



NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

The Wild Truth

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Introduction:

Today we are exploring the concept of “truth” and using the Chris McCandless story as a springboard. You may recall that Chris McCandless is the young man who, in the early 90’s, left his family on the east coast shortly after he graduated from Emory College and would never be in touch with them again, including his beloved sister, with whom he had shared a very tumultuous upbringing. Chris was found dead in the Alaskan wilderness, in a bus, about two years later. His story was captured by Jon Krakauer in the best-seller *Into the Wild* and later a film of the same title, directed by Sean Penn. We’re hearing some of the music from that film today. Thank you, musicians.

I was browsing at Vroman’s bookstore shortly before Christmas when I came across the book I hadn’t known existed until then, *The Wild Truth*, by Chris’ sister, Carine McCandless, published in 2014. I immediately started reading it, and ten minutes later realized I might as well buy it. Anything about the Chris McCandless story I was interested in.

I recommend this book to anyone who’s ever had an interest in Chris’ story, or to anyone who also grew up with the kind of abusive childhood Chris and Carine McCandless did. Or, anyone with big family secrets. Carine wrote this courageous book because she felt that Chris would have wanted the truth to be told about their family – just how thoroughly violent his father was and the lies his parents colluded in, which is essentially what drove him to cut off all ties to the life he left behind.

Carine was protective of the truth for Krakauer’s book and the movie in part because she still hoped some relationship with her parents was salvageable. But when she saw that it wasn’t, she wrote her story - her truth. One of the family secrets was that their father, Walt McCandless, was married to two women, and even impregnated his two wives around the same time, so that Chris had a half-brother his same age. Strange as it may sound, the two families’ children spent a lot of time together growing up – Carine and Chris had 6 half brothers and sisters.

Carine has quite a story to tell, but as is so often the case, the best part of a book is the last part. In this case, I’m going to read the very last part of the epilogue . . .

Sermon:

I am forever enthralled by the Chris McCandless story, a modern American parable featuring a man of my generation. No, my upbringing was not physically violent, though it was verbally violent. I have no more family secrets than is par for the average family.

For me, the power of Chris' story relates to his demarcation of the civilized world and all its petty demands, and the wild. The wild has her demands too, of an elegantly distilled variety, and to experience and survive the wild is something I learned to do pretty well in my young adult years. Backpacking is my favorite sport and I spent a few summers working and backpacking in Alaska, not far from the famous bus where Chris died. My boyfriend at the time, who's still a good friend, and I, used to make fun of Chris McCandless – well before the book and movie came out. We chose not to journey to his bus, because we had no deference for him, not knowing the more complete story yet - thinking him foolish to attempt what he tried, with not even a decent pair of footwear.

I read Krakauer's book *Into the Wild* but I remember the movie best – how much it reminded me of similar feelings I had the summer after college. I wanted to travel the world, and settled for Northwest forest firefighting, interstate bicycle-touring, and a hitch-hiking adventure instead. The same summer Cheryl Strayed was hiking the Pacific Crest Trail for her story published in a book called *Wild*, I was hitch-hiking with my green-haired friend Becky, down Hwys 99 and 101, from Eugene, OR to Santa Cruz and back. I still need to write that story, called *26 Rides*, because that's how many rides it took.

I didn't like the demands society was soon to press down on me via my parental units. "Hannah, we don't care what you choose to do with your life, but do *something*," was their drumbeat. I was not yet convinced the conventional life had its rewards and, like Chris McCandless, was turned off by the demands of an image-driven life – career success, money, and the things, all the *things*, which signify success - the house, the car, the clothes, yadda yadda. I was an artistic hippie, and at 42 I've advanced by identifying as a "cultural creative." I can't wait to indulge this inclination starting – tomorrow! – when my sabbatical officially kicks off. Thank you again for this time, and know that I will miss you more than you know.

Ministering to people feeds something that's forever hungry in me – to be connected and to be of use. The life of a writer sounds romantic but it's lonely. Because the life of my ministry and my creative writing life are so different, I *feel* like I'm going off to live on Walden Pond. Unfortunately, unlike Thoreau, I won't have the women in my life delivering food and clean laundry. But this is my chance – to face myself in some unusual measure of solitude; face the primary relationships of my family with more time, and face whatever else may be knocking around, neglected, from being so entranced by day to day ministry.

What is the truth in my life that needs to be reckoned with, what does it mean for me to live deliberately - in right relationship - with myself, my partner, and my kids?

How often do you ask yourselves such questions? As a minister I feel like there's some failure on my part to not be more on top of this on a regular basis, but ministers, like any human being, can't be perfect. It's one reason why I relate to the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King – he wasn't perfect, and his relentless conviction to uphold the truth in the public arena caused him to be away from his family an awful lot. And while I'm not apart from my kids to that extent, it has weighed on me: how little energy is left over for parenting. I know I'm not the only

parent haunted by this modern aspect of life – all the time spent earning money just to have the basics for our family – a roof, food, clothes, good schools. What *are* the true costs of the American dream?

Let me put it this way. My youngest child, my daughter Ada Lou, has less than 6 months before she's never four years old again. This is my last chance to make the first five years of her life as happy as I can. The opportunity we are given in solitude, or as part of any act toward simplifying our lives, is to come to terms with basic yet consequential acknowledgements such as this, of what is true about our lives. What simple but portending truths are lurking in your life, perhaps in plain sight, that if you were to take them to heart and make different choices, might transform your life and the lives of your loved ones? Perhaps it's correcting a disconnect with a loved one, or a disconnect between your values, and your actions.

You know, sitting down in front of the computer and writing comes fairly easily to me. Sitting down and giving my absolute, undivided attention to my 4 or 6 year old for any length of time does not. I can do it, but I have to work at it. That's the wild truth for me. All of us should get a sabbatical! All of us need a chance to face our truth. For me, it's going to be about getting out of my head and into my heart; into my body; into my family. When we take on any new ventures that require courage because they're uncharted territory for us, it *is* like going into the wild, into the unknown, where we must pay attention of a different sort. In search of the wild truth.

So on an individual level, the search for truth can be an enterprise of spiritual and emotional growth. I'm convinced we change the world when we start with changing ourselves. We are then better equipped to get society's house in order, after we've gotten our own house in order.

The reputation of truth has seen better days in our public sphere. And yet, we're also boldly in a new era of truth-seeking by questioning the authority of our criminal justice system in unprecedented ways.

Well-publicized hate speech in politics is actually an act of dangerously disseminating lies. When we hear demagogues say the truth in words doesn't matter as much as the emotional effect of words, our liberal religious antennae should come to attention. It's not just the truth of facts and reality that's at stake – for many poor people, it can be the difference between one's freedom or facing life shadowed by a felony conviction, or even life in prison.

As I take stock of my ministry before sabbatical, one observation I've had is that to work for the cause of a more non-violent world, I am required to bring up the topic of violence on a regular basis. While paradoxical, it's necessary to help us open our eyes to how systemically affected by violence our society is, right down to our family units. We are entering a new era of truth-finding in our public sphere which is, while scary and painful, necessary if there's hope of changing systemic injustice. Another modern parable in search of the truth is this *Making of a*

Murderer business, the Netflix documentary series I watched in preparation of this service, in hopes of grasping some compelling nugget.

What I came away with is the conclusion that, perhaps way too often in our criminal justice system, the truth is never meant to be found. This is an example of an immutable truth. Steven Avery and his nephew either murdered Teresa Halbach or they did not. You can't kind of sort of murder someone.

And while it's true, for example, that there are plenty of police officers who *do* know how to de-escalate a situation so as to avoid shooting and killing someone unarmed, there are nevertheless still too many who don't – so it's important for the public to hold our law enforcement entities accountable across the board, by demanding, for example, a search for truth, rather than a search for a conviction. We should all take an interest in making sure our police enjoy widespread public credibility, not just the FBI, whose intentions and inner workings are notoriously suspect. It is frightening to behold how much injustice there is in our justice system, but it's work in service of truth and justice worth doing – it strengthens our American identity, wounded in so many ways.

The McCandless story is the ultimate story of a white, affluent family wounded by violence. For it's not just the poor who are often forced to navigate a life sanctioned by violence on someone else's terms. Violence is passed down in families across class lines. Until – unless - there are people like Chris, Carine and their siblings who are willing to work hard to halt the cycle of violence with themselves, within their generation.

I don't want to go into too much detail over the violence they endured, but it was verbal, emotional, and physical, with never any acknowledgement or real apology. To Chris McCandless, who tried desperately to ask his parents to take some responsibility for their actions, the concept of "home" had become so repugnant, so willfully untruthful to him, that he went to drastic measures to experience what a life free of pretense could be like. It drove him, eventually, to a solitude so extreme that his freedom cost him his life, which was tragic. But like his sister Carine points out, he nevertheless died with the peace knowing he had achieved living the life he chose, with as much integrity as he could honor. His loss was our gain, as we can glean wisdom and inspiration from his quest, a quest to finally feel safe in the world, safe in his own skin.

This matter of living life deliberately cannot be explored too much by us religious liberals. For those who do examine this essential question, perhaps we are the last vestige of the moral philosophers. Before philosophy was ghettoed to sterile academia, "moral philosophers" are what men like Emerson and Thoreau were thought to be. Earlier this month there was a great piece from *The Stone* in the New York Times. The piece is called *When Philosophy Lost Its Way*.

It's about when philosophy was removed from the real world in the late 19th century, from street level or the wilds, to the ivory towers of modern research universities. Suddenly

philosophy wasn't about who we are and how we should live, but about scientific research culture. The authors of this piece, Frodeman and Briggie write, "This occurred even as they taught their students the virtues of Socratic wisdom, which highlights the role of the philosopher as the non-expert, the questioner, the gadfly."

Unitarian Universalists proudly count many questioners and gadflies among its esteemed heritage. One of them is quoted in this piece, in a paragraph that begins, "philosophy should never have been purified . . . The 18th-century thinker Joseph Priestly wrote 'a philosopher ought to be something greater and better than another man.' Philosophy, understood as the love of wisdom, was seen as a vocation . . . It was widely understood that the point of philosophy was to become good rather than simply to collect or produce knowledge." Further down the authors conclude, "There was a brief window when philosophy could have replaced religion as the glue of society; but the moment passed."

I posit that liberal religion aspires to relevance in this way in the modern world, in our insistence on the free and responsible search for truth – in the search for who we are and how we should live. The truth bloody well does matter, whether it's in your personal life or the public arena, and you don't need to be a tenured social scientist to engage in that search for truth - and with hard work and integrity, better yet, *find* that truth.

In our personal lives, it might be boiled down to this one user-friendly question: are you living the life you choose? Or are you on auto-pilot, constantly filling your free moments with chatter, noise, and distraction. Such questions require that we employ solitude, but solitude has become the closest of modern enemies. A lot of us bear a solitude we never enjoy, one we might characterize as loneliness. Rather than viewing it as the enemy, we have to approach solitude and ourselves with kindness and curiosity. What can I learn here? Why is it that I can't stand silence? Who is this being, solitude, that I need to get to know and love as well as Thoreau and McCandless did?

There are a few quotations from Tolstoy that Chris McCandless highlighted in the dog-eared books he left behind on the bus. Both from a story called "Family Happiness." "It is a bad thing . . . not to be able to stand solitude . . . I can't praise a young lady who is alive only when people are admiring her, but as soon as she is left alone, collapses and finds nothing to her taste – one who is all for show and has no resources in herself."

We all have such resources, but we have to develop them like we do any habit. Regular periods of solitude is a habit of the heart, one we have to prioritize, as we would the discipline of a spiritual practice. These are muscles we exercise, in service of our spiritual and emotional fitness. What muscles do you need to flex and challenge, for the health and well-being of your life?

Yes, all of us deserve a sabbatical from our busy lives, heavy with the weight of obligations - that we might experience the lightness of emotional health found in solitude – to get to life's

“lowest terms,” as Thoreau says – to get down to earth; to be the moral philosopher each of us has the birthright to be, simply because we are human.

We ourselves are the building blocks of a progressive, more just society. And while, thankfully, our family pasts are likely not as troubled as the McCandless’s, all of us have the work of differentiation to do, throughout our lives. What was true of our parents, but shall not be true of ourselves? What cycles of violence - emotional, verbal, or physical - end with us? We have to think of ourselves as an authority figure, if only of our own lives.

Violence is a piece of American heritage we all inherit. We would do well to each personally challenge ourselves to see how far we can go to reverse this legacy, to bring about healing in our lives, our families, our communities, our world. Chris McCandless gave his life to this endeavor, and his siblings have nobly followed suit in taking this charge on themselves.

May we be blessed, every one of us, with such role models in our lives, inspiring us to greater heights of acknowledging the truth, leading us to transformed lives of integrity, service, and joy. This is the adventure called life – it’s as adventuresome as you choose to dare make it.

So stay safe, but adventure deep – deep into the wild truth.