

**“This Is the Truth?”**  
**A sermon by Rev. Charles Blustein Ortman**  
**March 21, 2010**  
**At the Unitarian Church of Davenport, Iowa**  
**For the Installation of Rev. Alan Egly as Minister Emeritus**

**READINGS:**

Our first reading is a long time favorite of our honored guest today, Alan Egly. It is from the 25<sup>th</sup> Chapter of the Book of Matthew:

For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and in prison and you looked after me.'

They will answer, “When did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and helped you?”

He replied, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these, you did for me.'

Our second reading is by A. Powell Davies entitled, *Why I come to Church*. Davies was a Unitarian minister who died in 1957. He served for a while at a congregation near to me in Summit, NJ. He went on to gain national renown from his pulpit at All Souls Unitarian Church in Washington, D.C. For decades he provided a powerful liberal religious voice by combining a passion for civil rights with a deep concern for both spiritual and worldly issues. He wrote:

Let me tell you why I come to church. I come to church—and would whether I was a preacher or not—because I fall below my own standards and need to be constantly brought back to them. I am afraid of becoming selfish and indulgent, and my church—my church of the free spirit—brings me back to what I want to be. I could easily despair; doubt and dismay could overwhelm me. My church renews my courage and my hope. It is not enough that I should think about the world and its problems at the level of a newspaper report or a magazine discussion. It could too soon become too low a level. I must have my conscience sharpened—sharpened until it goads me to the most thorough and responsible thinking of which I am capable. *I must feel again the love I owe to others*. I must not only hear about it but feel it. In church, I do. I am brought toward my best, in every way toward my best.

**SERMON: “This Is the Truth?”**

**Part I: Introduction...**

I bring you all greetings, congratulations and best wishes from the members, friends and the ministers of the Unitarian Universalist Congregation at Montclair. I wish you could all know my folks back in New Jersey; they are an absolutely wonderful and dedicated group of people. In many ways they remind me of you.

I want to say how pleased I am to be here among friends, colleagues, acquaintances, and you other poor people – whom I have never met, and who have no idea what you are about to be in

for from this guy who used to be a member of QCU a long time ago. A word to this latter group – if any of the old-timers here have said *anything* to you about me, I would just like a chance up-front to deny most if not all of what you may have heard.

Quite seriously, I am thrilled and honored to be a part of these proceedings, recognizing Alan Egly as Minister Emeritus of this Unitarian Universalist Congregation. It is so totally wonderful to be here with him and with you all.

Despite Alan's many pleas and admonitions, I'm going to take just a moment to say thank you to him for the generous gift of ministry that he has given to me both personally and professionally, and that he has given to the rest of us who are gathered here. Some of you may know that Alan played an enormous role in my own ministerial development. In truth – he gave me ministry – by showing it to me, by teaching it to me, by inviting me into it, and by sharing it with me.

*My years under his exemplary supervision were overflowing with wisdom, reflection, generosity, grace and his uncanny ability – whenever necessary, which was often enough in those years – the ability to express the painful truth that I needed to hear, in loving and disarming ways.*

I know that these same gifts formed the foundation of his parish ministry here. To those of you who are here from the wider community, I trust that you have also experienced Alan's ministerial presence as well, through his work with the Doris and Victor Day Foundation, or the QCAD or the many other ways in which Alan has served this Quad Cities area.

As we install Alan Egly as Minister Emeritus, we recognize the many gifts that he shared with *all* of us. What has made Alan's ministry such a blessing and such a success, is that his ministry has been about far more than Alan Egly, far more than any or all of us, as well. It has been about serving high ideals and compelling principles – not only through what he has said to us, but in the ways he has shown us those principles and ideals, as he has *lived* them throughout his career.

These are ideals and principles that I suspect we might all aspire to. They include tolerance, freedom of conscience and the use of reason. They include a burning inclination towards truth, beauty, justice and compassion. Above all, I think, they include a vision of the larger whole, and an unrelenting dedication and service to the largest common good.

So we come here today to honor Alan Egly, but also to honor the larger legacy that was first left to him by those who came and went before him, and now through him to us. In truth, I hope it is much more than Alan we come here to honor. I hope it is that larger legacy of ideals and principles.

And so maybe there is an even deeper reason for our presence here – that we have come to honor life itself. We can't give that legacy its due in one brief morning. It takes a lifetime to pay adequate tribute to the ideals and principles upon which we build our religious communities; upon which we build our lives.

Today is one fine and glorious day! It's a time for celebration, expressions of gratitude and joy. What we do tomorrow though, and with all the days that follow, that will tell the tale of our appreciation for this legacy of ministry, this gift of life, that has been given to us.

## **Part II: The Story...**

A little while ago, as we began our gathering, we lit the chalice — symbol of our Unitarian Universalist tradition. So here we are, the assembled tribe, gathered together around our community fire. People have gathered for religious rites in this same way from the beginnings of human experience. As long as there have been people, we have gathered like this, around the fire, to share our human stories.

And out of those stories, throughout time, people would find and make meaning. That meaning might give them hope, strengthen their faith, help them bear the pain of loss. It might hold them in their joy, and guide them through difficult times and, as A. Powell Davies suggested, it might challenge them to more intentional living.

I promised by my title that I would say something today about the nature of truth. And so I want to tell you a story from our own Unitarian tradition that maybe some of you are familiar with. It's a story I hope, that might have significance for each of us personally, but one I also hope might have significance for this congregation — where Alan Egly once served as minister and where you now search yet again to find a new minister whose ministry might also be filled with wisdom, reflection, generosity, grace and an unflappable ability to speak painful truths in loving and disarming ways.

This story, one of my favorites, is set in Transylvania in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century. It illustrates an integral characteristic of our ongoing Unitarian character from that day to this. It's a story that gives us a rich metaphor, both personally and institutionally, for working out our issues, while providing some perspective on the struggles of living within the covenantal life of a church community.

The story actually begins in Poland, where there was an enclave of Socinians based in the city of Racow. These folks were followers of Faustus Socinius, and they were unitarian in theology, though not in name. They believed that God was one, not three, not father, son or spirit — just one. God was the creator; Jesus was a teacher, not a god; and the spirit was the spirit of love. This was radical for its day, and a lot of people died for believing things far less radical.

The Socinians grew in power and influence throughout the religious and social circles of Poland. But then they fell into disfavor when an heir to the crown, who was loyal to the Roman Church, came to power. The Socinian community was literally decimated. Men were executed; women and children were sent into exile.

There was at the time a gifted Italian physician, Giorgio Biandrata, who had been part of the Racowian enclave, who somehow managed to escape Poland with his life. He wandered east into

Transylvania where he found employment as physician to the Royal family. Some people land well, don't they?

Transylvania in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century was a boarder state between the Ottoman and the Roman empires, between the Moslem and the Christian worlds. Transylvanian loyalties swung back and forth between the two empires, depending on who was sitting in the throne.

Giorgio Biandrata served Queen Isabella (*who had nothing to do with Ferdinand or the country of Spain*) whose reign had been endorsed by the Ottoman Sultan. Gender equality was a non-existent idea at that time and so her sovereignty was one of caretaker until her son, John Sigismund would be old enough to take up his rule.

Sigismund and his mother had been greatly swayed by Biandrata's anti-Trinitarian teachings. So had Francis Dávid, the leading preacher in the capitol city of Kolozvár. Together they all created the foundations of the Unitarian Church for all of Transylvania.

Some of the regional princes who were loyal to Rome challenged this new religion. An assembly, *called a diet*, was convened in 1568. A great debate took place. Representatives of the Catholic, Calvinist and Lutheran religions argued against Dávid, but they were no match against his superior biblical scholarship. The diet concluded with a declaration of an Edict of Toleration. John Sigismund declared all four faith traditions to be valid and to have full and equal protection of the crown.

Unfortunately, Sigismund died at a very young age. His cousin, Stephen Báthory whose loyalty was to Rome, replaced him. I suspect that there are people in this room who have cousins who don't see things in quite the same way that you do. Stephen did everything within his power to rescind the Edict of Toleration.

Failing that, he modified the edict to limit the theologies of the four accepted religions to what had been declared by them at the time the edict was issued. Nothing new could be added to the written or the spoken word. This had little impact on the other three religions, which embraced theologies of sealed revelation. But to the newly emerging Unitarian theology, it was a great threat. For Unitarianism to grow, so must its beliefs. So this all sets the stage for the major point of tension in this story.

Francis Dávid was the chief theologian of this new faith community. There were now Unitarian churches throughout Transylvania. Dávid was their recognized spiritual leader. He was determined that the new religion would not be reduced one bit by political interference. Freedom of conscience was an ideal of the highest order; his would not be compromised. Neither would his preaching.

Giorgio Biandrata's commitment and devotion to Unitarianism was no less than Dávid's. But Biandrata had been in Poland. He knew from personal experience that it was possible for this new religion to be completely wiped out. He pleaded with Dávid to bide his time, to work with

what he already had, and not to risk further interference from the crown by violating these new conditions of the edict.

He was sure that in time the situation would ease, and then Unitarianism could move forward into its fuller potential. He was especially afraid that Dávid would inadvertently cause the destruction of the fledgling religion that they had both worked so hard to create.

When Dávid refused to yield, it was Biandrata himself who reported Dávid to King Stephen. Dávid was charged with heresy. He was imprisoned and died of pneumonia there some months later.

Ever since that time, there has continued to be a tension within Unitarianism, and now Unitarian Universalism between the rights and the needs of the individual on one hand, and the common good of the institution, which existed in order to offer safe harbor to the individual, on the other. Though the story that introduces these dynamics is indeed a sad one, the dynamics themselves generate a very creative tension. The religious process, at its best, is always a dance of balance between the *one* and the *many*.

The spiritual quest, which might be defined as our personal search to find and make meaning in our lives, is always an effort on the part of *individuals* to discover who they are in relationship with their community, their world, with all that is. The religious quest is the institutional/community venture where we bring our individual journeys in order to pursue them in cooperation with and in the company of kindred spirits, who can provide us with safety in numbers and encouragement in our growth.

Individuals require room to grow. Institutions shelter and foster that room, but it is at a cost. If we are going to be engaged in any community of more than one – *more than ourselves* – that community will need to be capable meeting needs, sometimes greater, sometimes different than our own.

How did Mick Jagger say it? “You can’t always get what you want, but if you try sometimes, you just might find, that you get what you need.” The outcome of the tension – in that dance between the one and the many – can be the creative development of an interdependent and delicate dance of balance. The central dynamic in that dance lies in the relationship between the one and the many.

What are some of the qualities that we came here to honor today? They are wisdom, reflection, generosity, grace and an ability to deliver painful truths in loving and disarming ways.

What are some of the principles? They include tolerance, freedom of conscience and the use of reason. They include a burning inclination towards truth, beauty, justice and compassion. They include a vision of the larger whole, and an unrelenting dedication and service to the largest common good.

### **PART III: The Invitation...**

I had a wonderful opportunity recently to spend the month of January in San Miguel de Allende, down in Mexico. It was exquisite. San Miguel is an enchantingly beautiful place that I highly recommend. It even has a UU Fellowship! While I was there, I had the opportunity to visit the fellowship twice. The first time I attended a Sunday service, and then a week later I was there as guest minister to preach the sermon.

On the first Sunday, when I was visiting, I observed a rather curious experience that I took the opportunity on the following week to talk about with the congregation. This experience speaks to me of a challenge that I think we face today within Unitarian Universalism. At its core, I think it asks us to check ourselves regarding orthodoxy and intolerance, and theological inhospitality.

The custom in San Miguel is to take a few minutes at the beginning of each service to have visitors and recent returnees, to this expatriate community, introduce themselves and tell where they're from. A little ways into the introductions that first week, a man introduced himself and his spouse as atheists. He declared that they were atheists and that they had come that day to join together with others of a similar bent.

I thought that was a little odd. Several people laughed. And then the next person to introduce him self proudly proclaimed that he too, was an atheist. And then the next person did, and then it kind of became a chorus that continued throughout the rest of the introductions. There was a kind of arrogance in the expression, an assumption that this perspective was the only one that might hold any intellectual validity in that room.

When I spoke the following week, I reminded people of that experience from the week before. They all nodded in agreement that in fact they did remember. And then I told them that the experience had really saddened me. And the reason I told them was because I felt, and feel, that claiming our religious identity, claiming who we are *religiously* – merely by defining what we are not, is a very sad way of avoiding responsibility for what we are and for what we *do* believe.

To say that one is an atheist is perhaps useful, when used in comparison with someone else's beliefs that may have a more theistic or mystical bent. But for that to be the defining characteristic of a person's religion, at least to me, is akin to allowing others to dictate the definition of our religious experience. It's like defining one's self as anti-life, instead of claiming to be pro-choice. It gives away one's power to name their own experience to others who are only too happy to do the naming. And all of this is in addition to the lack of hospitality for any alternative religious perspectives.

Most of us don't believe in a whole lot of things, including – I suspect – a whole lot of the same things. The thing is though, those things we don't believe aren't particularly helpful to us. There are times when each of us wake in the middle of the night, or sometimes find ourselves even in the midst of our days, struggling through the challenges of our lives, struggling to find and make meaning of loss, or grief, of sadness or of even great joy. And when we are in those *white-knuckle* moments, I *gotta* think it's time to grab a hold of the things we do believe. Maybe it's time for counting our blessings, if for no other reason than to be in touch with our sense of grati-

tude. Gratitude alone can sometimes provide firm enough ground to stand on when we find ourselves slipping on the edges of our lives.

In those moments I don't imagine it very hopeful trying to hold on to what isn't there. I don't imagine it's very helpful to say, "Thank goodness that I don't believe in this, or that I don't believe in that, or that I don't believe in the other thing."

When we are in the midst of the challenges of our lives, I've got to think that we need to hold onto what we *do* have. We need to wrap ourselves around something that has enough value to hold us, something that helps us to find and make the meaning we need in order to go on – sometimes even just to take the next step.

Some of us may thank God. Some of us may thank goodness. Some of us may thank our lucky stars.

It doesn't matter, or it doesn't have to matter to anyone else, what name, or image, or metaphor we might choose. What matters is that we find meaning in it. It matters in the connection of who we are with the lives that we live. It matters in the connections of who we are within the context of those lives – with our families, our work, our community, our congregation, our country and our world. What we *are* is what matters; what we *are not* is most often of little consequence.

Far too often, Unitarian Universalists have tried to get away with defining ourselves merely by what we are not. I have to believe that Francis Dávid did not go to prison and eventually die to defend what Unitarian Universalism would not be. It was to promote the possibilities for what we could become. What might that include? I have to think – a religion dedicated to upholding the principles of freedom of conscience, religious tolerance and the application of reason.

Unitarian Universalism is a humanistic religion in its many expressions. That humanism though, is not one that is based in any kind of orthodoxy. We don't say, "It's my way or the highway" at least we tell our selves that we don't say that. Sometimes though, our actions do speak louder than our words.

Unitarian Universalism is a humanistic religion because we are a religious movement that was born of the rational enlightenment. Our perspective is lodged in the *human* experience and it is based in our *human* relationships to self, to one another, to our world and to the universe – as far as we can imagine that universe, using our very *human* imaginations.

Ours is a humanistic religion that can incorporate all kinds of religious perspectives – Christian, Jewish or Earth Centered. It can be practiced as spiritual humanism or as a more atheistic/agnostic humanism. The thing that it cannot abide though, is totalitarian dogma. No one here, not myself, Alan Egly, Mary Moore, or anyone else can define what being human should mean for you. And it's not of much value for any of us to try to define that experience for anyone else.

Here's the true test of humanism I think, the true test of freedom of conscience and religious tolerance: is it big enough, is it strong enough, to embrace other people's ideas about what it means to be human. If we are busy shouting out the righteousness of our own answers, then we aren't listening. We become merely a part of yet another form of orthodoxy, joining the cacophony of Babel-like intolerance that does not help to transform the world in ways we hope for it to be transformed.

If we are intolerant, in our congregations or out in the world, of language that uses words that we don't choose for ourselves, then we go unable to hear the questions being asked by others about our shared, human experience. If we are intolerant, I have to think that we are missing some major point that's been passed on to us through our religious tradition, from its very beginning. We live in a world overly filled with intolerance, and I believe that we are called to a greater cause.

What does all of this have to do with the history of that tradition? What does it have to do with Francis Dávid and Giorgio Biandrata? What does it have to do with each of us, or with this congregation? What does it have to do with our wider culture now polarized between neo-conservative ideology and liberal idealism? What does it have to do with Iran, the Middle East, the Palestinian Question, and so many conflicts around the world? Everything!

In every dimension of our lives we see the dance between the one and the many. In every dimension we see the tension between who I am and who you are, between who you are and who we are, between who we are and who *they* are.

We know too well the list of brokenness in the world around us – racism, sexism, homophobia, corrupt and inadequate healthcare, and an environment teetering on the brink of destruction. The list goes on too long. In all that brokenness, if we dare to look, we can see the failure of the delicate balance in the dance between the one and the many.

I'm not so sure we can see as clearly all of the spectacular advancements in the world around us as easily – medicine and science, democracy and the development of human potential. That list also goes on and on, as well. And where we look to find these successes in our human effort, we can discern the very *collaborative* balance between the one and the many, within the steps of that same dance.

Our liberal religious, humanist approach to life offers us access to that dance. But it doesn't assure us of any kind of success in it. It opens the door; we have to enter. We have to risk our certainty, if we are going to ask that of others.

We speak of the interdependent web of existence of which we are a part. It is a web that holds us together within a context of expectation. We are called by it, called by our tradition to account for our part in our relationships with this very big world out there that seems to be coming apart at the seams, even with its silver linings. We can ill afford to invest our energies and resources in what we are not; far too much is at stake. We can ill afford to invest our energies and resources in demanding to be censors of religious vernacular, or in ceding the authority of that editing to anyone else.

If there is anything that can be said about the definitive nature of truth, it is that no one holds a monopoly on it. Truth appears to each of us in our personal experience, perspective and expression of it.

Religious tolerance means that we allow for freedom of conscience in others. It means that we have the courage to recognize that there are many valid manifestations of the religious impulse, and that our own perspective of the universe is not the only legitimate one.

It also means that we need to expand toleration to include ourselves. We need to leave some room for the possibility that we don't have things all figured. It is only in that possibility that our potential for growth exists.

And what does it mean to grow? It means learning the new steps we will need in order to do the dance promoting the balance between the one and the many, between the one and the all. That's what Francis Dávid died for, and what Giorgio Biandrata lived for. The question is – are we willing to walk as kindred spirits with others who are seeking to achieve this same balance, without wasting our time and energy being hung up on language, symbols and metaphors?

Our religious community ought to provide us a place to learn those steps, within the laboratory of our intentional efforts and the safety of our limited but essential diversity. Our religious community ought to provide the world with a people who are committed to being in the dance, in the conversation with others, working towards a balance of the one and the many, working for a world that embraces truth, beauty, justice and compassion.

Today we've come to celebrate the life long ministry of one who has lived by these principles of freedom of conscience, religious tolerance and the use of reason. We've come to gather around the community fire, to tell stories that might help us find and make meaning in our lives, stories that might strengthen faith and give hope, stories that might challenge us to grow and develop as *human* beings – partners in the human community. Today we have come as individuals, and we have joined together, forming a larger whole.

May we be granted wisdom, time for reflection, a leaning towards generosity, an openness to grace, and an ability to deliver and receive painful truths in loving and disarming ways.

May we be granted a vision of the larger whole, of our part in it, and an unrelenting dedication and commitment to the service of the largest common good.