Protestant forms. In modern times we have developed two formulations that express this attitude toward truth. In the Universalist Avowal of Faith we affirm our faith in "the authority of truth known or to be known." This is a heuristic conception of truth: We hold a belief tentatively until we can confirm it or until it helps us discover something more truthful. We can act with conviction even without absolute certainty; we can be sure without being cocksure. We are not absolutely positive that we shall be alive tomorrow, but it seems a reasonably good hypothesis to act upon. This faith in existence is clearly a risk, but one that seems worth taking. We fashion our faith out of the workshop of doubt. As Gordon Allport tells us, we need to act as if there will be a tomorrow.

We might say that growth is the root metaphor of Unitarian Universalism. We are imperfect beings in the process of becoming more human—spiritually, emotionally, intellectually, and behaviorally. We seek to experience a creative surge of the spirit. Spiritually, we grow or die. While preaching an old sermon written many years before, Ralph Waldo Emerson reportedly stopped suddenly in the middle of it and said to the congregation, "The sentence which I have just read I do not now believe." One might be tempted to criticize Mr. Emerson for poor sermon preparation. If he had only reviewed it ahead of time, he might have been able to catch his change of mind in private rather than having to admit it in public. Be that as it may, the key element in this episode is that religious growth is an integral part of religion. Emerson was unashamed to admit he had changed his mind, in other words, he had grown.

Our current Unitarian Universalist Purposes and Principles state, "We covenant to affirm and promote . . . a free and responsible search for truth and meaning," conveying much the same idea—that truth is not really something we possess once and for all but something for which we struggle over a lifetime.

This understanding of truth is somewhat more nebulous than the creeds and catechisms, duties and dogmas from which many of us have departed. While the comfort of absolute confidence in

what is true is appealing, Unitarian Universalists choose the discomfort of needing to experience that truth in their own lives. In the choice between truth and repose, we choose the former.

Mark Twain once said, "When in doubt tell the truth. It will confound your enemies and astound your friends." He continued that he had never known a real truth seeker. Sooner or later, he said, everyone engaged in the search for truth found what they were looking for and gave up the quest.

Protestant theologian Paul Tillich puts it somewhat more eloquently: "The castle of undoubted certitude is not built on the rock of reality." And later he sermonized on Pilate's question to Jesus in the Gospels, "What Is Truth?" "The passion for truth is silenced by answers which have the weight of undisputed authority. . . . Don't give in too quickly to those who want to alleviate your anxiety about truth. Don't be seduced into a truth which is not really your truth, even if the seducer is your church or your party, or your parental tradition." A "passion for truth" sums up one of the core convictions of Unitarian Universalism. Our doubt that we have found absolute truth already is not based on a lack of concern with truth. Our passion is learning the truth of the world in which we live and our way of living in it, in the words of Emerson, "converting life into truth."

But what is truth, and how do we know if we have found it? Psychoanalyst Carl Jung says there are really two kinds of truth—objective and subjective. Objective truth is that which can be proved, as scientists can prove that the Earth travels about the sun, that two molecules of hydrogen and one of oxygen inevitably constitute water in one of its forms, that what goes up must come down. This is truth that is universally accepted and verifiable. Subjective truth, however, is another matter. This is the religious truth that guides and directs our lives. What is true for me is perhaps not true for you. For born-again Christians, it is subjectively true that Jesus Christ is Lord and Savior. That is a central truth of their lives that cannot be refuted. Likewise a more Unitarian Universalist belief in Jesus as a man for others cannot be refuted. We can deny the miracles surrounding Jesus—the virgin birth, walking on water, the resurrection—by appeals to objective truth. Religious fundamentalists probably would not accept that, of course, but we can still make the case with confidence in the objective truth of what we claim. What we cannot deny is the impact of the idea of Jesus the Christ. Whether the lives of believers are transformed for good over time is yet to be demonstrated. Our lives will also have to demonstrate the power of our belief in the human prophet from Nazareth.

Pablo Picasso once said, "We all know that art is not truth. Art is a lie that makes us realize truth. At least the truth that is given us to understand." He discovered the elemental truth about human beings and events and portrayed it on canvas. In his depiction of the mass bombing of the Spanish village of Guernica, for example, he pointed to the truth that war is hell but hope rises out of the ashes; an arm with a lamp stands out in the midst of destruction. Einstein, on the other hand, found truth in his formula $E = MC^2$—energy equals mass times the speed of light squared. This equation points to the truth of physics inherent in the cosmos. "Truth," he said, "is what stands the test of experience." Presumably this formulation is still useful for scientists.

Who is to say whether subjective or objective truth is more valid? In religion, subjective truth might be the feeling that God comforts one who is in trouble. We can't prove this, but for the believer it is true. It is true in Picasso's sense of truth but not in Einstein's, for one cannot prove the existence of God by scientific means. Jesus Christ may not be Lord and Savior for Unitarian Universalists, but it may be a truth for a friend or neighbor. We can neither prove nor disprove that someone is "saved," but no one can prove that we are not.

Parker Palmer calls the search for religious truth "the eternal conversation about things that matter." That conversation is symbolized by the Chinese ideogram for truth, two people talking. In this intriguing understanding, truth is not something handed down from on high but something created in the constant dialogue thoughtful people have always had over matters of ultimate importance.

How desperately we need such a "conversation about things that matter" is illustrated by Kahlil Gibran's parable about four frogs. They are sitting peaceably on a log when it is caught by a current and carried into a swiftly flowing river. One frog credits the log with having life; a second says the river, walking to the sea, carried the log on its back; the third frog says that neither the log

nor the river was moving but the movement was in the frog's thinking, for without thought nothing moves. The fourth frog says, "Each of you is right and none of you is wrong. The moving is in the log and the water, and in our thinking also." None of the first three frogs is willing to admit that his is not the whole truth and that the other two are partly right. So they get together and push the fourth frog into the river.

The fourth frog in this story is probably a Unitarian Universalist who believes that the discovery of truth is not a solitary affair but the work of community. The fourth frog understands the importance of conversations that matter, of dialogue on questions of ultimate concern. Each of the frogs has a valuable insight; no one of them has the whole truth. Each of us is responsible for finding truth, for contributing our small truths to the larger truth. We share the truth openly and honestly as we experience it in our living. I learn from you and you learn from me. None of us has a monopoly.

In this community of conversation and dialogue no one is pushed into the river by those ultra-confident about their monopoly of the truth. From this kind of religious hope and humility it is possible to learn something.