

UNITARIAN CHURCH, CAPE TOWN



SPEAKING TRUTH TO POWER

and

GIVING POWER TO YOUR TRUTH

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You will undoubtedly recall the decision made in August 2007 by President Mbeki to dismiss the deputy health minister, Nozizwe Madlala Routledge. That decision, the day before Womens' Day, caused a great stir throughout our country, a decision that sent a shiver down the spine of the nation. Little did the President seem to know then that one of consequences of his decision was to enable a powerful woman to stand bravely and brilliantly in her own light, a light to be seen throughout the world, and in that way to earn the respect and acknowledgment of the whole country for her integrity, her courage and her truth.

The Cape Times of 20 November 2007 carried a half-page editorial comment headed "**The Importance of Speaking Truth to Power**", written by Diane Salters. She wrote that "every now and then a particular phrase captures the public imagination and seems to express something that needs saying. Former deputy minister of Health, Nozizwe Madlala Routledge, used the phrase "**speaking truth to power**" after her dismissal and this phrase has been cropping up in editorials, letter columns and even in a recent advertisement for Andrew Feinstein's book *After the Party*."

The author of the article says this phrase, in its original usage, is *a declaration of willingness to speak one's truth.....and to stand defenceless in the winds that may then blow from the corridors of power*. She goes on to remind us that Madlala Routledge is a Quaker and that that phrase *Speaking Truth to Power* draws on a well-established Quaker tradition that calls on us to **speak out with integrity, regardless of powerful injunctions from party, state or society to remain silent**. The Quaker tradition states that "The primary social function of a religious society is to 'speak the truth to power'".

So why am I fascinated by this phrase "**Speaking Truth to Power**" ? In reflecting on this phrase two questions come to mind:

- 1 What does this phrase say to us Unitarians, each of us on our own spiritual path?

2 What does it say to us Unitarians and our role in the larger context of South African society"

Firstly, it resonates for me, and I imagine, for all of us as Unitarians.....in the context of our strong commitment to 'living our truth' There is no higher church or religious authority that requires us to conform to the truth as interpreted by someone else. Always for us the challenge is to be **clear and pure in our own truth**..... And so this question follows: "What does it mean to find and to live our truth?" It's a question that implies a huge responsibility and obligation on each of us that must essentially be based on absolute honesty with ourselves.

So what is truth? How would you define truth? Is it adequate to define truth as that which is not false? "*Ja, well, no, fine*", (as we South Africans sometimes respond to a seemingly difficult question). It's not as simple as that! Truth is not simply opposition to falsehood. Truth is essentially about honesty, about reliability, about accuracy, and equally essentially about **integrity** (i.e. when our actions and our inner values are in alignment); it's about honesty and honour, **and also authenticity** (genuineness, legitimacy and validity).

And **POWER** ? What are we talking about when we use this word? Force or Strength? Or Control? Or might we be referring to power as **ability, or capacity to do something? Power as influence? As value? As energy?**

So the phrase "***Speaking Truth to Power***" means that as we live and practise our spirituality we combine the purity and clarity of our integrity and of our authenticity in **realising (i.e. making real), expressing, doing and SPEAKING** our truth. What a tribute we pay to a person when we see and describe that person as being authentic,as being genuine, having no pretensions, no mask, no cover-up, no shield behind which he or she hides..... You see what is real, no charades; you see the whole pure truth of that person.

For sure, in the very humanness of who we are, each with our baggage from the past, our fears, our flaws, our inadequacies etc., none of us can claim 100%

perfection, pure absolute clarity of truth but, we have the responsibility to ourselves to strive to be honest and to act with integrity, and to strive to **give truth to our power, our energy, our value, our influence and our capacity for good.**

And so as we gather here each week, to honour the sacredness of Life, and to give thanks.....we come in our very humanness none of us perfect, but we come nevertheless, in the honesty of who we are, in our truth. During this time together, one of the special things we do is to take time to share our joys and sorrows, our celebrations and concerns..... This tradition is our holy communion. We are in holy communion with each other when we bring ourselves as gifts to the altar of the Universe and of humanity.

A brief reflection on what it means to be in communion reminds me of a book "**The Unitarian Way**" written by Phillip Hewett, a retired UU minister in Canada, a fine and wise elder. He spells out what it means to be in community. He refers to the church as a community of "sharing and caring" but he cautions that it is easy to become sentimental in one's expectations (of being in a sharing and caring community) and to forget that however warm and nurturing a religious community may appear to be, it is still composed of people who are very human. He refers to the parable once told by the German philosopher, Arthur Schopenhauer. "On a cold winter's day, so cold that one could freeze to death, a group of animals tried to huddle together to keep warm. The problem was that these animals were porcupines. As soon as they got too close to each other they found that this was just as uncomfortable as being too cold. So they moved in and out repeatedly until they discovered the best distance at which they could keep each other warm without pricking each other with their quills." Hewett says that when the porcupines face in the same direction, their quills can be laid back in parallel lines rather than wrecking the attempt to be in community. And he adds that joys and sorrows, hopes and disillusionments, work and commitment can be shared as parts of a many-sided community life that expresses religion as inter-personal relationship.

So it's here in this sacred hour and this sacred place that we can try to be in community with each other and where we have the opportunity of living and practising our truth..... of speaking truth to our power, and giving power to our truth. It's here in our honesty and our openness that we are vulnerable to the gaze of others as we share our humanness.....it's here that we have opportunities for huge blessings as well as being open to misunderstanding and or hurt.....if each of us, as we witness another, does not stay centred in our own truth and our own power. When someone presses our buttons as he or she shares with the rest of us, we can allow ourselves to be knocked over, to be knocked off-centre and to lose our truth and so we respond inappropriately, even hurtfully! But in the very act of sharing, we also have a responsibility to be mindful of the needs of others who wish to share, by being sensitive to the fact that church time is shared time, and to ensure that one is not abrogating to oneself more time than is appropriate.

Perhaps we're like those porcupines, each of us with our quills that can be a cause of discomfort or hurt to another until we learn how to deal with our quills so that we don't allow them to become a problem, or if they DO cause hurt or damage, we learn how to heal ourselves.

As we are mindful of each other in a supportive and caring way, allowing and encouraging each other to be who each is in his or her truth, **we give power to another person's truth by bringing our truth to that person.**

There's a further point that I want to make about us Unitarians living our truth. This refers to an e-mail we received from Rev Greg Chute, a Unitarian Universalist minister from Newark, DE, USA, who has visited South Africa many times. He addressed our 2007 National Gathering in Durban and then visited us here in Cape Town as our guest speaker the following Sunday. In his message to us he challenges to us to reflect in **truth** on what it means to be a Unitarian. Here's an extract from his message in which he refers to the seven principles of Unitarianism: *"I am always so disappointed when people resort to the*

'infamous' 7 principles in trying to explain who we are. There are several reasons. First, they are 7 principles which 'we covenant to affirm and promote;' not in which we believe, or to which we adhere. So those are values we are trying, supposedly, to instil and create in the world. They do not define or describe us. We don't get off that easy. Second, most people I associate with would also agree to those values, and yet many of them are not Unitarians! Such altruistic values are not ours alone. American Baptists also seek a 'free and responsible search for truth and meaning.' They just go about it differently. So what makes us different from them? And third, they are too simplistic. They avoid the hard work and responsibility that comes with the freedom to actually create a spirituality, or theology of purpose (whatever we may choose to call our ground of meaning).

I would ask what lies behind and beneath those few 'guidelines' and values? What is the core which guides me, the instrument of better living, the compass for lost days, the life vest for when life swamps me? In my recent visit to your church, I presented my theory of gratitude and responsibility. I think it parallels Albert Schweitzer's 'life of reverence,' Mother Theresa's 'life of service,' Rachel Carson's 'life of wonder.' There has to be more to religion than a code of behavior, otherwise it remains a civic organization. There has to be some motivating understanding that gives us structure, direction, assurance, and reassurance. There needs to be something that comforts and encourages, prompts and provokes. We need to look deep down inside ourselves for that uniqueness that shapes us. We don't put on a one-size-fits-all religion. We don't put on a one-size-fits-all code of ethics either. Its not that easy.

So I invite you to put on your thinking caps. Do some serious self-reflecting, and personal exploration. What would you have to say about Unitarians and Unitarianism if you had to write copy (or a stranger were to ask you on the street)? That we believe in 7 principles? Or live by them?

Or is there something more? Something more substantial, inviting, mysterious, compelling? I would certainly hope so. Some day you may need to know. Not for others, but for yourself. And a card with 7 principles on it just isn't enough." Now there's food for thought!

Finally, there's a second thing to said about the phrase "**Speaking Truth to Power**" and that's in the context of the wider community of which this Unitarian congregation is a part. A religious community that does not engage in and with the social environment outside its doors is only half alive; it lacks an essential vitality that makes it a living organism in the greater community. Phillip Hewett says *"the idea of a cloistered religion shut away from the world outside has always been foreign to Unitarian thinking."* He says *"Life has taught us that love does not consist in gazing at each other, but looking outward together in the same direction. There is no comradeship except through union in the same high cause.... Wider relationships are essential to the focal concern of a congregation in which the community seeks ways to respond to its call to social responsibility. This flows directly out of the worship in which a congregation's dedication to ultimate values is celebrated and reinforced."*

Our country has countless opportunities for engaging in issues as a community and as individuals. It's of great concern that right here in our country which has been such a beacon of hope and reconciliation that our political leaders have become denialists in such issues as the HIV/AIDS pandemic and other aspects of health care.....one of the consequences of which was the dismissal of Nozizwe Madlala Routledge from her post as deputy minister of health, simply because the President and the Health Minister couldn't face the fact of this young woman speaking her truth to her power. The arms deal *skandaal* and all that's been going on with regard to corruption and assassinations etc is another area where we need to "**speak truth to power**". Note the verb "to speak" in that phrase..... We need to stand up to our leaders when we see unethical and illegal behaviour on their part, we need to become part of a vocal civil society that has power to influence, that has power to change things, and that gives truth to that power.

So, there are two thoughts for you to take home today.....(1) living our truth right here in this Unitarian community..... a truth that is powerful, that is authentic and has integrity, that is compassionate and that is also generous in spirit; and (2) speaking our truth to power in the wider world that so badly needs the voice of reason, truth, and courage in the face of declining standards of ethics and honesty.

May we become that truth, that power, and the light in the world in which we live here in Cape Town and in our country.

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Acknowledgements

- 1) **Hewett, P.** The Unitarian Way, Canadian Unitarian Council. Toronto, Ontario 1985 - ISBN 0-919667-15-5
- 2) **Salter, D.** The Importance of Speaking Truth to Power, published in Cape Times 20 November 2007



**"Truth or repose? Take which you please. You cannot have both."
*Ralph Waldo Emerson***

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