

“Questioning Integrity”

Rev. Danielle Webber

Kelowna Unitarians

12 January 2020

Centering Words

Radical Honesty By andrienne maree brown

We begin learning to lie in intimate relationships at a very early age. Lie about the food your mother made, [lie] to avoid punishment, [lie] as you swallow your tears, [lie] about loving this Valentine’s Day gift, [lie] about the love you want and how you feel. Most of this is taught as hetero-patriarchy 101: men love one way, women another, and we have to lie to impress and catch each other. Women are still taught too often to be submissive, diminutive, obedient, and later, nagging and caregiving—not peers, not emotionally complex powerhouses, not loving other women and trans bodies. These mistruths in gender norms are self-perpetuating, affirmed by magazines and movies, girded up at family dinner tables.

We also learn that love is a limited resource and the love we want and need is too much, that we are too much. We learn to shrink, to lie about the whole love we need, settling with not-quite-good-enough in order to not be alone.

We have to engage in an intentional practice of honesty to counter this socialization. We need radical honesty—learning to speak from our root systems about how we feel and what we want. Speak our needs and listen to others’ needs. To say—I need to hear that you miss me. [OR:] When you’re high all the time it’s hard for me to feel your presence. [Learn to Say] I lied. The way you talked to that man made me feel unseen. Your jealousy makes me feel like an object and not a partner. The result of this kind of speech is that our lives begin to align with our longings, and our lives become a building block for authentic community and, ultimately, a society that is built around true need, and real people; not fake news and bullshit norms.

Reflection

Rev. Danielle Webber

So I am sure that some of you are wondering how Adrienne Maree Brown’s words relate to our topic of questioning integrity this morning, and whether or not this is where we need to go, when we talk about realigning our understandings of the concept “nobody’s perfect.” But if I were to be radically honest – I would say that I am not certain I can make it all fit together either, wrapped in a succinct 2000 words, and have a beautiful conclusion to end with. But let’s jump into the mess and see if we can come out of it together.

As I have read through the material of Integrity, trying to understand what I think about it, and what other people have had to say in regards to it, I find myself feeling caught between two spheres of thought:

One in which integrity is the person who has integrity is whole, and complete, they are undivided – like Integer numbers, not fractions or decimal points, but whole numbers. There is a sense of consistency, a sense of never leaving parts of ourselves behind.

The other is one in which the person is honest, a sense of speaking truth about how we think and what we feel. There is a sense of authenticity, and morals, and principles that feels somewhat static, and shiny – like my grandmother’s silver.

Both of these spheres don’t seem to take into account the flexibility and adaptability that I seek when searching for integrity. For me, integrity needs to meet me where I am at, with my own sense of human-ness, with my own growth, and shrinking, my own openness and closing off of truths. For me, integrity needs to take into account truths from the greater world, and it also needs to dis-regard truths that the world has pushed onto me, like the monkey on my back that I cannot get rid of.

I loved the image of integrity brought forth in our story, the empty pot this morning. I could definitely see my 8 year old self taking back an empty pot to the Emperor. But I can also imagine myself not wanting to go back at all. Feeling a sense of shame, and guilt for not being able to live up to the expectations that were set upon me. Of course I would likely not be able to articulate it. But that is what guilt and shame are, right? Not being able to live up to expectations. Living up to the expectations that the world puts on us, the expectation that society, patriarchy, heteronormativity, puts on us. Much like brown said in her reflection. And even though I have been able to break the mold in so many of the stereotypes placed down upon me: being the bread winner and focusing on work instead of having a family; going into ministry at a young age, instead of having a regular career first; I am not diminutive, or obedient, both statements my parents would agree with. There are areas of my life where I want to fit into the mold, areas where I hate that I am different or unable to slide easily into norm. I want to have better skin, I want to be thin, I want to lose my excess weight, and find time to go to the gym, and stop eating crap food, and I could so easily fall into the never ending cycle of yo-yo diets, and exercise regimes followed up by bought of gluttony, and self-indulgence.

And Yet, somehow ignoring those truths, disregarding that piece of my whole being, and allowing myself to find harmony with the fact that I have bad skin, and I am not going to use outrageous chemicals to treat it, or that yo-yo dieting is really not sustainable or the healthiest for me in the long term, feels more integral then allowing myself that wholeness. Ignoring some truths, and allowing myself to challenge others, brings me to this sense of integrity. Finding my balance, and knowing how much I can manage and what I need to let go allows me to find integrity. Floating somewhere in between these two spheres, one of wholeness and the other of truth, and completely disregarding static formula of both, allows me to find my integrity.

One of our famous Unitarian writers – Henry David Thoreau – speaks to this idea of integrity in his book *Walden: Life in the Woods*. We quote him in the back of our grey hymnal – a responsive reading, here is what he says:

I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear; nor did I wish to practice resignation, unless it was quite necessary. I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life to cut a broad swath and shave close, to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms, and if it proved to be

mean, why then to get the whole and genuine meanness of it, and publish its meanness to the world; or if it were sublime, to know it by experience, and be able to give a true account of it in my next excursion.

Thoreau spent over 2 years living, predominantly self-sustained, in his little cottage, with his large garden in upper-state Massachusetts. He went there in order to live deliberately. This time has been called by many, and even by Thoreau as a time of Social Experiment, an attempt at spiritual discovery, and a personal declaration of independence. Filled with allegory and contemplation of a better life, Thoreau criticizes what he sees as a desperate existence, one that he sees most of his contemporaries living. Not only does he criticize society, and its culture of consumerism, materialism and the destruction of nature; But he attempts to and writes about a life that engages the opposites of these cultural norms: by building his own house, and producing most of his food. And having very little materials to satisfy his wandering mind, but being content with writing and reading materials. The story of Walden is that of a man's life when he attempts to live the values that he holds highest. He states that in order to live deliberately he must have self-reliance, and be able to manage on his own. Although as I read through this book I recognize many instances when he is clearly not self-reliant, and indeed is in great need of his family and friends. Thoreau required the support of wealthy benefactor in Ralph Waldo Emerson, his mother would bring him sandwiches and take home his laundry. Although that excerpt makes it seem as though Thoreau was isolated and held off from the rest of society by the words that are written down, in reality he was a 20 minute walk from his family's house, in Concord Mass. He refused to admit, in writing anyway, how necessary it was for connection, and how self-reliance doesn't always work out that way.

One of Thoreau's contemporaries was Theodore Parker, the author of the words from our first hymn Be Ours a Religion also had some interesting tangles with integrity. Theodore Parker is famously known throughout Unitarian Universalist communities for being the Father of Transcendentalism – a philosophy that merged intellectualism and spirituality, he was one of the first Unitarian Ministers to deny that the Bible had any miraculous authority and he declared it to be full of myths. He was also known to be an abolitionist, it was said about him that he would help escaped slaves, by allowing them to stay in his home, he was said to have written his sermons with a loaded pistol on his writing desk, in order to keep safe his charges. And yet, even though he went to such great lengths, there is plenty of evidence, both in his writing, and in the many actions he took while alive, that Parker was a white-supremist, and believed that racial science supported his understanding of the superiority of the Caucasian race.

Although I recognize that these are two drastically different ways to be incongruent with one's life, or perhaps out of integrity with oneself, it does help us to go back to this idea that integrity is not a static concept, that integrity is an every shifting and changing concept that cannot be pinned down to one time or space. If we can hold these two men up as beacons to the history of our faith tradition, if we can believe that both Thoreau and Parker were monumental for our faith, and recognize that they fell short of their ideals, that they fall short of our own ideals, can we still believe that they have integrity?

Similarly for me, I know that when I was in an abusive relationships I was ready to go to bat for my husband. I was willing to cut off ties with people who said he was hurting me, that I had

changed because of him. In fact I did cut ties with many people – my family included. I disregarded what they had to say, because somehow I believed that to maintain my integrity, I would see his worth and dignity, and we would work through our challenges. That his worth and dignity, that first principle which Unitarian Universalists espouse to, was just as important as mine, and we would be able to find wholeness if we could overcome the lesser parts of our nature. It was part of my own understanding of myself, of who I wanted to be, of how I wanted the world to see me, that kept me in that relationship. I recognized that his behaviour was wrong, and I believed that I should stay any ways. I wasn't willing to see that I could still witness his worth and dignity, and leave him. I wasn't willing to shift my understanding of having integrity, and so I stayed, allowing my sense of self to diminish instead. Again, not as drastic as white-supremacist points of view. Or even an unwillingness to see the support of females in one's life as a crucial reliance to their existence. But nonetheless still out of sync with my own integrity. Or a shift in how I viewed my integrity. Never a static ideal, but something ever evolving and shifting with our own knowledge, and sense of self.

Questioning integrity. What does it look like, are we able to narrow it down to one simple definition, probably not. Are we able to narrow it down for our own personal definition? For a moment in time, but not necessarily for our whole life. As we move through this theme of integrity I encourage you to sit with these questions, and ponder – what does it mean to be a person of integrity?