Finding Truth and Meaning in a Liar's Kingdom

Delivered by Tobe Jensen

(Lyrical UU version)

1. We Begin in the Circle

Slide 1 for Service

Unitarian Universalists gather because we trust that when we seek truth together, we become more fully human. We believe that truth is something both fierce and fragile. We believe that every human being deserves to be treated fairly and kindly. We believe dignity has a name.

Slide 2

Last week, when Mike Wilson spoke of the two-headed snake—the double wall— cutting through his tribal land, I got an insight on the wall's symbolism.

Because that snake is not only steel and concrete. It is made of fear. It signals hate. It symbolizes that we should fear and punish desperate immigrants. It is made of lies because it allows our government to use the most vulnerable immigrants as scapegoats while flooding liberal cities with unidentified masked federal agents to control us and to take more of their land—again. The wall is also made of the old poison that whispers white supremacy into the cracks of our nation.

And from that lie, a thousand other lies are born— lies that claim diversity is dangerous, lies that turn the powerful into oppressors.

Slide 3

But we know better. We know that monocultures are not resilient so why destroy DEI policies? Diversity is the very foundation of our nation. Equity is the spine of justice. Inclusion is the quiet miracle that makes democracy whole. I argue that people with dramatically different cultural experiences have made our nation stronger, more creative and yes, more resilient.

When DEI becomes a dirty concept, lies lead to violence and, certainly, to exclusion. Suddenly, grants vanish. Research is halted. Careers freeze. Sacred sights are violated. Rights erode. People are jailed, deported or killed under false pretenses.

[Pause. Let the ache breathe.]

2. The Ache of Witnessing

Slide 4 Books

It makes me physically sick to witness this unraveling of our democracy. It hurts because we all have glimpsed of a better country— a country that could have been or a country still struggling to be born.

I'll give you one example among many. This month, BUU supports Books for Schools, an effort started by women who could not bear the silence of empty shelves in poor and reservation schools. Books are a tool that underlies the fourth UU principle— the free and responsible search for truth and meaning.

Through them, we learn of lives unlike our own. Books teach us empathy and understanding. They teach us to imagine the worlds beyond our knowledge. They open us up.

Because I know this, it is painful to find that over 12,000 books have been banned in US schools this year alone.

[Breath.]

3. My Journey: A Soul in Motion

The freedom to find truth and meaning changed my family's lives. My grandparents on both sides were poor homesteaders in North Dakota and Montana. My father was a first-generation immigrant, but his life was transformed by a college football scholarship and he became a teacher. Thus, I grew up in a home filled with books and the love of learning. Then, I became a teacher myself because I believed— and still believe— that truth liberates us, that meaning sustains us, and that curiosity heals us. There was nothing so gratifying to me as seeing the spark of light in a youngster's face when they finally understood something new.

I continued to carry that flame for learning in my work in public media and the arts.

Later in my life, my search for meaning was deepened by living and working in other cultures— I went to school in Austria and Japan. I lived in Mexico for 22 years before coming to Green Valley. I came to understand oppression when I consulted in Saudi Arabia to establish an educational television system, and also in Russia during that shining time of glasnost that opened the possibility to change lives. I've had deep friendships with people whose governments fear the truth. You just were introduced to my friend Ingeborg who lived for 10 years under Hitler's third reich.

I have learned what happens when truth is shackled, when lies become truth, when fear becomes governance.

And now, with a kind of trembling, I see those same shadows lengthening here, in my own beloved country.

4. The Storm of Noise

Today, seeking truth is not easy. Our attention is asked to respond to so many distractions. Every day is like walking through a crowded carnival. The air is thick with noise and reflection time is rare. True discernment becomes nearly impossible with such distractions.

Sometimes I feel like I'm living in a sci-fi horror film—with robots scheming to destroy humanity and an ignorant mad king consumed by slapping his name and gold on everything like a toddler who has just discovered a glue gun. Sometimes, I just want to put a pillow over my head and formally resign from the day.

[Pause for reaction.]

But when I lift the pillow, when I dare to connect the dots, a pattern emerges—I see a slow, deliberate violation of everything I have come to value. I find myself in an alien land where the foundations look familiar, even when they're being renamed, destroyed and replaced.

All the places we might find an escape from the lies are being attacked: museums, universities, federal courts, prosecutors, journalists, members of congress, former heads of national security and intelligence. Our leaders punish truth-tellers now and create fake narratives. We've lived through crisis

after crisis, each one a sleight of hand while the tricksters make themselves rich at a tax-payer ATM.

Did you know that Reporters Without Borders now ranks the United States **64th** in the world for press freedom— just above Panama, just below Botswana.

And, here's a shocker! On a democracy scale of the last 20 years, the U.S. rating has declined more than that of any other country that Freedom House categorizes as "free," except for—wait for it--Bulgaria.

[Let the shock land.]

5. The Liar's Kingdom

What began with a lie about immigration has led us to a full-scale liar's kingdom— a place where rulers' lies are protected with immunity, and whatever they say, no matter how absurd, is defended as truth. Unlike the US, political lies are punished in France, England, Germany and, even, Brazil, where former President Bolsonaro is in prison for telling them.

We punish lies everywhere else in the country— in court, in Congress, on our taxes, in school, at work. But political lies? They roam free here and greatly undermine trust in the truth.

I was working in public broadcasting when the Fairness Doctrine was revoked. The Fairness Doctrine required an array of perspectives to be a part of any public affairs programming, a principle that ensured that an electorate was well-informed on important issues. The founders believed an informed

electorate was the bedrock of democracy. Once that doctrine was revoked, came the rise of Fox Noise and hate radio.

Now, our media bows to lies from our leaders, oligarchs profit from deception, and lies become the air we breathe.

Once leaders get away with lies, others follow. The agencies of government and media lie. Even law enforcement lies. Furthermore, lies seem to work: one-third of our country still believes the 2020 election was stolen.

To make it worse, scams multiply and intensify with AI. Influencers with conspiracy theories now pose as sources of news and replace journalists. As a result, misinformation becomes a parasite feeding on every corner we turn.

Hannah Arendt, the powerful decoder of tyranny, warned us: *"When lies replace factual truth, the very sense by which we take our bearings in the world is destroyed."* No wonder we feel like our world's been turned upside down and we don't know which way is up!

[Pause.]

And we are perilously close to the edge of that abyss. We, that once shining city on a hill, are becoming a corrupt banana republic. Just look, deportations without due process. Private prisons holding migrants indefinitely without charges--sounds like a gulag to me. Unidentified and unaccountable federal officers are shooting peaceful protesters in the street and investigators are treated as traitors.

Cruelty has become the purpose not a flaw, of policies. Things that used to alarm us to action are now normal: 200,000 more children have become

separated from their families because of immigration enforcement in the last two years. As Hannah Arendt warned, fiction is presented as fact. Performance becomes reality.

With the excuse of preserving safety, we have all become less safe, less just while our country becomes less recognizable. Do you ever remember hating Canada, anybody?

And our virus spreads through the world undermining what we have stood for the last eighty years— we now extort nations through tariffs, we even threaten the annihilation of some, we commit international crimes, and undermine the International Court, NATO, and the United Nations. Where we were once the lynchpin of world peace and order, we have withdrawn from over 70 international treaties on such essential things as climate control and nuclear proliferation.

[Long, reflective pause.]

6. The Turning Point

Friends, if we do nothing, we are complicit in this unraveling.

The loss of our democratic republic is upon us (pause). I know many of you know that our country has never fully lived up to its ideals. There has always been a white, male, and straight America while other lives lived in the shadows.

But up until a few years ago, we were inching closer to the country we have dreamed of.

We elected a Black president. Marriage Equality was passed. Women's rights expanded. Native Americans were elected to office and their wisdom was informing our environmental policies. A moral uprising occurred after George Floyd's murder, sparking a multi-generational, multi-cultural movement toward greater equality.

Then the right rose with fury— fueled, in part, by some technofascist billionaires who see themselves as elites destined to rule. They control vast networks of communication, surveillance, and national defense upon which we all depend. It is important to know that they are, also, demonstrably racist and anti-democratic. And they have sunk their hands deep into our politics and pockets.

Now we stand at a precious moment— a hinge in human history— a moment when those who believe in freedom of thought must act because democracy requires less ignorance.

Our UU tradition has always asked us to choose courage over comfort. Abolitionists, suffragists, civil rights leaders— many were UUS who refused to surrender truth.

We cannot be the Unitarians Mike Wilson once lost faith in— those who talked a lot and did little.

So today, let us **vow to resist lies we are told and to keep freedom of thought alive because that freedom to seek truth STILL lives in our hands**. Let THAT be the flame we carry forward. And as long as it lives, let us wield that light of truth.