

Religious Integrity

by Rev. Don Garrett

delivered February 10 at the

Unitarian Universalist Church of the Lehigh Valley

When I went to Lutheran Sunday School as a child, I think I was supposed to be learning morality and ethics, but it was pretty hit-and-miss. What really made an impression on me, though, were the books by Dr. Seuss – especially *Horton Hatches the Egg*.

Do you remember that book? It starts with an elephant named Horton meeting Mayzie the lazy bird who is tired of sitting on the egg in her nest. She begs Horton to help her out, give her a break so she can rest. She promises to return soon.

Horton says, “Very well, since you insist. . . You want a vacation. Go fly off and take it. I’ll sit on your egg and I’ll try not to break it. I’ll stay and be faithful. I mean what I say.”

Taking his responsibility seriously, Horton props up the nest so it will hold his weight. The next day there was a terrible storm and he grumbled, “I wish she’d come back ’cause I’m cold and I’m wet. I hope that Mayzie bird doesn’t forget.”

Days drag on as summer turns to autumn and autumn to winter when Horton’s covered with snow and sleet, “and icicles hung from his trunk and his feet.

“But Horton kept sitting, and said with a sneeze, ‘I’ll *stay* on this egg and I *won’t* let it freeze. I meant what I said and I said what I meant. . . An elephant’s faithful one hundred percent!’ ”

This is followed by further challenges as all his animal friends tease and mock him. Then he’s set upon by hunters who capture him – egg, tree and all – and carry him far away and sell him to a circus.

But, with each new hardship or insult, Horton always returns to his credo: “I meant what I said and I said what I meant. . . An elephant’s faithful one hundred percent!”

The egg finally hatches and Horton and the newborn complete their bond in an instant and are rewarded with a return trip to their jungle home.

Horton Hatches the Egg served as my primary text for integrity. When faced with an ethical quandary I often repeated that phrase, “I meant what I said and I said what I meant. . . An elephant’s faithful one hundred percent!”

So this was in the background as I grew and learned morality from more sources. The Boy Scout Oath was one I thought about. It says that, “On my honor I will do my best to do my duty to God and my country and to obey the Scout Law; to help other people at all times; to keep myself physically strong, mentally awake, and morally straight.” And the Scout Law is a promise to be “Trustworthy, loyal, helpful, friendly, courteous, kind, obedient, cheerful, thrifty, brave, clean, and reverent.”

That’s a lot for a kid to think about. And I did think about it a lot, wondering what it meant and if I could be faithful one hundred percent to all of that.

Though I haven’t always embodied the integrity I valued, the hook was set: Horton’s words served as a beacon, a guidepost on my life journey. And I’ve discovered that integrity lived is even more complicated for me than it was for Horton.

We usually think of integrity as a solitary virtue, something we can be proud of. We have integrity when we preserve the honor of our convictions against temptations to stray, whether for comfort, convenience or profit. As the poet Richard Lovelace wrote, “I could not love thee, dear, so much, loved I not honor more.”

On the face of it, integrity is easy to understand. It is honesty, moral consistency, honor. We know when we have it, and, if we’re honest with ourselves, we know when we don’t. That’s what conscience is all about. It hurts us when we abandon our integrity, our values, our truth.

When I have integrity, I do what I say I’ll do. I keep my word. I don’t tell lies. I resist pressures to change my beliefs, or to act in ways that violate my ethical standards.

In his book, *Religious Integrity for Everyone*, the Unitarian Universalist minister, Fred Campbell, gives us a provocative new definition of integrity: “A

person has integrity when his or her words communicate congruence with personal experience. . . .” He points out that integrity is a matter of language, that there is a state of integrity when our language matches our experience.

He goes on to expand this to religion, “A religion has integrity when it enables human beings to enact the drama of living, aging, and dying with understanding and acceptance, meaning and purpose, trust and love, faith and hope. A religion has integrity when its articulated understandings about our world and our living ‘make sense.’ A religion suffers a crisis of integrity only when its spoken truths and practices no longer meet the needs of the people it seeks to serve.”

I faced a crisis of religious integrity when I was in the eighth grade. I’d gone to church my whole life, studied the Bible, sang in the choir, went to Sunday school. Finally came confirmation class. I studied the creeds and the catechism, learned what it said, but ultimately found it confusing and troubling. Its language didn’t match my experience. I lived in a world of science, not one of miracles. Sure, I could appreciate the miraculous nature of existence itself, but the world seemed to follow natural laws that my church was expecting me to repudiate. In order to believe in virgin birth, resurrection, a literal heaven and hell, I would have to abandon the integrity of my own experience.

My minister told me that it wasn’t such a big deal, that I should just say the pledge and become a full member of the church – that many people weren’t sure they believed everything in the Creed. But I felt that if it was important enough to swear to, I shouldn’t go through with it if I didn’t really believe it. At 13, I had a well-developed sense of honor and integrity. I refused confirmation.

Was I right? I guess that depends on your point of view. It certainly created a stir at my house, a crisis of integrity, if you will. After all, my father had taught me about the value of integrity. He also thought I was wrong. But the ethical principals that governed our family demanded that they accept my decision.

That didn’t mean they liked it. My family still thinks I’m wrong. They’ve tried quite a few tactics over the years to try to get me to see the light and change my mind. They worry about me. They pray for me. But, since my ordination as a Unitarian Universalist minister, they’ve stopped pushing me up against the wall

to accept their version of salvation. They've finally come to respect my integrity by accepting my decision, even though they don't agree with it.

Unitarian Universalism has given me a spiritual home where I can continue my religious journey with integrity and respect. I can feel accepted without being agreed with. I've found integrity to be a journey in itself, because as my life changes, as my experience changes, my language and understanding change as well. I would feel stifled if I had to believe exactly the same thing all the time.

When I was preparing to go before the Ministerial Fellowship Committee to be evaluated for entry into Unitarian Universalist ministry, I needed to write an essay describing my theology. When I told my daughter, Cypress, what I was doing, she looked at me, eyes wide, and said, "Wow, that's a moving target!" I agreed and said that any essay I could write could only be snapshot of a process in motion: useful for reference purposes, perhaps, but not as a timeless statement of belief.

For me, religious integrity demands that I constantly change my language. There's a line that says, "That's my story and I'm stickin' to it." My version would be "That's my story and I've changed it already."

Fred Campbell would agree that religious integrity is more a journey than a destination; that integrity is a search for meaning congruent with our experience, and to the extent that we have new experiences, we need to find new meanings, and that meaning has to do with language. He says, "meaning has to do with an increase or decrease in relatedness experienced by human beings to each other and to the elements of the reality which surrounds their lives. . . . When the meaning of living increases for us, we gain insight, understanding, knowledge, friendship, perceived closeness, acceptance, connection, love, faith, hope. . . . Language is essential to honoring the meaning of our living."

I once spent a day with the distinguished scholar of comparative religion, Huston Smith, who shocked me by saying that he had no patience with people who said they were spiritual but not religious. This went against many of my own beliefs at the time, which was that spirituality was what was important, while religions often obscured the spiritual with burdensome and irrelevant doctrine. Huston Smith explained that spirituality is everywhere, like light, like air, like

breath itself. It happens to everyone, but, without some frame of reference, we don't know what it is, we fail to appreciate how valuable it is. He said, "Religion gives spirituality traction in history." Religious language gives us a framework to understand our experience, thereby making integrity possible.

This leads to a definition of integrity that I never suspected before I met Fred Campbell. We can't have integrity if we lack the language we need to describe the particularity of our experience. Consider the experience of transcendence, for example. We've all had experiences of transcendence, of being part of something greater than ourselves. Campbell says that the only way we can come to the knowledge that we are alone is by comparing it to not being alone, of being part of something greater than ourselves, and that religion is what we do with the knowledge of our aloneness. Religion enables us to embed ourselves in a system of meaning that is greater than ourselves. We do this here every week when we come together in worship.

As Campbell said, "A religion has integrity when it enables human beings to enact the drama of living, aging, and dying with understanding and acceptance, meaning and purpose, trust and love, faith and hope. A religion has integrity when its articulated understandings about our world and our living 'make sense.'"

We need different religious viewpoints because people's experiences are different; what makes sense to one person is nonsense to another.

Campbell defines religious and intellectual freedom differently from the way we usually do. We tend to talk about freedom as a condition which may or may not be present. Campbell defines freedom more as a capacity than as a condition: he calls it "the capacity to shift . . . perspectives of reality." He says that, "If one can only reflect and respond to life from within one paradigm or understanding of reality, then you are severely limited in how you may approach the complexity of our world and how you may relate to people holding different perspectives of reality. If you can shift from one interpretation of reality to another with empathy and understanding, then you have a freedom based on intellectual capacity."

Can we really understand and appreciate the frame of reference of someone with whom we disagree? Doesn't the wide path of Unitarian

Universalism enjoin us to respect each other's integrity whether we agree with them or not? It could be that, all too often, we fail to respect others' integrity by arguing against their beliefs. When you think of it, isn't most persuasion a challenge to the integrity of another?

Remember, it's perfectly possible to have integrity within a conventional Christian community if its language matches your experience. Even those who clear-cut our forests may have integrity based on the congruence of their experience and values. We may disagree, but our commitment to freedom and diversity requires that we not withhold our respect.

The same goes for this gathered community of faith and freedom. We are committed to being a compassionate community that nurtures personal growth and works for justice. We don't say we're committed to changing each other's minds. We are committed to understanding each other, valuing and appreciating both our similarities and our differences, not to deciding who is right and who is wrong.

I invite you to practice your faith. The next time you disagree with someone, instead of trying to get them to accept your point of view or renounce their own, try to find out the deep basis for their point of view, to find and honor the roots of that person's integrity. Try to empathize with them, feel how it feels to believe as they do.

I invite you to honor our diversity truly as we share our journey together in integrity and in faith. Try it and see what a difference it makes. Let me know how it feels.

It could be that one of the strongest paths for nurturing our own integrity is honoring the integrity of another.

May it be so.