

# **The Power of Truth**

Reilly Yeo  
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A classic distinction in any literature on power is between power-over, power-with, and power-within. RevJ. talked last week about power over - the omnipotence of god, or the power of strong man leaders - power with, the power of community, and power within - the light that he encouraged all of us to shine. Today I want to keep talking specifically about power within. Your chalice lighting words, like those of many Unitarian congregations, talk about the light of truth. Let's explore today what that connection is between [the light of power within, and the light of truth](#).

As Unitarian Universalists, we articulate our commitments in a set of principles: to try to grow spiritually (the third principle), to freely and responsibly search for truth and meaning (the 4th principle) and a commitment to what we call "the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process" (fifth principle)

Those of us who hold dear to these principles may be feeling beset by a world in which these principles seem to be discarded, demeaned, disdained. They seem less and less to shape the norms of our broader society and culture. In fact, more and more power seems to be directed specifically at an assault on these principles. Suddenly the law of the jungle seems to have been re-established. "Might makes right" - are we really returning to that social order? It's hard to believe, yet irresponsible not to grapple with.

The term "fascism" has entered the chat. How could it not, when we see so many of the classic hallmarks of fascism in countries backsliding? Ultrnationalism, a dictatorial leader, belief in a natural social hierarchy, militarism, suppression of opposition through force...

What then must we do, we who still believe in growth, truth, conscience and democracy? It's a discouraging time, but all is not lost - we don't live under fascism yet, and therefore our actions now can have significant consequences in preventing it from developing.

In his book, *The Power of the Powerless*, Czech dissident Vaclav Havel says that before power becomes an overt and often violent conflict between opposing forces in society, it first plays out "in the theatre of the spirit and the conscience of society" (43). Havel says "If the main pillar of the [authoritarian] system is living a lie, then it is not surprising that the fundamental threat to it is living the truth. This is why it must be suppressed more severely than anything else" (40). He says the primary breeding ground for opposition to the totalitarian system is "living within the truth" (41).

Similarly, Gandhi called nonviolent civil disobedience satyagraha, a neologism he coined that's often translated as "truth force." The literal meaning is "to hold on to truth" or "to cling to truth" or "a tenacity in the pursuit of truth"

I've been absorbing the wisdom of these people who so successfully confronted power over and transformed it by building power with and power within. I've been feeling grief, even despair, about the seeming powerlessness of truth in our world today. The miasma of disinformation that has taken hold, the number of people who fervently believe lies. It's easy to feel like the power of truth is inadequate to confront fascism in our time.

But Gandhi and Havel know a lot more about resistance, and about how to bend the long arc of the universe towards justice, than I do. The power of disinformation was also overwhelming in Havel's time - *The Power of the Powerless* includes a long meditation on ideology. Havel explains that any ideology has an inherent weakness, because it is based on lies. It can't handle the truth.

Trump isn't just fighting us through traditional politics - he's fighting us through *affective* politics, through emotional manipulation. Through his control of the media and the creation of a parallel information ecosystem, he's going to spend the next few years telling us that Canada is broken, that we're a logical junior partner of the US, that their system is preferable to ours, that the US can free us from taxes, big government, a broken healthcare system, the opioid crisis, grievances about immigration, the imperative to fight climate change and the tradeoffs that requires, and any number of other maladies that have led to growing dissatisfaction with "the system" especially among young people. It's reassuring that currently so few Canadians believe this. But the real threat is that those numbers grow under a sustained campaign of both disinformation and economic warfare. So what are the truths that we need to hold onto, the power *with* and *within* that we need to cultivate?

John Ralston Saul has a book: *A Fair Country, Telling Truths about Canada* that I think should be essential reading in this moment. He shares that the best ideas about what it means to be Canadian - that we are a mosaic, not a melting pot, that diversity is our strength, that we can be what he calls "an inclusive circle that adapts as it expands" - all come from Indigenous cultures. *An inclusive circle that adapts as it expands...*right now we may feel more like circled wagons than an inclusive circle, as we face the intensity of the threat on our southern border.

But what's crucial right now is to remember exactly what makes that border worth defending in the first place.

In measures of power over like military spending, we consistently rank lower than our American neighbours. I grew up in a time when there was a serious hysteria about the "brain drain" - I vividly remember my conservative uncle's inferiority complex about our higher taxes and stronger welfare state, and his fear that Canada would fall further behind. Yet from that time, the 1990s, until now, we've consistently outpaced the US in measures of actual wellbeing like life expectancy, infant mortality, or income inequality. In Rutger Bregman's work on power, he explains how having less power can make you less confident, hesitant to voice an opinion. "Such feelings of uncertainty are convenient for those in power... Censorship becomes unnecessary, because people silence themselves."

How do we tell truths about our Canadian identity in ways that will give us the power with and the power within not just to preserve our sovereignty but to actually realize the *Canadian* dream? In the 90s I can't recall truth or reconciliation with Indigenous peoples, or respect for the immense contribution of their worldviews to our national identity, being part of the conversation. It was all brain drain and trickle down. We recovered from that particular miasma with a focus on how we can understand the truth of our unique history - that includes both Tommy Douglas and Medicare, *and* the horror of residential schools - and what that means for us today.

Jody Wilson Raybould writes in *The Star* "Indigenous peoples have been confronted with Trump-like leaders for centuries. They typically come in the form of Canadian government leaders and officials and, before that, the British Crown. For Indigenous peoples, the current, hostile rhetoric of Canada becoming the 51st state, the suggestion that borders be re-drawn, and that the economic interests of America must come first, echoes through hundreds of years of colonization. For Indigenous peoples, it is nothing new; it is simply an emperor in new clothing. In the face of efforts to eradicate us and our ways of life, we learned how to advocate and push back on intrusion into our lives, use public institutions and systems as a defence against a hostile state, build allies and alliances to bolster strength, and to maintain and adapt our systems of government and law. We also did these things with a focus on building consensus of approach, recognizing the importance and power of unity and our interconnection. All of which are values and practices we must all be upholding right now."

In this time of fear and intimidation, focus on what is true for you as a Canadian, what gives you power *within*, *satyagraha*, courage, *courage*. How does your identity as a Canadian shape your identity as a Unitarian Universalist? How does your identity as a Unitarian Universalist shape your identity as a Canadian?

Later today, our temporary Prime Minister Mark Carney is going to call an election. That's an opportunity for some truth telling - for us to share our truths about what it means to be Canadian, where our power comes from, what it would mean to realize our unfinished dream of truth and reconciliation. And we share those truths in Unitarian Universalist ways - centring compassion in human relations, our second principle, respecting the inherent worthiness and dignity of every person, our first principle, engaging in our own free and responsible search for truth and meaning.

I hope that as you come together in the months ahead, that you help each other hold onto and foster what Havel calls the "singular, explosive, incalculable political power of living within the truth." In this time of fear and intimidation, focus on what is true for you as a Canadian, what gives you power within. The Canadian dream is a bold one, a potential source of courage, that we can be an inclusive circle that adapts as it expands, that reconciliation and living in the truth are possible for an entire nation.

May you build power with and power within, defying a politics of lies with a fiery commitment to truth. May we use this moment to reflect more deeply on what we love about the idea of

Canada, not a vague sense of superiority or our own misguided exceptionalism, but a willingness to humbly grapple with the truth of our history and to put our elbows up to protect the land, its rightful stewards, and our unique identity. May it be so, and blessed be.