

## May the Quest for Truth Be Our Sacrament

a sermon by

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What I want to talk about with you today is the notion stated in our Humboldt UU Aspiration that “The Quest for Truth” is our sacrament.

In the Christian religion, a sacrament is religious act that is considered to be particularly important – like baptism, or taking of the Eucharist, or marriage.

In general there are three categories for religious acts or rituals:

Rites of passage – like Child Naming, Coming of Age, Marriage or Burial

Rites of worship – like communion, or group chanting, or unison prayer

Rites of personal devotion – like individual prayer, or fasting, meditation or Pilgrimage

A sacrament is a particularly important or serious religious act. So when we Humboldt Unitarian Universalists – along with many other Unitarian Universalists across the country – say that the Quest for Truth is our Sacrament, we affirm that the process of questioning and answering for ourselves as individuals – and for ourselves as groups – is tremendously important!!!

We declare that we aspire to have love be our spirit – and the way we will make that happen is by seriously asking what love and truth require of us.

In our Humboldt UU Covenant (also on the back of the Order of Service) we say it again in different words. We say: *We as a Fellowship, affirm our covenant to explore and embrace openly the fundamental mysteries of existence.*

The measure of success for our exploration is, of course, “love” but it is also “truth” as best we can determine it amidst the interconnected questions that underlie the surface of things. In other words for us - “truth” is not just “what is so” but also “so what?”

For example – recent geological surveys estimate that there are 90 billion barrels of oil in the Arctic circle. That may be so. But there are a lot of “so what?” questions that go with that fact. For example – Does that fact mean that we should immediately start drilling? Or might the oil be a bit difficult to extract and might there be some environmental concerns that invite us to be very cautious in the presence of all that oil?

As the French poet Antoine de St. Exuprey says: *We live not just by things – but also by the meaning of things.*

For us Unitarian Universalists the “quest for truth” is our sacrament. But we understand that “truth” is multidimensional, interconnected, multilayered and holy beyond any easy answers.

Still, even though it may be difficult, stating that the quest for truth is our sacrament implies that we trust ourselves and the fire of insight, discernment, life and passion within each of us. It implies that we believe we have or can learn the skills needed to respond to the questions we pose.

Trusting that fire and ability within is no small thing. In a life-long, ongoing way - developing the ability to question and answer well is no small thing. But we come from a long line of human beings who have so trusted and so developed themselves.

In ancient Greece, the term *paideia* referred to the process of growing and developing people. The English word “pedagogy” has its roots in “paideia” and for the Greeks paideia or growing human beings, was not unlike nurturing little plants in a nursery. Paideia incorporated both practical schooling and a focus on social and moral training.

For the Greeks the practical aspects of growing human beings included subjects like rhetoric, grammar, arithmetic and science. Physical training in gymnastics and other athletic endeavors was considered important too.

But in the process of paideia, the Greeks understood a person was more than body and intellect. A person was also spirit so spiritual and moral education was involved. It included ethics, music, poetry, drama, philosophy and religion. This approach to growing strong, centered human beings who could question and answer well was common to the Greek-speaking world.

If the “quest for truth” was their sacrament – and in many places in Greece it was – they wanted to be sure they trained themselves to be very good “questers.” They did not assume it was going to happen by accident.

After the fall of Greek civilization and then the fall of the Roman Empire, for many years in Western Europe during the Dark Ages – “Questers” were not trained much. If people had questions and sought answers, they kept pretty quiet about it. There were not a lot of people who could read and write. Obedience and subservience were high on the list of survival skills.

And, truth be told, the Greeks in the first place and the Romans who followed them kept pretty reign on who could experience paideia and who could not. Paideia was meant for aristocratic males and citizens – not women or non citizens or non aristocrats.

But then starting in the late 13<sup>th</sup> and early 14<sup>th</sup> century – with the emergence of manufacturers and merchants - money and power began to redistribute itself a bit. Freed from grinding poverty, these people began to free themselves from old subservience. They began to think of themselves as real people.

There was a “re-birth” (a Renaissance) of interest in paideia – of interest in developing the full potential of human beings.

Luca Pacioli, Leonardo da Vinci’s teacher, benefited from this. Born in 1445 in Tuscany, he was trained to be a bookkeeper for merchants. He actually did a lot to lay the groundwork for modern accounting – But as he labored away - he found his heart was ablaze with a love for theoretical mathematics. So he moved to Milan became a tutor, studied mathematics and wrote a primer on arithmetic for school children.

He did not teach in Latin, as was the custom of the day. Instead he taught in the language of the children he was working with. He began to offer “paideia” to people who had never experienced it. So he was instructed to stop teaching. And he did for a while. He joined the Franciscans and worshipped God by studying mathematics. The “quest for elegant solutions” was his sacrament. He wrote a number of books as has been previously mentioned and ended up tutoring Leonardo da Vinci.

To put it another way – Luca Pacioli shared with da Vinci the process of “paideia” – or the process of growing and developing full humanity.

When we UUS say – “the Quest for Truth is Our Sacrament” – I believe this process of “paideia” – this process of “growing and developing our full humanity so we can ask and answer questions well” is what we mean. And I believe the “truth” we seek is a holistic, multi-dimensional, relational “truth” – closely related to harmony with the “fundamental mysteries of existence.”

Certainly, scientific accuracy is important to us. Don't even dare to get a Unitarian Universalist started on a rant about ways of thinking that deny evolution or climate change.

Scientific accuracy, mathematical accuracy – and accounting accuracy too (by the way) are extremely important to us. But once we find “what is so,” we also know “Truth is complicated. And we have to ask not just what is so – but what it means!”

Some people take scientific fact and create a flat, dry, lifeless, spiritless, mechanical world. Other people take the dynamics of a rhombicuboctahedron and paint the Mona Lisa.

The poet Alfred Noyes puts it this way:

*Knowledge, some say, drives wonder from the world. They will say it still, though all the dust is ablaze with marvels at their feet. They will say it still though Physics' laws foretell that knowledge someday will be song!*

*We are like children wandering by the shore gathering pebbles colored by the waves while the great Sea of Truth (from sky to sky) stretches yet before us – boundless – waiting to be explored.*

So what do we Humboldt UUs do to prepare ourselves for the exploration and quest?

Well one thing we do is call ourselves to mindfulness. We invite ourselves to understand that “class is happening all the time.”

James Bosco, professor emeritus of education at Western Michigan University says: We learn every moment of our lives. When we work to improve our craft, when we trade recipes, when we learn to employ new skills as we mature or to survive without old skills as we age – we learn.

“Why is it important that we understand we are always learning?” – he asks.

And he responds that it is important because life is always changing. Every moment is new. In years gone by, perhaps we could ignore that truth, but, as you may have noticed – we can't now. Not only is technology changing faster than most of us can keep up with....human impact on the planet is changing the very web of life around us. How to survive in sustainable, life-giving, just and loving ways demands our full attention and responsiveness.

James Bosco says there is, of course, an essential scientific and behavioral dimension to our response to the challenges that face us – but there is an undeniable spiritual dimension to our puzzle too.

*We human beings are, of course, animals with intellect. But we are also spiritual beings. He says: To be human is to partake broadly and deeply of the richness of human culture. And we now graduate from our schools people who know how to read, but never read a book. People who have passed history tests but have no interest in the history that is unfolding around them every day. People who have taken music appreciation courses but will never attend a symphony.*

*It's not that I want my adult children to have the exact tastes and preferences that I have - he says. But I do want them to have their own continuing life-long passion for exploring life in mindful compassionate ways. I want them, in their own way, to have deeply happy hearts – and to have a passion for intellectual and cultural growth.*

He says further: *I not only want this for my own children – I want this for all people on the planet.*

James Bosco is a professor emeritus of education – so he is not only concerned about articulating what he believes our human goals should be – but also about how we are going to move toward achievement of those goals.

In broad terms he says there are three areas upon which we need to focus:

First – we must transform our pedagogy so that we nurture the innate human desire to learn and grow. We must honor the fire, and the heart within us that loves life and learning. Learning may not always be easy – but it should always be profoundly life-giving for us – body, mind and spirit.

Second – we must surely equip people with skills to enable them to be self-directed, life long learners. This level of learning, of course, will require a great deal of practice and effort to learn skills. But at its core this level is about learning how to learn.

And Third – we must make sure that people have access to the tools and the instruction necessary for them to grow. In ancient Greece Paideia or support in growing to be a fully empowered human being was limited to a very few. It is still far too limited today. Our educational model, like our economy, is based on winner take all competition. For us to survive on the planet – we'd better transform that model to one that emphasizes human worth and dignity and collaboration.

The “quest for truth” sisters and brothers includes knowledge but it is about much more than knowledge.

It is about wisdom and depth and size of spirit. It is about learning to stand in the presence of the Mystery of Life in humility and harmony, gratitude and awe. And it is about learning what the deepest questions are – and how to respond in ever deeper measure.

We UUs say: the quest for truth is our sacrament.

Albert Einstein says: *The world is a dangerous place to live; not because of the evil it contains, but because of people who haven't learned how to do anything about it.*

**Closing Hymn** - There's a River Flowing in My Soul – 1007

**Extinguishing the Chalice – Closing Words  
And Closing Song –**

**Closing Words** - From Antoine de St. Exuprey

In a house which becomes a home, one hands down and another takes up the heritage of mind and heart, laughter and tears, musings and deeds. Love, like a carefully loaded ship crosses the gulf between generations. If we fail in this voyage, our children will lose all of us that is wordless and full of wonder.

We live not by things – but by the meaning of things. And it is needful for us to know this – and to transmit this knowledge from generation to generation.

And...as we do...may we go in peace.

**Song:** Go from here in peace – Go with love