



## NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

### The Good News

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Every year, the editors of the Oxford Dictionary analyze the most used words in circulation and choose a “word of the year.” Katherine Martin, head of the U.S. dictionaries for the Oxford University Press, explains the choice this way. “We choose words that are going to highlight the interplay between our words and our culture.” The final word of the year is meant to be one that captures the “ethos, mood or preoccupations of that particular year and to have lasting potential as a word of cultural significance.”

The 2016 word of the year was “post-truth.” According to the Washington Post, “the dictionary defines ‘post-truth’ as ‘relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief.’ In this case, the ‘post’ prefix doesn’t mean ‘after’ so much as it implies an atmosphere in which a notion is irrelevant.” Over the course of 2015, the editors noticed an increased roughly 2000 percent in worldwide use of the word, the bulk of usage in the United States and Britain.

According to Oxford Dictionaries President Casper Grathwohl, “the first spike came in June, driven by the rhetoric leading up to Britain’s ‘Brexit’ European referendum,” and surged again after July’s Republican National Convention. However, the word was selected before November’s election.

Grathwohl noted that, “It’s not surprising that our choice reflects a year dominated by highly-charged political and social discourse” Grathwohl said, “Fueled by the rise of social media as a news source and a growing distrust of facts offered up by the establishment, post-truth as a concept has been finding its linguistic footing for some time.”

In 2005, a similar phenomenon emerged, popularized by the fictional tv conservative character played by Stephen Colbert. Colbert, in his Colbert Report, coined the term “truthiness.” In a 2005 segment that introduced the word, Colbert, in character, defined truthiness as: *believing something that feels true, even if it isn’t supported by fact.*

He elaborated: “Now I’m sure some of the word police, the ‘wordinistas’ over at Webster’s, are gonna say, hey, that’s not a word. Well, anybody who knows me knows that I’m no fan of dictionaries or reference books. They’re elitist! Constantly telling us what is or isn’t true. Or what did or didn’t happen.”

Colbert revisited his recently retired character and retired word for this summer’s RNC which popularized Oxford’s 2016 word choice. In true Colbert fashion, in place of his invented word, he coined yet another one, an exaggerated version of truthiness called: “Trumpiness.”

The emergence of this invented word of the year, and the accompanying dialogue about the nature of “truth” requires a bit of investigation on our part. To claim we are living in “post-

truth” times as a standpoint for viewing the world—again, quoting Oxford—the “post-” prefix doesn't mean “after” so much as it implies an atmosphere in which a notion is irrelevant.

As Unitarian Universalists, our fourth principle affirms our religious purpose to promote “a free and responsible search for truth and meaning.” In a diverse, globalized and post-modern world, we are certainly familiar with the idea of multiple truths, whether grounded in our life experience or by the nudge of our religious teaching that compassion and wisdom are gained by listening to the “truths” of others and allowing these truths to transform us. It was Mahatma Gandhi who said, “Everyone holds a piece of the truth.”

One place we can turn to understand is to philosophy. Socrates first defined a philosopher as “one whose passion it is to see the truth.” Epistemology is a philosophical movement dedicated to the study of and theories related to knowledge. Those who study epistemology are particularly concerned with the question: How do we know what we know?

How do we know what we know—in other words—

How do we acquire and construct our knowledge?

How do we tell if the knowledge we have is indeed true?

What do the nature of concepts of truth, belief and justification really mean and how do they change over time?

How do we tell if our sources of knowledge are credible?

Taking a look at the basic definitions, epistemology defines belief, truth and justification differently. Here's how one theory of knowledge understands it, a foundation first established by Plato in the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC.

*A belief is an expression of faith and or trust in a person, power or other entity.*

*Whether someone's “belief” is true is not a prerequisite for their belief.*

*On the other hand, if something is actually known, then it cannot categorically be false, even if it is not justified.*

*For example, if someone believes that a bridge is safe enough to support him and attempts to cross it, but the bridge then collapses under his weight it could be said that he believed that he was safe but didn't know it, and that his belief was not true.*

*Many “true beliefs” are not justified, but in this theory to become knowledge, a belief must be both “true” and it must be “justified.”*

Philosophers have argued about this theory, mainly what it takes for a “true belief” to be justified and become knowledge, asserting different permutations of what is required for a belief to be reliably confirmed by facts and evidence.

There are also conversations about what makes a belief instead of an opinion. Many would say that facts and evidence, even if those are not justified, make a belief, rather than an opinion, shaped by personal experiences, feelings and perspectives. Years ago, former Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan once famously said: "Everyone is entitled to his own opinion, but not to his own facts."

But if facts and evidence do not matter in these times, then beliefs, however "deeply held" or "deeply felt" become knowledge without the need for justification. Truth, as a concept, becomes irrelevant when the philosopher's step of justification is no longer a requisite for defining "true belief," the pathway to knowledge. Here's where we are at as a culture: feelings become facts, emotion becomes evidence. Believing something strongly makes something true, period. Hence, the post-truth, post-fact world, where rational arguments are short circuited in favor of passionate and often hyperbolic "half-truths," and "alternative facts" also known as lies. Jennifer Rubin of the Washington Post calls this a kind of "moral nihilism--" without the legitimacy of truth, either everyone lies or no one lies.

Epistemology, or philosophy of knowledge not only asks how we know what we know, but where we get our knowledge. What are the sources of authority that shape our beliefs and make us who we are, how we understand the world and to behave in the ways we do as political actors? What sources of knowledge do we trust to guide our decisions and shape our beliefs?

For many of us, our education is a primary shaper of our knowledge. We have a general basic education in a public or private school, some of us have more specific knowledge, whether in cooking or law, theater or business. Our sense of knowledge changes. The arts and culture teach us about beauty and creativity. Sports teach us about competition, team work and physical strength. Science teaches us about our place in the natural world. Our ethnic heritage and cultural traditions teach us about where we come from and what it means to belong. Our families teach us values, habits and how to care for ourselves and for others. And of course, there is the knowledge we acquire from our religious teaching.

Whether from our cultural heritage or from our religious background, much of the way our knowledge is constructed is by testing and discerning the truth from what we have been taught—comparing what we are taught with the evidence of our lived experience of the world.

For many of us, what we were taught and our personal experience of the world are two very different things. Last week, we heard a story from one of our members, Lee Oldham, who grew up in a conservative Christian church, who began to question the teachings of his church on homosexuality during the Proposition 8 campaign. He could not tolerate the hatred being taught, and his conscience led him to seek a new spiritual home where the church's beliefs would align with his values of inclusion and acceptance.

So our knowledge is being continually shaped by many sources—constructed and deconstructed. Of course, these days, much of our knowledge about the world comes from none of these sources, but from the media.

The media. Specifically, the news media. An all powerful source of “truth” in our world, which is now being questioned, doubted and de-legitimized. Alain de Botton is a Swiss born British author of, perhaps most famously, *Religion for Atheists*. In his book *The News, A Users Manual*, his task is to demystify the source of our knowledge which most consistently commands our attention and to look at the kind of society we are becoming in its hands, consciously and unconsciously.

While most of us are tethered to our phones and Facebook, and begin to feel a loss if an hour goes by without checking the news, we rarely actually reflect on the meaning of the phenomenon to which we dedicate so much of our time and attention. Even less, we probably question the legitimacy of the news if we “trust the source.”

Here’s an interesting observation de Botton makes, following the philosophy of Georg Hegel: He writes: “Societies become modern when news replaces religion as our central source of guidance and our touchstone of authority- (our central source of truth). In the developed economies, the news now occupies a position of power at least equal to that formerly enjoyed by the faiths.”

Dispatches track the canonical hours with uncanny precision: matins have been transubstantiated into the breakfast bulletin, vespers into the evening report. But the news doesn’t just follow a quasi-religious timetable. It also demands that we approach it with some of the deferential expectations we once have harbored of the faiths.

Here, too, we hope to receive revelations, learn who is good and bad, fathom suffering and understand the unfolding logic of existence.

And here, too, if we refuse to take part in the rituals, there could be imputations of heresy.

To be sure, this observation has a real history worth considering. After all, it was the printing press, invented in 1440 by Johannes Gutenberg, which allowed the bible to first be printed and accessed by the people, displacing the central political and religious authority of the Catholic Church.

With the de-centralized press, an era of mass communication was born, as was an era of mass literacy, leading to the development of a larger and more empowered middle class, followed by the Protestant reformation and the Enlightenment, made possible by the widespread printing of the Bible and distribution of religious and philosophical pamphlets in multiple languages across Europe.

This is the context in which our liberal religious movement was born, using the press to give ordinary people the tools to challenge and transform the world around them by thinking for themselves. And this act of promoting free thinking was often deemed heresy and punished by death or imprisonment.

So where does this leave us today? In our nation, we are seeing the news media attempting to be de-stabilized as that central source of knowledge. In an age where twitter is being claimed to be more "legitimate" than the New York Times, we are being asked to question the validity of the sources and to relativize truth based on feeling, emotion and unjustified belief.

But like our experience of the other sources of knowledge which shape our lives, like religion, like our family heritage and our education, we need to question what we are witnessing, to be suspicious of the way our knowledge about the world is being shaped. We need to put the media to the test in light of our values. No longer bound by the printing press, we have the tools to transform the discourse right in our hands. We know that we do not live in a world where truth is irrelevant, but it is more relevant than ever. So friends, let us remember the original role of our liberal church—to doubt and to question—to hold fast to what is good—to defend what is true, and to proclaim "the Good News" of this world.

Amen, and blessed be.

*Psalm* by Wislawa Szymborska

Oh, the leaky boundaries of man-made states!  
How many clouds float past them with impunity,  
how much desert sand shifts from one land to another;  
how many mountain pebbles tumble onto foreign soil in provocative hops!  
Need I mention every single bird that flies in the face of frontiers, or alights on the roadblock at the border?  
A humble robin --- still, its tail resides abroad, while its beak stays home.  
If that weren't enough, it won't stop bobbing!  
Among innumerable insects I'll single out only the ant between the border guard's left and right boots blithely ignoring the questions "Where from?" and "Where to?"  
Oh, to register in detail, at a glance, the chaos prevailing on every continent!  
Isn't that a privet on the far bank smuggling its hundred-thousandth leaf across the river?  
And who but the octopus, with impudent long arms, would disrupt the sacred bounds of territorial waters?  
And how can we talk of order overall when the very placement of the stars leaves us doubting just what shines for whom?

Not to speak of the fog's reprehensible drifting!  
And dust blowing all over the steppes as if they hadn't been partitioned!  
And the voices coasting on obliging airwaves, that conspiratorial squeaking, those  
indecipherable mutters!  
Only what is human can truly be foreign.  
The rest is mixed vegetation, subversive moles, and wind.

In 1967, the Beatles were asked to come up with a song with a universally appealing message to be shared on a new television program called *Our World*, the world's first satellite broadcast of its kind, linking 25 countries and 400 million people. The song was to be debuted live on June 25th, but as the date rapidly approached, the band had written nothing. Across the pond in San Francisco, more than 100,000 flower children flocked to the Haight Ashbury district of San Francisco. Inspired by the hippie's message of peace and love, their protest of the increasing militarization in Vietnam and the pressures to conform to social norms, the Beatles put their heads together to create an anthem appropriate for the Summer of Love.

The resulting song was *All You Need is Love*, performed in a studio surrounded by flowers and balloons, a swaying audience holding up signs with the song's title scrawled in a dozen different languages.

Everyone in the band agreed *All You Need is Love* was John's song, with ad-libbed ideas from Paul and Ringo to tie in older songs like "She Loves You." While the Beatles were not openly political at that time, the positive response to *All You Need is Love* aligned them with the burgeoning peace movement. Lennon famously became more outspoken, especially after leaving the band in 1970. Perhaps no other song better expressed the longing for unity and peace better than the song *Imagine*, released in the midst of the intractable violence of the Vietnam War.

Lennon's anti-war efforts earned him national attention, specifically from President Nixon, sworn into office only six months after the summer of love. With support from Senator Strom Thurman, Nixon launched a four-year "strategic countermeasure" to deport the former Beatle. The deportation order attempted to silence Lennon's influential activism which Nixon called "propaganda." Nixon believed it could cost him not only reelection but would threaten the military prowess of the United States.

Lennon doubled down on his outspoken politics. According to journalist Jade Wright, when asked whether songs like *Give Peace a Chance* and *Power to the People* were in fact propaganda songs, he answered, "Sure. So was *All You Need Is Love*. I'm a revolutionary artist. My art is dedicated to change."<sup>4</sup>

In March of 1973, Lennon was given a deportation order while his wife, artist Yoko Ono, was granted permanent residence. In response, on April 1, taking full advantage of April Fool's Day, the couple held a press conference at the New York City Bar Association, where they

announced the formation of a conceptual country called Nutopia, waving two white handkerchiefs representing surrender and peace, as a flag.

Surprising lawyers and delighting the public, Lennon and Ono solemnly read the following statement on live television.

We announce the birth of a conceptual country, NUTOPIA.

Citizenship of the country can be obtained by declaration of your awareness of NUTOPIA.

NUTOPIA has no land, no boundaries, no passports, only people.

NUTOPIA has no laws other than cosmic.

All people of NUTOPIA are ambassadors of the country.

As two ambassadors of NUTOPIA, we ask for diplomatic immunity and recognition in the United Nations of our country and our people.

Their NUTOPIA skit apparently worked -- As the Nixon administration became more deeply embroiled in the Watergate scandal, interest was lost in pursuing the deportation order and in 1975 a green card was finally granted. Interestingly, Leon Wildes, Lennon's immigration attorney, in arguing for Lennon's case for deferred deportation, helped set the precedent for President Obama's DACA, or deferred action for childhood arrivals policy. Beyond this contemporary legal twist, Lennon and Ono set forth an inventive approach to interfacing with the power of an oppressive administration. The NUTOPIA performance questioned the legitimacy of American nationalism while proclaiming a somewhat absurd vision of his "Imagined" world, telling a very different story than the Nixon administration was telling about America.

While Lennon sang:

Imagine there's no countries-

It isn't hard to do

Nothing to kill or die for

And no religion too.

Nixon painted a dark picture of a nation whose Christian moral values were under the dangerous influences of foreign communism. His solution was to seed a new resurgence of a Christian nationalism that would recover America's past triumph from its present crisis—blaming the media (CBS was the target at the time) for sheltering the voices of the "Silent Majority" of Americans who agreed in favor of the "noisy minority" of protesters.

Catholic lay theologian Daniel Callahan put it this way in an article in National Catholic Reporter: "What the underclasses—students, blacks, jaded intellectuals—seek in revolution, the overclasses seek in a return to the old sources. The former want to create new gods, labeled freedom, self-fulfillment, liberation, while the latter are willing to propitiate and invoke the old ones: law, order, discipline."

Nixon's communicator in chief of this strategy was none other than the Reverend Billy Graham. Graham, now 98, is perhaps the most well-known American evangelical of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Graham saw Washington influence as the final frontier of his religious "crusades" after securing a base with wealthy and powerful Hollywood and corporate executives.

With President Nixon, he finally found the national stage he sought. In the new book *One Nation Under God: How Corporate America Invented Christian America*, Kevin Kruse calls Graham "a constant presence and trusted advisor" and cites the words of biographer Marshall Frady, "something like an extra officer of Nixon's Cabinet, the administration's own Pastor-without-Portfolio."

In his first White House public appearance at Nixon's Inauguration in 1969, Graham delivered a sermon-like prayer, warning that the religious "pillars of our society" had "eroded in an increasingly materialistic and permissive society," and the nation was "now reaping a whirlwind of crime, division, and rebellion."

Graham's theological influence could soon be seen permeating Nixon's communications, extending beyond the social and into an economic world view that praised individualism and blasted "entitlements" in the form of welfare, student loans and social security. The disgust for "handouts" has a deeply conservative religious origin—that government support for the student, the poor person, the elderly, the disabled, the immigrant and the refugee weakens individual character, creates dependency and interrupts God's preference for those who "help themselves." Success and wealth, particularly evident in the "self-made," were the visible markers of "the saved."

Fast forwarding to today, Paula White, the President's spiritual advisor, with direct ties to Billy Graham, is a Florida mega church pastor that is best known as a preacher of the prosperity gospel, or "name it and claim it." This theology believes a divine hand is at work in the global marketplace, and proclaims that poverty and misfortune are simply the product of distorted thinking and inadequate religious devotion, not the product of globalization, racism or lack of education, and can be overcome by the saving power of prayer. "Name it and claim it" has a simple message: get saved, and get rich.

Today, as it has been in the past, religion will be manipulated to be an expression of a rampant individualism which detests the poor, the immigrant and the elder. It will be used as a clarion call for white supremacy and Christian nationalism, to rally a crusade against Islam and to roll back the advances made by women, gays, and minorities.

Or, it can be, and it must be, something else.

Our task is to articulate, again and again, even more boldly and loudly, what our Unitarian Universalist faith means and what it calls us to do at this very critical moment of history. Since our faith's beginning, Universalist theology has called us to proclaim a message of love and hope. Universalism, evolving from a different time of very similar fear, fire and brimstone of

the American Great Awakenings, claims that we are all worthy and deserving of love—both human and divine. In Christian terms, we are all saved or no one is saved. Since we are not individually responsible for our own salvation, we bear the collective responsibility not for one another's salvation but for one another's wellbeing. In our lives, we continue to be saved, not by a divine hand but by the beauty of the world and the generous hands of our friends, family and neighbors. Universalism proclaims no special blessing is deserved by any one group or sect, and honors no savior but the one we discover in ourselves and in one another, no hell but the one we create on this earth.

In these times, Universalism remains a radical theology—and a demanding one. A prophet of Universalism in his time, Forrest Church, preached these words of caution to those who dare to follow this spiritual path:

Taken seriously, no theology is more challenging—morally, spiritually, or intellectually: to love your enemy as yourself; to see your tears in another's eyes; to respect and even embrace otherness, rather than merely to tolerate or, even worse, dismiss it. None of this comes naturally to us. We are weaned on the rational presumption that if two people disagree, only one can be right.

Yet as even approximating the Universalist ideal remains devilishly difficult in actual practice...

we also must remember that only a respect for the worth and dignity of every human being and a shared commitment to the interdependent web of being—each among Unitarian Universalism's guiding principles—present a saving alternative to the perils of division in an ever more fractious world.

Today let us make it perfectly clear that we are a self-governed congregation that is dedicated to upholding religious values of love, inclusion and respect and carrying these values with us into the public square.

Let us be bold: our faith fosters a greater love for humankind, a love without borders or walls, a love which expands our hearts and motivates us to act for justice.

I send you off with the words of one of our Universalist founders, John Murray:

You may possess only a small light, but uncover it, let it shine, use it in order to bring more light and understanding to the hearts and minds of men and women. Give them not Hell, but hope and courage. Do not push them deeper into their theological despair, but preach kindness and everlasting love.

In short: All you need is love

May it be so, and amen.