

## The Triple A Motel

I was delighted to see the triple A sign hanging from the motel that was the closest to the lake and mountains where I intended to cross country ski and snowshoe for a few days. The weather being brutally cold and the wind as cutting as it could be in Western Maine, the motel seemed like an oasis in a foreboding wilderness.

After surveying the heated pool and sauna, I checked into a cozy office surrounded by a plush oriental carpet, deep green velour couches and a fireplace that came directly from the pages of home beautiful. This was to be a great weekend! The proprietor nonchalantly sauntered to the desk wearing an ancient pillowed bathrobe, dirty pink fuzzy bedroom slippers, with her hair in rollers. She tossed the room key on the desk, returned my credit card and schlepped back into the wall from whence she came, mumbling, “checkout time at 11 sharp.”

The room was small, cold and most uninviting. The heat controls were either zero or 90. The 2” space between the door and the frame allowed the evenings snowfall to pile up under the door, leaving several inches on the orange threadbare rug. There was a sign on the wall that stated, “ if you need a wake up call, come to the office and get an alarm clock.” The pool was being used by assorted aqua therapists who reserved it for the weekend and it was off limits... that was just the beginning. The crowning blow, after a terrible nights sleep on a so called “bed” which was part futon and part rock pile, was a simple request for a cup of coffee which I was briskly informed by Ms. Fuzzy slippers, could be obtained at a convenience store 10 miles down the road, provided they were open. Also the plush living room was part of her private quarters, not to be used by her “guests.”

By the impeccable condition of the façade, one would never guess that The Mollyockett triple A rated motel was a sham, an out right lie.

Cold and hungry, I checked out early, voicing my discontent, reluctantly paid the bill and later looked it up on the internet. The Motel appeared to be up to standard from the outside, with a pool and spa, and all the amenities, slyly written, so as not to reveal the reality of the restrictions for use and the sub standard accommodations.

There was obviously a bit of 'truthiness' going on here, and I wondered how long it would be before some big wig discovered the discrepancies and called to complain to triple A. The sign had been there for a long time, and I, like many before me, had shamefully left that task to someone else, who maybe had more to lose, who possibly came from a greater distance or planned to stay a while and found the accommodations just too far from the truth. The following year the sign was gone.

This experience intrigued me, as I realized how many situations we fall prey to that contain incomplete or deceiving information; information that is not really a lie, but only a partial truth, that can slip through the growing cracks in a way of life we are all becoming far too familiar with. I cringe when I hear such things as, "yes, you have a one year warranty, but it only covers the box it came in, not the product," or in my case, "we have a beautiful fireplace in the lodge, but you can't use it;"

It happens in small ways, when the phone rings and your six year old answers .. " Mom it's for you." From the kitchen comes a muffled shout, "Tell them I'm not home." It begins at the amusement park or in the theatre when we allow a 13 year old to pass for 12 and pay half price to get in.

When I was teaching years ago I saved my notes from "parents." Some were very funny, "Please excuse Rachel from Jim, she has panes in her sides." or, "Charlotte was late yesterday because she fell off the tractor and hurt her hed." When I spoke to the parents about their "notes", their reaction was often "so, kids will be kids," the message was even then, 'call me when its important.' Well, when its important, its too late.

We have all done it to some degree. You know, the man who claimed his pet Iguana on his income tax as a dependent, or the woman who cut off the expiration dates on her grocery coupons. We are inundated with such forms of deception, emanating from every direction; like the evils of fine print, found in miniscule type at the bottom of every contract, to the denial of political indiscretions, or the ultimate form of deceptive opinion, stated as divine truth, such as "God hates homosexuals." that simply are archeologically or historically not true.

Such misleading opinions have all become so commonplace that deceptions, both deliberate and inadvertent, have become accepted as a part of our culture, and always will be and it is one of the most profound and challenging obstacles we will ever face as both individuals and as a faith community, particularly when we are witness to an act of deception, abuse, or outright dishonesty. The challenge we all face comes in determining whether or not to speak up, to contest what we hear, or just let it go, as it can be very risky at times, to choose to bring the truth to light.

From 1992 to 1994 I was the interim minister of the Westborough Massachusetts UU church. I succeeded their former minister of 18 years who had been tried, convicted and jailed for the sexual abuse of a minor; of three Tibetan girls who had been brought to this country by the church in the hopes of giving them a better life. Obviously that did not happen.

The messengers as the whistle blowers were called, who reported the abuse to the authorities, were, taunted, vilified and outcast by many members of the congregation. They suffered greatly from their act of courage. During my two years in Westborough, there was one phrase voiced by a parishioner that has haunted me, she said "Whatever a person does on their own time is their own business" now may I add a caveat... "as long as it doesn't affect me."

In Westborough, there were a number of other voices that echoed the same sentiment and it has all resurfaced in my mind again during the recent controversy generated by the accusations leveled against the coaching staff at Penn State and the firing of the long time coach Joe Patino, for withholding sexual abuse allegations that occurred over a 15 year time period, which were leveled against assistant coach Jerry Sandusky. What is truly ironic, is the firing of Mike McQueary who initially witnessed and reported the incident, yet no investigation took place. The saddest part of this story is the grief fans are feeling, for losing Patino...Who is asking, "what have been the consequences for these boys?"

In the same week Presidential Candidate, Herman Cain was faced with a multiple charges of improper conduct.

**As a result of the allegations, instead of the public seeking the truth or falsity of the accusations, thousands of dollars were donated into his campaign by his sympathetic supporters, who did not care whether or not the allegations were true. What it does do unfortunately, is absolve the offender, be it the accuser or the accused from having to own up and pay the consequences. That really frightens me.**

**There is no greater issue facing us today in our homes and schools and churches than what the expression and definition of what telling the truth means in our private lives as well as our public ones. And what are the consequences of blowing the whistle? Vilification, shunning, firing,?**

**On the other hand, I ask, "Should a person who is deceitful or unfaithful or dishonest, or who abuses their power and position in private, be allowed to get away with it?"**

**We know that in the past many public figures have led a dual existence and lived very different lives in private than they did in public. Regardless of how the media chooses to condemn or to forgive, there are at least two people who do know what really happened; the explicit details may well be none of our business. What is our business, as individuals and as a nation, is to determine if we are willing to take the risk of exposing the offender?**

**All of us have been brought up to understand that telling the truth is critical to being trusted and it begins in very small ways, behind closed doors in the privacy of our own homes, it can also affect many more if the choice is silence, or fear of retribution.**

**Years ago while I was doing my ministerial internship a parishioner came to me. She worked in a cancer lab as a technician. She had been taking a medication which made her drowsy and forgetful.**

**She could not remember which tissue samples she had been testing; which had to be heated or cooled. The results would be very different if she had done the wrong thing. The reports were sent back anyway.**

**The laws of confidentiality between a minister and a parishioner would not allow me to alert the company that the hundreds of tests she had done over a period of months were sent back to doctors and patients,**

many with the wrong results. In the solitude of her lab those samples were just numbers and splotches of tissue. She was afraid if she told the truth she would be fired. I took a chance and told her if she did not go to her boss and tell him herself what had happened, I would have too, and I was prepared to face the consequences. She did tell him and subsequently she was fired. She easily could have complained to the Board that I had broken a confidentiality, which is subject to dismissal. But she did not.

What if you were one of those patients, or the technician or the minister, what would you do? Too many might think, 'as long as it doesn't affect me...It doesn't matter.'

Let me bring it a bit closer to home. Do you believe that your minister, your church leader, can really do as she pleases in her private life? Where are the boundaries? Had I taken advantage of the advances of a 20 year old intern under my supervision, to name one, in a long line of potential offenses, I would expect to be fired. Had I lied about it, and been caught, I would never expect to work as a minister again. These should be un-debatable consequences. I would also expect the same should I misuse my power and authority as a minister to take advantage of the naiveté' of another, no matter how willing he or she may be. It was and is my responsibility to be actively truthful and fully aware of how my power is used. It makes no difference how well I preach or how much I am liked. Sometimes I have to even remind myself that my life in the pulpit is only one hour of the 135 hours I am among you and others during the week. It takes a phenomenal amount of courage to accuse one in a position of authority and all too often it is the accuser who is the one who truly suffers.

What we as a nation and even our religious institutions have not done, is to have made the consequences known and clear. Sadly, we are far less likely to support the whistleblower, who has more to lose, than the offender. The effect that will have on the evolving values and ethical standards of our children is also a very serious matter.

**They need to know and witness that a substantial part of truth telling and honesty and trusting applies not only to what we see hear and observe, but also what we do in our private as well as our public lives.**

**It is much more than withholding or manipulating the truth to fit our needs or image, it is how we first learn to deceive ourselves that matters, regardless of what we would like others to think about us in public.**

**As we enter this exciting era of transition, may we be unafraid to set an example of our faith; to speak out our truth, when our sacred principles are violated, to tackle the difficult and the sensitive, to take a stand on those things which do affect us all, even when we have become desensitized and are tired of hearing about it!**

**May we, in the exciting days to come, take a moment to think about how we are viewed, within and without; what is the sincere message we wish to impart as a church community, in public and in private, and as individuals in our search for truth, and the outward and internal expression of that truth is the foundation upon which we build our faith. Honesty, clarity, and conviction, and the strength and commitment to carry it out, are the single most critical factors we face in our mission as people and as a congregation.**

**So be it .. amen**

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**It is also both unfortunate and fortunate that we as a church, a society, are in the business of seeking the real truth, the substance behind the fine print. Being surrounded by so many questionable practices and claims of “whatever” being the end -all be- all, the ultimate answer, the perfect solution or God’s indisputable, will is mind boggling.**

**No wonder we are leaping from cause to cause, like whirling dervishes, to corral the truth and to bring destructive falsehoods to light. There is so much out there that I know, I have at times left the battle to someone else.**

**Our history is filled with individuals who contested and dispelled radical and disparaging statements and beliefs that our forefathers and mothers tackled with great gusto, simply because we were the only ones who dared to speak up and to declare an alternative. In a sense we have done our job well. There are now many organizations out there to combat injustice and inaccurate information, to contest beliefs that are damaging and prejudicial and to take those to task who violate human rights and who dispense untruths like candy.**

**There is talk around UU circles that maybe our work is done. I disagree, it is far from finished and I suspect it never will be complete. Yes, we are in the truth seeking business along side many others who have taken up the issues and causes as diligently as we have. But there is another side to this that has become obliterated and hazy due to the more exclusive efforts that we, as part of an association of churches have expended in visible social causes. I am not for one minute suggesting that we simply drop them in the lap of others, what I am suggesting is that we make our efforts at social and moral justice, directly connected to our spirituality.**

