

4th Principle: Free and Responsible Search for Truth and Meaning

By Michael Cluff
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Just before this talk, I play a video clip from the Comedy Show "The Colbert Report," where Stephen Colbert (a spot-on parody of Bill O'Reilly) asks co-worker Jimmy about Jimmy's Unitarian Universalism. Jimmy stumbles, not having a good "elevator speech," and manages only to confuse Colbert even further.

Trying to get clarification, uber-Catholic Stephen Colbert asks Jimmy, "Do you celebrate Christmas, or Hanukkah?"

Jimmy replies, "Sure."

I'm Michael Cluff, and I disagree with you.

Whether we agree on god or No God, body or soul, just wars or pacifism, Clinton or Obama (or that other guy), Coke or Pepsi, we disagree with each other on *something*.

That's what makes us great.

I grew up in a church where we *agreed* on the fundamentals. We believed in everything stated in the Nicene Creed: one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible. And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God... (Sorry, I'm no Colbert.)

It was all wrapped in a package with an ornate bow: believe this, and all will be okay.

Oh, there were disagreements all right. But not on the fundamentals. The disagreements were: incense or no incense? Wine or grape juice?

But Stephen Colbert's pal Jimmy in the clip shows that with UUs, the deeper stuff is *wide open*. Take the central concept of god:

Within 20 feet of you, you will probably find someone who believes that god is:

- a conscious being that intercedes in our lives and answers our prayers,
- a Gaia-spirit emerging from the consciousnesses within the universe,
- an Einsteinian metaphor for natural law,
- or a fictional concept that arises from our evolutionary habit of assigning agency to what we don't understand,
- or something else entirely.

The Unitarian Universalist Association isn't going to take a stand on the issue of god. And they don't *intend* to do so. There's no "UU creed" to recite on Sundays to the point of meaninglessness. No dogma.

This must be perplexing to those with spoon-fed beliefs. Looking at us from the perspective of the false comforts of dogmatic thinking, we must look like Martians.

That's why I pity Stephen Colbert. He doesn't get it. He sees Jimmy's stammering attempts to describe UUism and sees *weakness*. A lack of resolve. Jimmy's too wishy-washy to make up his mind,

to see the truth in the One True Religion. But as the bumper sticker says, Colbert's karma has been run over by his dogma.

This is just the rut that UUs are trying to avoid. We hate dogma so much we've made anti-dogmatism the basis for one of our seven principles.

The Fourth Principle proclaims that UUism **"affirms and promotes a free and responsible search for truth and meaning."**

Could it be that this is what sets us apart from other religions? Look at the other principles here. You look at any one of them but the fourth, and you can probably think of a religion (or a sect within a religion) that shares such a value. (Especially when you consider the Quakers.) But a free and responsible search for truth and meaning? Perhaps only Buddhism, with its emphasis on the personal quest, is as open.

During our recent class on "Articulating your UU Faith," John Luoma lamented the dangers in fetishizing the seven principles, turning them to a dogma in their own right. I guess having one sermon apiece on each principle might go a long way towards fetishization! But these principles can be useful if we see them as evocations arising from our beliefs, rather than as a mental cattle chute meant to corral our beliefs into a safe, predictable place -- just before leading us to spiritual death that dogma brings.

So with that in mind, let's break apart the fourth principle's four key words: Free and Responsible. Truth and Meaning.

TRUTH AND MEANING

Let's start with the last two words together, "truth and meaning." These are our ultimate goal, the grand prize, the big Kahuna. Truth and Meaning. All religions, at least in concept, are seeking *both* of these elusive goals. We aren't all just looking for truth: otherwise we'd just be a science club.

Truth without meaning is unsatisfying to our human experience.

Truths by themselves rarely supply meaning: It is TRUE that the earth revolves around the sun; it is TRUE that we evolved from early primates; it is TRUE that humans and animals experience pain and suffering. But what do they *mean*?

Now, it is my perspective that the world does not owe us meaning. (This may be one of the things that you disagree with me about.) But it is our nature as humans to NEED meaning. Does Punxatawney Phil sit in his hole and ponder the meaning of Groundhog day? No, but Bill Murray certainly did.

So, if truth without meaning is unsatisfying, what is meaning without truth? Meaning without truth is -- *fantasy*.

More on that when we get to the word "Responsible." But first, let's get to "Free."

FREE

"Free." What a nice word! Who doesn't like *free*?

Before I became a UU, someone once tried to pick a fight with me by saying, "Freedom of religion means that we are free to pick *any* religion. But you can't pick *no* religion." (It's a good thing he didn't run a buffet: "you are free to eat anything you want, but dammit, you gotta eat *something*.") I thought that was odd: since we are not free to pick *no* religion, should I be jailed?

Limiting one's choices is not free: Remember Henry Ford's famous quote: "A customer can have a car painted any colour that he wants -- so long as it is black." This is what is what dogmatic churches

offer: You are free to take from the choices we provide you.

But freedom to choose is ingrained in UUism. The very basis of our faith is *heresy* -- which comes from the Greek word "to choose."

Yes, heresy. Such an awful word! But it's official: Unitarians and Universalists have been heretics since the year 325. They disagreed with the Nicene Creed, by believing that God was one, not three, or by believing in Universal salvation. In other words, they *chose* to believe differently from what the Council of Nicaea dictated to them.

Back in the days of the Holy Roman Empire, this was *not* a good career move. People were killed for such beliefs. (And I'm sure there were a few waterboardings as well...)

And thus early Unitarians and Universalists were heretics. Choosers! Imagine that: "Death to you -- you *chooser*!"

Let's take a look at the Nicene Creed, the very beginning of Christian dogmatism:

We believe in one God,
the Father, the Almighty,
maker of heaven and earth,
of all that is, seen and unseen.

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,
the only son of God,
eternally begotten of the Father,
God from God, Light from Light,
true God from true God,
begotten, not made,
of one being with the Father.
Through him all things were made.

For us and for our salvation
he came down from heaven:
by the power of the Holy Spirit
he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary,
and was made man.

For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate;
he suffered death and was buried.
On the third day he rose again
in accordance with the Scriptures;
he ascended into heaven
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.
He will come again in glory
to judge the living and the dead,
and his kingdom will have no end.

We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life,
who proceeds from the Father [and the Son].
With the Father and the Son
he is worshipped and glorified.
He has spoken through the Prophets.
We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church.
We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.
We look for the resurrection of the dead,
and the life of the world to come

Now, your mileage may vary, but when I read this, the first thing I realize is that I don't believe a *single word* of it! Does that make me a super-heretic? A double-dog heretic, perhaps?

This is supposed to be the *central belief statement* of Christianity, yet it says NOTHING about the teachings of Jesus! NOTHING about compassion. NOTHING about loving one's neighbor. No "blessed are the peacemakers" or "consider the lilies of the field." None of the good, meaningful stuff, none of the best aspects of Christianity. The Council of Nicaea was not interested in blessing the meek; they wanted to make sure the meek toed the line.

Worst of all, the Nicene Creed allows people to call themselves Christians without ever taking anything Jesus said to heart.

So as Unitarian Universalists, whether or not we reject what's stated in the Nicene Creed, we reject the *idea* of such a creed in the first place.

Too many people believe that UUs can "believe anything they want." But that's not true. My father once asked me, "would a Nazi be welcomed in your congregation?" Assuming that he meant that the Nazi was unrepentant, my answer was, "No."

Why? After all, the Nazi's path to Naziism came from a *free* search for truth and meaning, right?

But notice there's a word missing. Their search for truth and meaning was *free*. But it wasn't *responsible*.

RESPONSIBLE

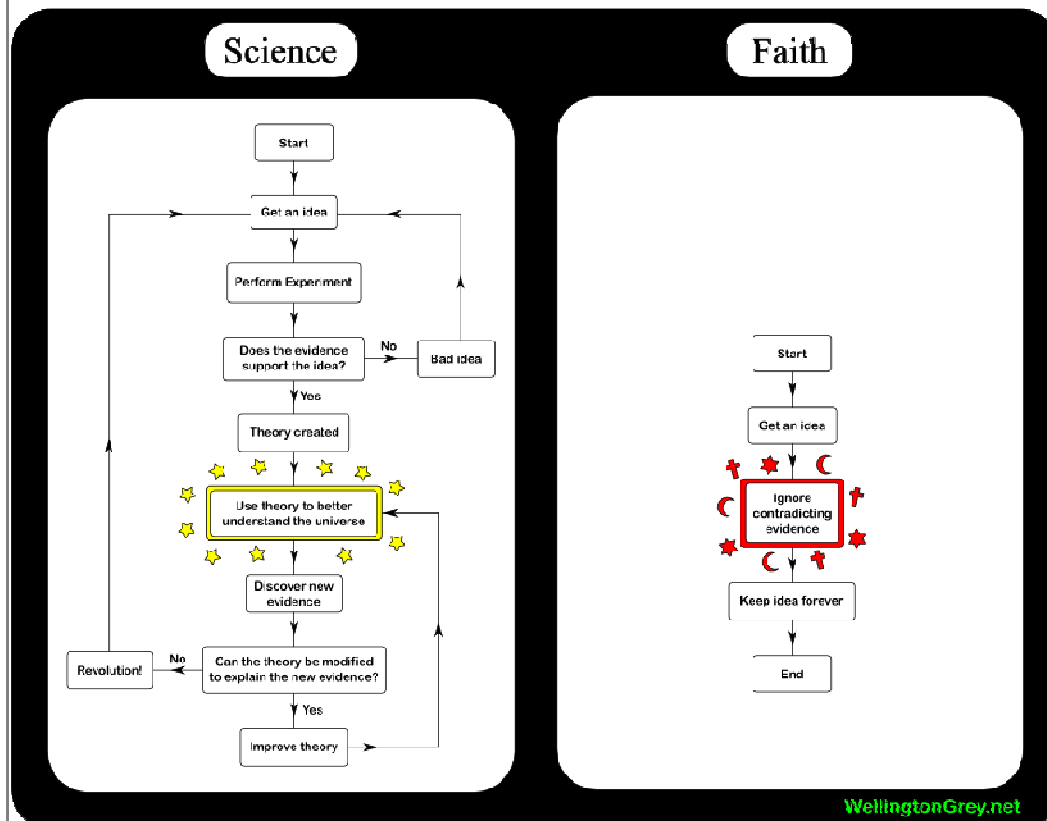
When we seek truth without meaning, we embark on our quest without an important tool: a BS detector.

Without a BS detector, we cannot know the difference between opinion and fact.

Remember this quote: "You are entitled to your opinions. You are not entitled to your own facts." If you wish to conduct a responsible search for truth and meaning, you are *not entitled* to believe that Auschwitz was not a death camp. You are not entitled to believe that American slaves were happy. You are not entitled to believe that Genesis is *literally* true. And for God's sake, you are *not* entitled to believe that "Norbit" was a good movie.

So how do we make sure our search for meaning contains the element of truth?

I would hope most of us agree that science is a responsible way to look for truth. On the left is a nutshell diagram of how scientific inquiry works.



And on the right side you can see a tongue in cheek diagram how a dogmatic kind of faith approaches truth. In our quest for meaning, shouldn't we make sure our quest looks more like the left diagram?

I've already given a talk on truth versus truthiness, on the dangers of an over-reliance on intuitive thinking, so I won't tread on that ground again. (And yes, I thank Stephen Colbert for assistance on yet another talk.) But I'd like to suggest some BS detectors – things I know *I* need to keep straight, too.

1. BS Detector #1: Know the difference between what you *believe* to be true, and what you *know* to be true.

For example, when I say I'm an atheist, that's a statement of *belief*. But I also know that to claim that "god does not exist," I would be making a statement of *fact* -- and I *cannot know* if this is a fact. I *believe* that there is no god, especially in the western sense of a personal god who listens to prayers and intercedes in human existence. Though I cannot know for sure, my deepest suspicion is that there's nothing there; the world makes more sense to me without a god. (And if you want to hear my thoughts on why this doesn't make me an agnostic, see me after services.)

For anyone to claim that they know the nature of God, or claim to know what God wants, as the fundamentalists do, is to make the mistake of mixing up what you *believe* with what you *know*.

Americans have fallen prey to the belief that emotional conviction somehow amounts to truth. We see an eloquent speaker, and we are convinced by their passion. Talk show hosts and other demagogues rely on our making this mistake. But one can believe in something with all one's heart – and be dead wrong. By knowing the difference between what we believe and what we know, we are less likely to

make such a mistake.

2. **BS Detector #2: Ask yourself: "What would it take to change my mind?"**

However strong my beliefs may be, I try to question myself, and get a sense of where my beliefs are firm and where they are tentative. For example, I often think about what kind of proof I would need to change my mind about the existence of God.

Similarly, I challenge you to survey your own beliefs. Take a look at them and ask, "What would it take to change my mind?" That may seem scary, but remember that it took Rene Descartes to question his own *existence* before he had the revelation, "I think, therefore I am." So, no belief is so sacred that it cannot be probed like this.

My suspicion is if Osama bin Laden or James Dobson asked themselves this question, their answer would be "Nothing would change my mind. I'm good." If *your* answer is ever "nothing," this may be a sign of dogmatism at work.

3. **BS Detector #3: Be Open-Minded**

Not only should we listen to the beliefs of others, we should try to *understand* them as well. Do you really understand the beliefs you oppose, or is it just an easy-to-destroy straw-man version? Do you try to listen to an argument before categorizing it?

In her recent book lamenting the sorry state of American intellectual life, "The Age of American Unreason," author Susan Jacoby says:

The unwillingness to give a hearing to contradictory viewpoints, or to imagine that one might learn anything from an ideological or cultural opponent, represents a departure from the best side of American popular and elite intellectual traditions.

Throughout the last quarter of the nineteenth century, millions of Americans – many of them devoutly religious – packed lecture halls around the country to hear Robert Green Ingersoll, known as "the Great Agnostic," excoriate conventional religion and any involvement between church and state. When Thomas Henry Huxley, the British naturalist and preeminent popularizer of Darwin's theory of evolution, made his first trip to the United States in 1876, he spoke to standing-room-only crowds even though many members of his audiences were genuinely shocked by his views of the descent of man. Americans in the 1800s, regardless of their level of formal education, wanted to make up their own minds about what men like Ingersoll and Huxley had to say.

That kind of curiosity, which demands firsthand evidence of whether the devil really has horns, is essential to the intellectual and political health of any society. In today's America, intellectuals and non-intellectuals alike, whether on the left or right, tend to tune out any voice that is not an echo. This obduracy is both a manifestation of mental laziness and the essence of anti-intellectualism.

4. **BS Detector #4: But don't be so Open-Minded that your Brains Fall Out**

Listening and grasping others' beliefs doesn't mean you must adopt them. Being open-minded doesn't mean that "anything goes." While it's true that we should be open to new ideas, those ideas must be subject to critical thinking.

Being open-minded does not mean you cannot reach *any* conclusions. Rather, it has more to do with how you *treat others* who have reached different conclusions, and how willing you are to reconsider your own.

Without testing our beliefs, without critical thinking, we become namby-pamby, a true reflection of Stephen Colbert's stereotype. Our faith's openness to ideas is one of its great strengths. By not flexing our intellectual and moral muscles, our strength will wither away.

I value the fourth principle deeply, because it differentiates us from those looking to confirm their own beliefs. It keeps us from adopting complacency over finding epiphanies.

When I come to services, not only am I looking for community, I'm looking for epiphanies. And I've had little revelations here and there. Without this congregation, I never would have re-awakened my interest in Buddhism. Without you, I'd still be inspecting my navel, instead of my carbon footprint.

And so, I'm Michael Cluff, and I disagree with you. Let's talk.