

# The Muddy Season Truth

A collaboration of First Universalist Church of Rochester,  
Unitarian Universalist Church of Canandaigua, and First Unitarian Church of Rochester.

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*Photo Credit: Suzy & John Farrell*

**How does seeing truth as a messy and recursive process, rather than an unchanging object, expand your deep personal understanding of truth?**

Dear Ones,

Exploring “Truth” in the season of mud seems particularly apt for Unitarian Universalists, because we know that truth is not often simple or clear. It can be a tricky topic. We are religious pluralists, affirming that there are many paths to the truth, and perhaps even multiple truths at the heart of things. But also, we are not merely relativists – we do make moral claims for truths that transcend time, place, culture, and theological ideas.

Navigating this tension isn’t straightforward. Our faith doesn’t hand us easy answers. It rigorously asks us to find the balance between a humble and agnostic openness to the diversity of truth and truths, and a resilient and grounded defense of what is “True with a capital T.”

Part of what makes this possible is understanding different contexts and different *kinds* of truth. There are verifiable scientific truths that help us describe empirical reality – we can say it is false that the earth is flat, and true that homo sapiens evolved from earlier primates. But the scientific process can only comment on observable phenomenon and make predictions – it cannot provide us a moral compass. It can tell us what *is*, but not what *ought* to be.



*Image by Gerd Altmann from Pixabay*

To ethically live in a world of difference, we also have to be able to distinguish-personal truths (the things that are important north stars for us but cause no concern if our neighbor has a different one) and those which are about shared reality (the basis on which we work with others to build a common society).

And of course, to explore this theme of Truth during the muddy season of 2026 is to reflect on a value that our own government is increasingly hostile to. Whether by-promotion of lies and propaganda, or through ~~its~~ denial of basic truths like human dignity and compassion, Truth is the enemy of any authoritarian regime. How do we keep ourselves grounded in the values we know to be true, educated on what is factually going on in the world, and still connected to others across difference, when much of our society is primed for polarization, radicalization, misinformation, and deceit?

The truth is, it’s all very muddy. To be able to share our own truths with one another and discern shared truth from which to build friendships, a community, a society, we must do the hard, self-reflective work of spiritual deepening and exploration. The good news is, we are not alone!

In faith,

Rev. AJ

First Unitarian Church of Rochester

**Gratitude:** Many thanks to the Muddy Season’s packet team leads, Suzy Farrell and Amy Stockwell, the three church worship team brainstorm, editor Mary Hammele, and numerous contributions from the packet team, as well as from Lynn Kinsman.

## READINGS FOR CHALICE LIGHTING

### ***We Light our Flaming Chalice***

by Elizabeth M McMaster

We light our flaming chalice  
To illuminate the world we seek.  
In the search for truth, may we be just;  
In the search for justice, may we be loving;  
And, in loving, may we find peace.

### ***Open to Unexpected Answers***

by Julianne Lepp

We seek our place in the world  
and the answers to our hearts' deep questions.  
As we seek, may our hearts be open to unexpected answers.  
May the light of our chalice remind us that this is a community of warmth,  
of wisdom,  
and welcoming of multiple truths.



*Willy Wo, Unsplash Free Use*

## READINGS FOR CHALICE EXTINGUISHING

### ***Only One Thing Required of Us***

by Rev. Kendyl L. R. Gibbons

There is, finally, only one thing required of us: that is, to take life whole, the sunlight and shadows together; to live the life that is given to us with courage and humor and truth.

We have such a little moment of the vastness of time for all our wondering and loving. Therefore let there be no half-heartedness; rather, let the soul be ardent in its pain, in its yearning, in its praise.

Then shall peace enfold our days, and glory shall not fade from our lives.

### ***Here and Beyond These Walls***

by Craig Rowland

As we extinguish this chalice flame, may the warmth of its light remain within us, guiding our steps and our hearts.

Let us carry forward the strength of this community, the courage to speak truth, and the hope that transformation is possible.

In each breath we take, may we remember that the work of love, justice, and healing is ours to continue – both here and beyond these walls.

Go in peace, with the light of this gathering to illuminate your way.

**THREADS FOR THIS SEASON:** “What is truth?” is a question humans have been working on as long as we have been human! Given the vastness of the topic and the impossibility of covering even a tiny fraction of its practical and spiritual implications, we instead pose some “threads,” suggesting just *some* of the ways to deepen understanding of this complex subject.

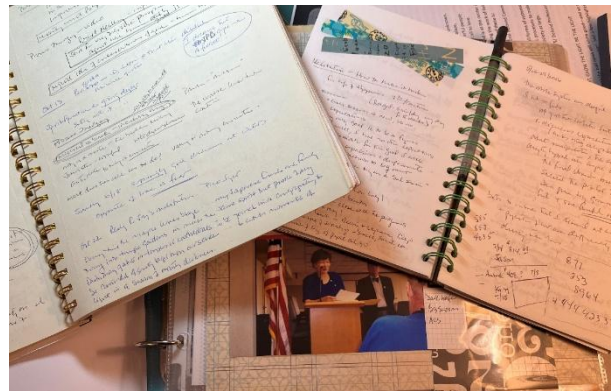
- What is my personal internal truth and how does this change over time and with changing circumstances?
- What is scientific “objective” truth and how does it change?
- What is the truth accepted by groups of people/societies and how can this be an instrument of social control?
- What are ultimate, or moral, truths found in ancient wisdoms, myths, and stories?

## **SPIRITUAL EXERCISES**

*These exercises are designed for both individual reflection and group participation.*

**A. Telephone game.** With your group (in person or on zoom), form a line, or determine an order. The first person decides on a simple story: two people, an action between them, a result. Person One whispers this story to Person Two; Person Two listens to the story and retells it in their own words to Person Three, etc. When the end of the line is reached, or all have participated, the last person tells the story out loud, and the first person recounts the starting story. Discuss how stories and truths are changed with transmission. If online, the first person types a private message in the chat to the second person. The second person recounts the story in their own words, typing their version in a private chat to the third person, etc. Try not to simply copy and paste.

**B. What Once Was True ...** If you have old journals, letters, emails, or social-media posts, pick one at random. Read what you wrote then as true for you. Reflect on how your understanding has stayed the same or changed. What was true for you then? What is true now? If they are different, how does this help you reflect on the process of discerning the truth? Do this exercise again on several more days. Does this shape your understanding of truth development in any way?



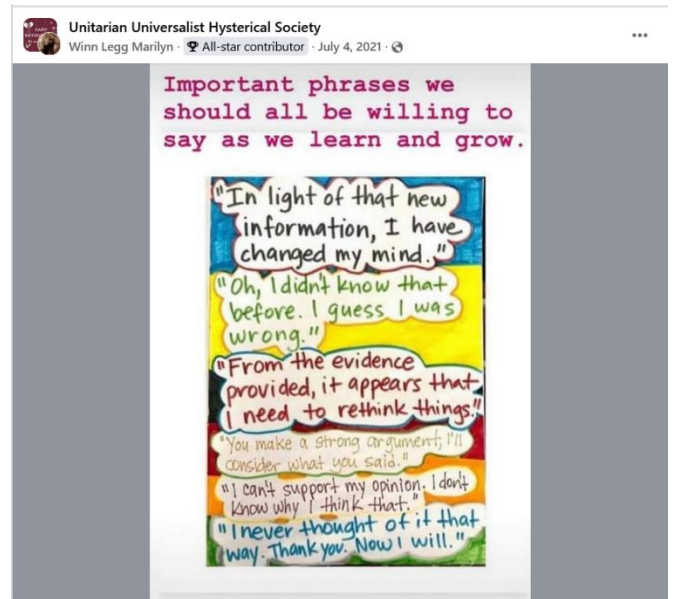
*Photo by Amy Stockwell*

**C.** We all remember hearing of “tall tales”. Perhaps you even told a few! It is the idea of elaborating on the truth to separate it from reality and to make a story seem more outrageous than it actually was. How do your feelings about this process shape your understanding of evaluating truth when you don’t have direct experience, such as understanding public officials or people in the media? Write down some reflections on the process of truth telling and the nature of truth in messy human interactions.

## REFLECTION QUESTIONS

*These questions aren't "homework" that need to be covered entirely. Instead, simply pick the one question that speaks to you most and let it lead you where you need to go. The questions often lead not to answers, but more questions.*

1. Where is your inner truth teller embodied? How can you strengthen this voice?
2. How do you know that your own truth/ inner voice is not driven by fear, ego, anxiety, or external social pressure?
3. When you are asked to do something that crosses your internal moral truth, how do you respond? How do you feel after this response?
4. How can "white lies" strengthen and weaken relationships? What are the short- and long-term costs to white lies?
5. The history of scientific discoveries reveals a messy process before a hypothesis is broadly accepted, followed by new information, and gradual formation of new paradigms. What are the parallels between the process of scientific truth and personal spiritual discernment?
6. Does your understanding of truth include the reality of feelings as part of that truth? How does including feelings in your understanding of truth provide growth and greater understanding?
7. In the US judicial system, witnesses swear to "tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth." How is this standard related to personal spiritual truth? What tests applied in a courtroom illuminate the personal process of truth?
8. How do propaganda and social pressure distort truth?
9. How will/is AI distorting our understanding of truth? How can we discern the truth when at variance with AI? How do you judge whether something (media) is reliably true?
10. How might you find power in not knowing rather than experiencing not knowing with fear and anxiety?



## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES/FURTHER ENGAGEMENT

Here are a few curated opportunities for further deep engagement. This is such an enormous topic that we hope that the exercises and questions will inspire you to do further exploration on your own.

**Books** Titles link to the Monroe County Library System (MLS). A separate link to the Ontario Wayne Wyoming Livingston (OWWL) Library system is included when available.

[\*The Structure of Scientific Revolutions\*](#), Thomas S. Kuhn, 1996. A landmark study into the history of science. [OWWL link](#).

[\*Lies my Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong\*](#), James Loewen, 2007. Criticizes the way history is presented in current textbooks and suggests a fresh and more accurate approach to teaching American history. Also available in young reader/graphic formats. [OWWL link](#).

[\*Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes\*](#), Jacques Ellul, 1965. (trans from French) Not available through the OWWL Library System. This seminal study and critique of propaganda from one of the greatest French philosophers of the 20th century is as relevant today as when it was first published. Taking not only a psychological approach, but a sociological approach as well, Ellul's book outlines the taxonomy for propaganda, and ultimately, it's destructive nature towards democracy.

[\*Proof: The Art and Science of Certainty\*](#), Adam Kucharski, 2025. Not available through the OWWL Library System. An award-winning mathematician shows how we prove what's true, and what to do when we can't.



### Children's Stories and Fables

***Blind Men and the Elephant*** - This old Indian parable shows how 6 blind men hold their own truths based on their individual perspectives. They were all correct yet needed to put their collective thoughts together in order to get to the larger truth.

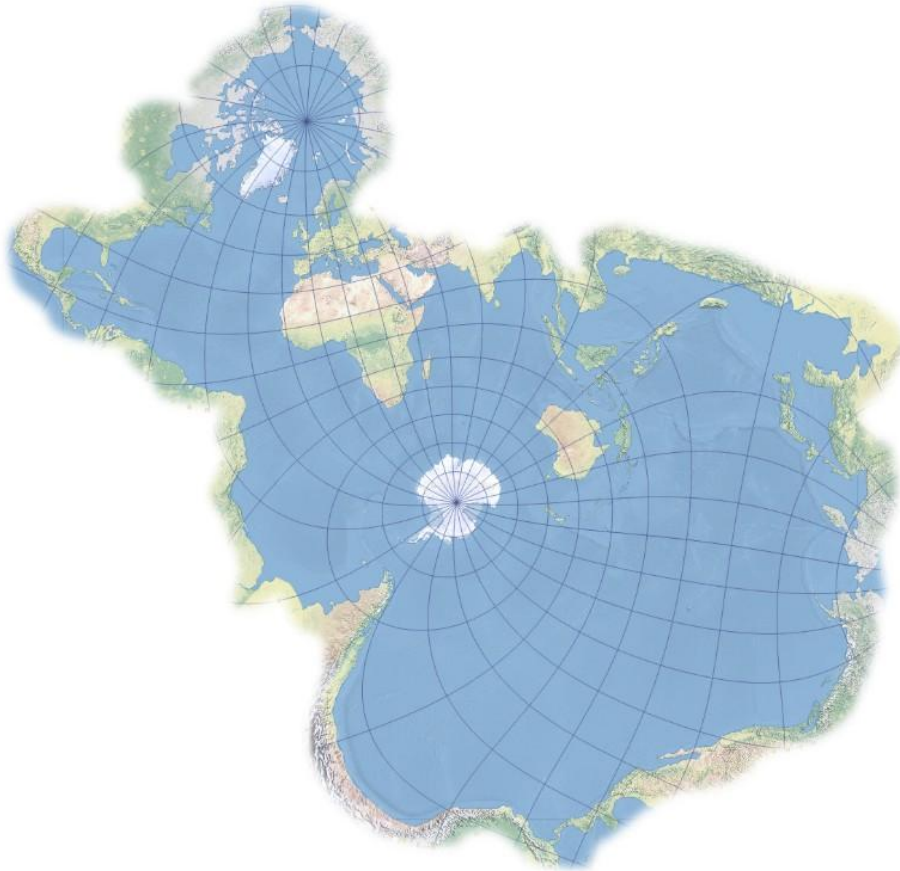
***Emperor's New Clothes*** - A classic fairy tale by Hans Christian Anderson in which a king is tricked into believing his tailors about his new clothes. It takes 1 innocent child to speak the truth leading all who suspected the same to voice their opinions.

***Wizard of Oz*** - This story was written in 1900 by Frank Baum and, among other morals, shows how your own truth, strength, and courage can be found deep inside you.

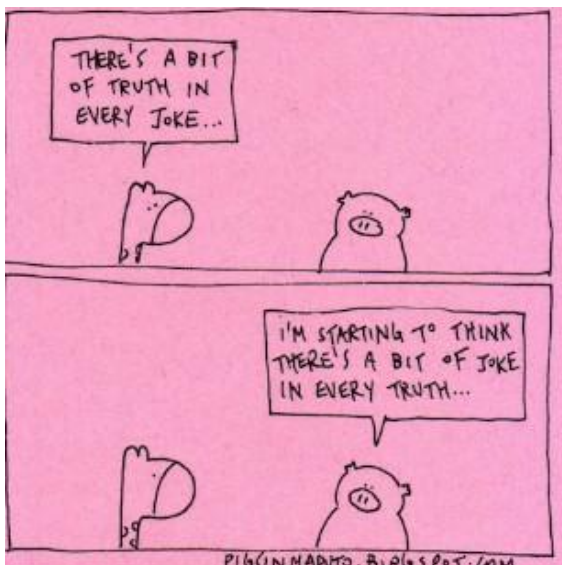
***Harold and the Purple Crayon*** - Author Crockett Johnson wrote this in 1955 and inspires young and old to use their creativity & imagination to grow & learn – and that personal truth may be very different than “objective reality.”



# HUMOR



[The Spilhaus Projection: The World According to Fish](#)



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"It's 'the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.' It's not a multiple choice question."