

The Rigorous Pursuit of... Truthiness?

*A Sermon by the Rev. Molly Housh Gordon
Delivered to the Unitarian Universalist Church of Columbia
Sunday, March 8, 2015*

Last week, a poorly lit photograph of a poorly made dress drove much of the social media world to the point of epistemological crisis.

Epistemology is the philosophical line of questioning that asks how we know what we know.

Last week, the human capacity to trust our own experience of the world as real and true seemed to be thrown into question in living rooms and studies across the country for sighted people as they sat in the same room, stared at the same screen, looked at this photo of a dress, and perceived it to be wildly different colors. Then, they FREAKED OUT. How can we be experiencing the same thing so differently, they yelled in unison across a thousand tweets and Facebook statuses.

I can only imagine that color blind and sight-impaired folks, and folks with various sensory differences might have reacted with either a “Duh” or a yawn.



But anyway, here's the dress. It's what is called in the fashion world a body conscious dress, made of horizontal strips of fabric meant to fit tightly and accentuate a curvy shape. It alternates between smooth fabric and lace, and there is a little bolero jacket slung across the top. But the color... well it's very clear to me... but let's see what some of you think. Raise your hands if you perceive that this dress is white and gold. Now raise your hands if you perceive that this dress is blue and black.

So that's about 30% for white and gold and 70% for blue and black. In my house, I was 100% certain it was a blue and bronze dress. My spouse was equally certain that it was white and gold.

What is the truth? Is there truth?

Well, the neuroscientists and Photoshop experts have weighed in. The dress is blue and black, though some of the scientists themselves see it as white and gold. The reason for the difference in perception has to do with the way that light is filtered through the eye and the way that the brain fills in the gaps of any optical input and interprets the image.

This particular poorly lit photograph hits a uniquely broad point of perceptual ambiguity – one neuroscientist said it is the biggest difference in individual color perception he has encountered.

But perceptual difference happens all the time, with sight and with all of the senses.

When I put goat cheese in my mouth, it tastes like I am sucking on a bar of metal, and I immediately want to spit it out. When you put goat cheese in your mouth, you may experience a tangy and creamy goodness... Or so I've been told. Yech.

Or touch – when the thermometer is below 45 degrees, I attest that it is factually cold outside. My friend from Alaska breaks out the flip flops and shorts.

This dress, though – for some reason it got the corners of the Internet philosophizing. “What is real?” shouted one tumblr blogger in all caps, spelling reeeeeeeal with 6 or 7 e's to highlight their distress.

What is real, indeed? It's a good question in a culture where we are often taught to trust nothing but our own perception of truthiness, but it is not a new question. Plato asked it. So did Aristotle. I am guessing so did the first person who dreamed or the first pair of people who found ways to speak to each other of what they knew to be true.

Our bodies are wondrous things, but one thing they are not good at is uniformity of experience.

Neuroscientists are discovering that these perceptual differences happen, in part, because our direct sensory phenomena are only a portion of what is shaping our experience in any given moment. According to an article on sensory phenomena by Dr. Atul Gawande in the 2008 *New Yorker*:

The account of perception that's starting to emerge is what we might call the “brain's best guess” theory of perception: perception is the brain's best guess about what is happening in the outside world. The mind integrates scattered, weak, rudimentary signals from a variety of sensory channels, information from past experiences, and hard-wired processes, and produces a sensory experience full of brain-provided color, sound, texture, and meaning. We see a friendly yellow Labrador bounding behind a picket fence not because that is the transmission we receive but because this is the perception our weaver-brain

assembles as its best hypothesis of what is out there from the slivers of information we get. Perception is inference.¹

This applies to that darn dress. It also applies to sensations of touch like itching or the phantom vibrating of a cell phone that isn't actually in our pocket. It applies to perceptual differences of smell, taste, sound.

In a sense we are all walking around in slightly different worlds, which our brains have built up around us. Personally, I think this is a beautiful thing, a curious thing, a source of perpetual discovery and deep mystery. But it is not a ringing endorsement of the idea that we can trust our own perception as capital T truth.

In fact, one could even see it as a scientific support for the philosophical turns collectively known as postmodernism, which regard truth as historically, culturally, or otherwise constructed, and as multiple, fragmented, and relative.

That darn dress!

If our brains are indeed weavers, assembling our experience from every thread it may grasp, can we not see reality itself as a rich and varied tapestry, or a fabric made of many different colors all at once?

Or could we see reality as the weaving itself, the movement of the warp and the weft, the act of fabrication? For how can truth possibly be static, in a world where nothing is static? Where sub-atomic particles vibrate and bounce matter in and out of form? Where light shifts and refracts and changes color?

In this worldview of emergence and becoming, truth does not exist somewhere out there, set forever, unchanging. It emerges, as the universe itself emerges, and changes every moment. It is slippery and mysterious. It is something we cannot hold still for long, instead setting out on a journey with the unfolding truth.

But stuck in a static world-view as we so often are, and longing for solidity and certainty, as we so often do, we tend to see the idea of truth in polarity – that there is Absolute Truth or there is no such thing as truth at all.

When we buy into this polarity, we are in danger of either living in a truth-y world of double speak and spin or fighting our way through an antagonistic world of competing absolutes.

Truly, it seems that both often happen at once, as Absolute Truth and relative truthiness become muddled into each other. The practice of spinning personally held belief into a claim of absolute truth seems to be the accepted currency of politics, media, and more.

Perhaps just as common is the human propensity to take some truth as relative, and other as absolute, depending on our own experience or our own internal convictions.

¹ Gawande, Atul. "The Itch," *The New Yorker*. June 2008. Accessed March 6, 2015 at <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2008/06/30/the-itch>.

For example, there are those who accept the science of vaccination as absolute truth and reject the science of climate change as relative, or “unconvincing.” At the same time there are those who take the science of climate change as gospel, but are deeply suspicious of the science behind safe vaccinations.

Recalling that science, at least so far, generally provides not proof but ever-more refined hypotheses – not truth itself, but ever more educated guesses, it is no wonder that even science is not exempt from the postmodern gaze.

Under watch of this gaze, truth becomes more deeply relative *and* more absolutely entrenched, as ideals and propositions are presented as fact and set up in polarity to one another, with real world implications.

We have seen and know that the relativism of truthiness can take us to war. Truthiness can degrade our atmosphere and destroy our forests. Truthiness can endanger our public health.

Relativistic truthiness has real consequences.

We also know that the clashing of absolutes can take us to war just as quickly. That the claim to absolute truth has been used to abuse and exclude, to shame and shut down. Even to torture and execute.

Absolute truth has real consequences.

So what are we to do? In this time full of overwhelming amounts of information, misinformation, absolute claims, truth-y spin, and general confusion... What are we to do? What is reeeeeeeal?

One thing we cannot do is throw up our hands, and declare simply – believe whatever you want. (And woe to us when our children get the impression this is exactly the message of Unitarian Universalism)

In truth, it matters deeply what we believe. Our beliefs feed our actions – our philosophical truths become our moral law.

Because it matters what we believe... we cannot give up on truth.

Indeed, in a world full of both spin and unquestioned absolutes, a rigorous pursuit of truth becomes a radical and urgently necessary act.

Never has it mattered *more* for us to engage in that free and responsible search, in which we ruthlessly and humbly examine our assumptions, perceptions, and beliefs.

I used to think of the search for truth and meaning as a pristine if challenging journey along a winding path, but these days I think of it more like sorting through a giant landfill piece by piece, seeking pieces of integrity, accountability, and practicality amid tons and tons of rubbish. I think of it as an ongoing question, asked to another – will this do? Can we use this piece? Does it work?

How do we do this in a changing world, where truth emerges and recedes, shifts, and becomes something new? Can we find a truth that lives and moves and evolves between the absolute and the dissolute? A truth that is not capital T, nor truthy, but trustworthy even as it continues to unfold? A truth steeped not in absolutism nor relativism, but relationalism?

Between – “this is the only way” – and “any old way will do” – there is a moment of encounter – encounter with another and encounter with the mystery that is truer than any truth. Perhaps the question then emerges in humility: Can we walk this way together?

This is a propositional truth – a truth that is always followed with a question mark, but one that can be walked, lived, enacted. Perhaps it is even a scientific truth, not in the sense of unquestionable fact, but in the sense of a hypothesis we can live. Perhaps it is a theological truth, a way of moving into the deepest questions that guide and shape our lives.

The theologian Catherine Keller describes this kind of truth as such:

If this trusty truth cannot be boiled down to any cognition or confession, it nonetheless offers a *way* of knowing. Like the lampooned truthiness, it makes a reference to feeling: but it uses the heart not to authorize fake certainties but to deepen understanding. It requires holistic thinking that draws deeply on our intuitions, our passions, our bodily experiences, and our relations – even as it tests them, tries them, keeps them in process.²

She continues: “A theology that would unfold “in truth” does not confuse itself with “the truth.” Thinking its way through the anathema of premodern absolutes and the nothing-but of modern secularism, it practices what we may call a critical fidelity.”³

Critical fidelity. Faithfulness to the rigorous pursuit; faithfulness to the community with whom we search and the world community to whom we are accountable and connected; faithfulness to truth that unfolds and emerges. Faithfulness that tests and tries and stays in motion in a search that we know will never reach its final destination.

Truth evolves. Truth unfolds. It is not absolute. It is not relative. It is emerging. It is relational. It is before us and between us, seen and unseen.

We pursue truth with rigor when we stay with the questions and the complexity of a world that is not one but many, of experience that is multiple, varied, and beautiful. We are faithful to the search for truth when we refuse to fall into the trap of black or white, white and gold, blue and black, but when we keep before us the whole spectrum of light, the whole tapestry of life. And we are close to knowing what is reeeeeeeal, when we glimpse the mystery at the heart of all, hard to see, smell, feel, touch, taste, but truer than any truth, and ever more profound.

² Keller, Catherine. *On the Mystery: Discerning Divinity in Process*. Fortress Press, 2008.

³ *Ibid.*