

**Who Do You Trust?**  
**By Rev. Don Southworth**  
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Let me begin this morning with a confession. I was raised on television and despite all the terrible things it can do to you, I still love it. I especially love old game shows. I don't have the Game Show channel at home (which is a good thing because I wouldn't get much done if I had it) but I can tell you more details about shows like Jeopardy and Let's Make a Deal than any sane man should. I also love Johnny Carson. I grew up with him too and I remember staying up until 1am when I was in junior high laughing and getting to know people like Don Rickles and Zsa Zsa Garbor. I confess this to you today because when I was naming this sermon I did something I usually don't do – I mixed up some of my favorite television memories.

Johnny Carson began his television career hosting a show called Who Do You Trust? Some of you may remember it but I do not because it was on before I was born and there weren't any reruns. I do remember To Tell the Truth. A couple of weeks ago Kitty Carlisle, one of the show's stars, passed away. As you may remember, on To Tell the Truth people would stand up and all say they were the same person. The panel's job was to decide who was telling the truth, who they trusted, and vote accordingly. When I named today's sermon I was thinking of To Tell the Truth but named the sermon Who Do You Trust?

Someone once said about Who Do You Trust? that it was grammatically incorrect but it still was a good show. Hopefully some of you will be able to say the same about today's sermon!

If our country was playing To Tell the Truth these days who would we be voting for? Every poll tells us what we already know. We trust many of our institutions and leaders less and less every year. The presidency. Congress. Political parties. The media. Corporations. Organized religion. All of these are near record lows when it comes to people's opinions about their trustworthiness. That's what can happen if you are dishonest, incompetent or corrupt, or at least if people think you are.

This week I was talking to an older member of our congregation who is a veteran. When I asked him about his level of trust for our government and our current administration his eyes became moist and he told me he cannot remember ever distrusting his government more deeply. I suspect many, if not most, of us could be moved as deeply and would say the same thing.

Ralph Waldo Emerson said “our distrust is very expensive.” And so it is. In a country founded on democratic hopes and ideals, trust and faith in our leaders and the government that they serve and we fund, helps to hold us all together. Our growing distrust in our leaders, our government and maybe most importantly our democratic process, especially in our young people, is expensive. It robs us not only of fewer and fewer people voting each year, it has the potential to drain away the hope, energy and creativity we need to re-envision and recreate a better future.

Our distrust is expensive not only when it comes to our future as a country. Distrust is costly, maybe even more costly, in how each of us live our day to day life. And that is what I really want to talk about this morning.

Whom do you trust? Each of us will answer that question a little differently depending on our age, our experiences in life and the level of our emotional and spiritual health and maturity. The choices we make when we trust someone or something - and trust is always a choice – are sometimes wise and sometimes not, sometimes healthy and sometimes not.

Trust is many things. It is a feeling we get when we meet someone. It is an automatic reaction we have, sometimes, based on our previous experiences. It is an assessment we make about others, an assessment of how sincere and honest they are, an assessment of how competent they are to do what they say they are going to do. Trust – like love – is both strong and fragile. Trust is many things but most of all it is something precious, something sacred, that we give to another and that we hope we are worthy enough of for someone to give to us as well.

Hopefully we know how it feels to be in a place, and with people, we trust. We feel safe. We feel empowered to be the best person we can be. We listen and accept coaching and feedback openly.

Unfortunately we also know how it feels to be in a place or with people we don't trust. We are on edge and defensive. We hold back and are slow to open up or give too much. We suspect the worst and often our suspicions are affirmed.

Some of us are quick to trust, sometimes too quick. Some of us are slow to trust, sometimes too slow. The minister and author Frank Crane once said, "You may be deceived if you trust too much, but you will live in torment if you don't trust enough." We walk a fine line when we give our trust away. If we give too much, too soon, we might be deceived, we might be hurt. All of us know how it feels when someone breaks our trust, when someone intentionally or unintentionally hurts us. And, because we are imperfect human beings, we also know what it means to hurt another because we have broken their trust. Some of us decide never to trust or make promises again. Some of us do the same with our love or our hope or our passion. Fool me once shame on you, fool me twice shame on me. That's living in torment.

There was a time in my life when trust and I were not very good friends. I was hopelessly addicted to compulsive gambling and telling the truth was not something I often did. When I got serious about changing my life and started making a commitment to working on becoming trustworthy, life decided to have fun with me and I was offered a job as a salesperson. I was nervous about sales because I thought what most people think, salespeople are dishonest and cannot be trusted. But I was running out of money and I needed a job. For the next 15 years I made my living by selling and marketing, by teaching selling and marketing and by leading and managing others who were selling and marketing.

I studied and learned a lot about trust in those days. I taught classes on how to take care of customers and how to sell with honesty and integrity. But I always knew that no matter how well I took care of people and how trustworthy I worked hard to be, when most people heard that I was in sales or marketing their natural, maybe even well-grounded assessment of me was that because I was in sales, I probably could not be trusted.

That is one reason I was so happy to become an ordained minister in 2000. In a 2001 Harris poll, 90% of people said they trusted clergy, more than any other profession and far, far ahead of salespeople. Finally, I thought, I am in a profession where people will trust me when I meet them. But then in 2002

stories about clergy sexual misconduct became the rage and in the next poll only 64% of people said they trusted clergy.

But sexual misconduct stories and low poll numbers are not the reason I have learned a truth in ministry even more deeply than I did when I was in sales. I have discovered that learning and studying about trust, and working hard to be trusted is even more important as a minister than it was when I was a salesperson. Especially as a Unitarian Universalist minister.

Trust is the glue that holds our relationships, and our congregations, together. Not only our relationships with our ministers, our relationships with each other. The stronger the glue, the stronger the bond, the healthier the relationship, the healthier the congregation.

We face a paradox as Unitarian Universalists. We believe in and fight for freedom. Freedom of religion, freedom of thought, expression and speech. We have a history as a religious people of standing up for the individual and for speaking truth to power. This is a heritage we should be proud of. But there is a shadow side to our passion for freedom. In our zeal for the individual we have often failed to care for and nurture our institutions, organizations and most importantly, the leaders responsible for them. One of our favorite bumper stickers is “question authority” but too often we have questioned, to the point of distrust and disrespect, those who are in authority, those who are leading us. Those people can be our professional, paid leaders and they can be our unpaid, volunteer leaders as well. This behavior does not honor our history or who we are, or maybe more accurately, who we want to be as a religious people.

Last week I was at our annual District meeting with Kathleen and a couple of other ERUUFians. I attended a workshop on linking spirituality and social action. The workshop leader asked us to take a few moments and reflect on how we were feeling about social justice and what nurtured us in our work. I was a little surprised by my answer. After a few moments of silent meditation I said what nurtured me was the vision and the ideal of the Beloved Community.

The vision and ideal of the Beloved Community, I didn't expect to say this. When I speak about what nurtures me I often talk about love, or my family, or my spiritual practices, my faith or that mystery

and wonder of life which I call God. But I realized last week and especially since then as I worked on this sermon, that the reason I wanted to talk about trust this morning is really because nothing is more important for building a beloved community than trust. And nothing stops us from being a beloved community more quickly than mistrust.

There are many reasons for being involved and eventually committing to be part of a religious community. To get to know other people, to have a place of sanctuary and renewal, to deepen our relationship and connection to that which we hold sacred, to work with others on making the world a better place, to learn how to answer and live with the big questions of life, to serve, to grow, to transform our lives and the lives of others. The longer I am a minister the truer I find the psychologist M. Scott Peck's words to be: "In and through community lies the salvation of the world." And as with anything that is healing, with anything that makes us more whole, with anything that promises us salvation, community is hard work.

I have discovered that one of the main reasons I am called to serve as a minister is because I want to help lead and facilitate the processes, the risks, the trust, the promise, the joys and the struggles of beloved community. One of the hopes I have for our Fellowship and each one of us is that we are willing and able to continue to do the hard work that it takes to become a Beloved Community, to do what it takes to trust and be trusted at levels that some of us may not have experienced before, with each other and with our leaders. Because I want us to be the type of organized religious institution and congregation that people always say they trust, where leaders in authority are questioned and trusted, where people feel safe enough to take the risks necessary to trust and are inspired to be more and more trustworthy every day.

As people who have historically been a religious minority our mistrust for religious institutions and religious authority has often been well-grounded. In the 16<sup>th</sup> century Michael Servetus trusted he could speak his truth against the notion of the trinity and he lost his life for that trust. Humanists, atheists, liberal Christians, gays, lesbians, pagans, Jews, Buddhists, have all been persecuted and discriminated against – and there's a little or a lot of that in all of us. The religious persecution our ancestors faced made them leery of any religious dogma or creed.

Maybe that is why we have always been said to be a covenantal and not a creedal religious tradition. What does that mean? It means from our earliest days our congregations made promises to each other and agreed, not to a statement of belief, but instead to a way of being together.

My colleague Burton Carley describes why covenant is so critical to who we are as a religious people and the power and promise that can come when we trust each other enough to be in covenant together.

*“At the heart of being in right relationship is the concept of covenant. It was a form of treaty making in the Near East and the Hebrew people took the concept and used it to define the divine/human relationship thus imparting to it deep religious and moral significance. In our tradition in New England, covenant defined the meaning of congregations and gave us our polity or the ways we are related to one another.*

*A covenant creates right relationship through partnership without dominance or submission. It is rooted in one of the most human capacities: our talent for making promises to one another. To freely enter into a covenant creates a bond of trust. Defining and strengthening the bond of trust is the grounding work upon which all work is built. The basis of that trust is the acknowledgement of the integrity and sovereignty of the other, and a mutual pledge to achieve together what neither can achieve alone.”*

Many of our congregations around the country have decided that they want to be more intentional about the promises they make to each other and are crafting covenants that speak how they wish to be together. Sometimes these covenants arise from a congregational conflict that strained trust and hurt people, sometimes these covenants arise from a yearning to go deeper in relationship, commitment and accountability to each other. Some of you have told me you'd like to explore something similar here.

Fortunately, at least as far as I know, we don't have any major conflicts at ERUUF today. I have heard we have had them in the past. Since we are human beings I know that we will have them in the future. They may come when we work as a congregation in the next few months on refining and better articulating our vision and mission. They may come as the Board of Trustees moves to a new governance structure or when we vote on the budget next month. They may come when change happens. They will come as we get to know each other better and trust each other enough to risk speaking our truth.

Conflict is a challenge and an opportunity for every relationship, every organization and every congregation. How well we respond to and grow from conflict is always related to the level of commitment and trust we have with another. If our commitment and trust is low we will walk away when conflict happens. If they are high we will stick it out and often grow and change because of our commitment. The invitation and opportunity we have as a covenantal religious tradition and community is

to continue to learn and grow and deepen our respect and trust for each other, and maybe, just maybe we will grow and deepen our respect and trust the other people in our life as well.

I leave you this morning with the words of one of my best friends, someone who I deeply trust and respect, Peter Morales, the minister of the Jefferson Unitarian Church in Golden, Colorado, who many of you met last December. His congregation is strong, healthy and vibrant – just like ours – and trust is a big reason. “Trust”, Peter says, “is a precious thing. When we learn to trust each other magic happens. If I trust you and you trust me, we can accomplish so much more. All of the best things we do as a congregation – from pastoral care to social action – we do because we trust one another. Something wonderful and beautiful occurs when we say to someone: “I trust you to do this. I think you are the best person to teach this class or chair this committee or represent us at this gathering.” When we learn to empower one another, we don’t lose power, we gain power. Trust unleashes our energy and our passion.”

Trust, precious trust, unleashes our energy and passion. May we continue to deepen our trust in ourselves and in each other so we can make more and more magic together! And the beloved community will no longer be a vision it will become a reality. May it be so. Amen.

M. Scott Peck in his book *The Different Drum*, which should be mandatory reading for anyone who wishes to develop and deepen community writes, “In our culture of rugged individualism – in which we generally feel that we dare not be honest about ourselves, even with the person in the pew next to us – we bandy around the word “community”. We apply it to almost any collection of individuals – a town, a church, a synagogue, a fraternal organization, an apartment complex, a professional association – regardless of how poorly those individuals communicate with each other. It is a false use of the word.”

The answer is the same for us. We are a covenantal and not a creedal religious tradition. What does that mean? It means from our earliest days our congregations made promises to each other and agreed, not to a statement of belief, but instead to a way of being together.

My colleague Burton Carley describes why covenant is so critical to who we are as a religious people. Please listen to his words closely, I believe they describe the solution to not only our challenges as Unitarian Universalists but also to what Katrina has shown us.

“At the heart of being in right relationship is the concept of covenant. It was a form of treaty making in the Near East and the Hebrew people took the concept and used it to define the divine / human relationship thus imparting to it deep religious and moral significance. In our own tradition in New England, covenant defined the meaning of congregations and gave us our polity or the ways we are related to one another.

A covenant creates right relationship through partnership without dominance or submission. It is rooted in one of the most human capacities: our talent for making promises to one another. To freely enter into a covenant creates a bond of trust. Defining and strengthening that bond of trust is the grounding work upon which all other work is built. The basis of that trust is the acknowledgment of the integrity and sovereignty of the other, and a mutual pledge to achieve together what neither can achieve alone.

Covenants exist because we are different and seek to preserve that difference, even as we come together to bring our several gifts to the common good. In addition I contend that the “we” is not just a mutually satisfying relationship, but asks of each party to care for the spiritual health and growth of the other even to the point of inconvenience and sacrifice. Another name for this might be love.”

M. Scott Peck: “In and through community lies the salvation of the world. Nothing is more important. Yet it is virtually impossible to describe community meaningfully to someone who has never experienced it – and most of us have never had an experience of true community. The problem is analogous to an attempt to describe the taste of artichokes to someone who has never eaten one.

Still the attempt must be made. For the human race today stands at the brink of self-annihilation.

Some of the victims of Hiroshima and Nagasaki are described as walking blindly down the street after the blasts, dragging bundles of their own skin behind them. I’m scared for my own skin. I’m even more scared for the skin of my children. And I’m scared for your skins. I want to save my skin. I need you, and you me, for salvation. We must come into community with each other. We need each other.”

One of my favorites is the Congregational Covenant of Good Relations that the Unitarian Church of Victoria, British Columbia has developed. Their covenant speaks to what is one of the biggest obstacles in nurturing a community – the way we treat each other. How often do we speak about how much we value you inherent worth and dignity of each other and then gossip about how badly somebody is acting, or complain that so and so isn’t pulling their weight. The members of the Unitarian Church of Victoria have covenanted with each other to “treat ourselves and each other fairly and respectfully.” We... intend to see our community thrive. Conflicts naturally occur...left unattended they will erode the trust and harmony necessary for our community’s health. We therefore acknowledge a personal obligation to learn and practice ways of preventing and resolving conflicts promptly and successfully.”

I suspect that our brothers and sister in Victoria came to their covenant because they learned that conflict and disagreement is one of the biggest challenges religious communities’ face. One researcher claims that liberal religious congregations like ours are more prone to conflict because we are generally

more democratic. Another says that the second most important reason people choose to leave a congregation is because the members do not get along.

Before we get to each of the seven principles, we must begin with “covenant to affirm and promote”. Covenant is one of those religious words that may make some of us uncomfortable. Covenant speaks to a promise, a commitment, that is deeper than a handshake or a contract. God made a covenant with the Jews in the Bible, I have a covenant with this congregation to be your minister, and Unitarian Universalism is often said to be a covenantal, as opposed to a creedal, religion. Rebecca Parker, president of Starr King School For the Ministry where I went to seminary, says, “covenant making may be the key to opening the door to another way of understanding ourselves. The commitments we make to one another, the promises we make to one another as a congregation, as an association, are what creates religious community. Covenant requires a human presence to one another, and gets us beyond who am I? to who are you? – and what can we do together?”

Trust is a precious thing. In today’s chalice lighting we heard Sara speak of learning about trust here at her church home. When we learn to trust each other, magic happens. If I trust you and you trust me, we can accomplish so much more. All of the best things we do as a congregation—from pastoral care to social action—we do because we trust one another.

Effective congregations all have strong leaders. Legitimate leaders are not tyrants. On the contrary, good religious leaders are servants. They should be the congregation’s most trusted people, people deeply committed to the church’s mission. Good leaders share power. They empower others. Something wonderful and beautiful occurs when we say to someone: “I trust you to do this. I think you are the best person to teach this class or chair this committee or represent us at that gathering.” When we learn to empower one another, we don’t lose power, we gain power. Trust unleashes our energy and our passion.