

Worthy of Trust: Who and What Can You Trust?

Sunday, March 2, 2025

Rev. Dr. Roger Jones, preaching

Unitarian Universalist Society of Sacramento

Hymns: “This Joy” by Shirley Caesar; “For All that Is Our Life” #128; “Wake Now, My Senses” #298.

Featured Music: “Simple Gifts,” a Shaker hymn by Elder Joseph Brackett, arr. Aaron Copland; “Count on Me,” by Bruno Mars, Philip Lawrence, Ari Levine (Anthony, vocal/ukulele; Irina, piano), “Gratitude” from Lyric Pieces, Op.62, No.2, by Edvard Grieg.

Reading

We have two readings from Nick Cave, an Australian songwriter, singer, and novelist. This first one includes his response to an adult who had lost his confidence in humanity and felt helpless to change the world:

Rather than feel impotent and useless, you must come to terms with the fact that as a human being you are infinitely powerful and take responsibility for this ... power. Even our smallest actions have potential for great change, positively or negatively, and the way in which we all conduct ourselves within the world *means something* With all respect, you have an obligation to stand up and take responsibility for that potential. It is your most ordinary and urgent duty.

And here is an excerpt of advice for living that Nick Cave wrote to a 13-year-old:

The everyday human gesture is always a heartbeat away from the miraculous — [remember] that ultimately, we make things happen through our actions, way beyond our understanding or intention; that our seemingly small ordinary human acts have untold consequences; that what we do in this world means something Our deeds, no matter how insignificant they may feel, are replete with meaning, and of vast consequence, and... they constantly impact upon the unfolding story of the world, whether we know it or not.ⁱ

Personal Reflection by Dawn, Worship Associate (printed after the sermon, but read it first!)

Sermon

As I go through my week, I try to notice examples of trust and reliability which make life possible, such as examples of trusting in strangers, in friends and loved ones, and in myself. Our Soul Matters theme this month is trust. Inside this envelope that I am holding up is a note card; on the outside is a postage stamp. For me the postage stamp symbolizes that countless Americans have relied the US Postal Service to deliver the mail for 250 years. Of course, many of us have had complaints about postal service mistakes over the years—late mail, lost mail, misdelivered mail. And a few postal workers have been prosecuted for stealing checks from the mail. But the postage stamp is a sign of my ongoing and overwhelming trust in the Postal Service. When I mail a letter, donation, or birthday card, I’m confident it will be delivered. It’s all about trust. What ordinary activities occur to *you* as examples of demonstrating trust in your world? It’s worth noticing and giving thanks for them.

Trust is the foundation of relationships among neighbors, participants in a community, and members of a nation. It is crucial for healthy families and partnerships, for friendships, and

for business and professional reputations. In these troubled times, however, trust among people feels frayed and stretched. It's disheartening and even scary. We suffer when our trust is broken. We grieve the loss of trust in our world. We long for more trust. What can we trust? Who is trustworthy?

On my mind this morning of course, are all of the ongoing atrocities of the current U.S. presidential administration. In service to this regime's unconstitutional grab for total power, all of its gaslighting and propaganda, all of its cruelty and its lies are intended to deceive us and divide us. These are tactics to spread hostility among neighbors, to poison our confidence in our government and other public institutions.

One way to resist this mistrust is by continuing to trust those leaders and public servants who try to earn our trust and keep it. To be sure, we hold them accountable, but people worthy of trust will accept honest criticism. A way to lessen mistrust in society is for us to choose to be worthy of trust ourselves. We gain trust through honesty and reliability, and by taking responsibility for our mistakes. And we gain trust by practicing empathy when someone else's trust has been broken and by showing compassion for ourselves when it happens to us.

Many of us have been scammed by phone callers pretending to be debt collectors or the Internal Revenue Service, by emails luring us to click on a link which leads to theft of personal information. We have been cheated by repair shops and online retailers. We have been manipulated by some of our family members and friends.

Typical feelings in the wake of a deception include shock, anger, confusion, and fear. We may also feel embarrassment and shame. This is why many of us who are taken advantage of by scammers do not even report the crime. We are embarrassed. One way to help a victim after the fact, one way to show our care, is to refrain from blaming them for their loss. They made a mistake, for sure. But they were not the culprit; they were a victim.

It's important to remember that scammers, fraudsters, and thieves are not new. Rip-off artists have been around forever. The *con man* character in literature, folk lore, and the movies is an enduring tradition because they have always been around. The full name is *confidence man*, which means a person who gains your confidence in order to take advantage of you. The difference in our time is that technology and social media have enabled scammers to reach millions of people at one click.

When I watch a YouTube video, I usually skip the advertisements, but sometimes I will let one play, at least for a minute or two. I am amazed at the slick ways they market nutritional supplements, medicines for all kinds of problems, and mechanical gadgets. In a sinister tone, they say: "This is what the medical establishment doesn't want you to know about." Or: "This new development is disrupting the industry." They are talented in hooking our attention, exploiting our hopes, and blurring our judgment.

Dawn's earlier story of being swindled outside a New York train station brings up memories of those times that I was tricked and stolen from. Most of the times I've been deceived have been brief moments when I wasn't able to pause in order to evaluate the situation --or I neglected to pause. I replied to an email too fast before I noticed what seemed off about the message, or before noticing that the sender's email wasn't authentic. Once when I sat in my car at a stoplight near a freeway on-ramp, a mother and teenage child came to my window to ask if they could borrow \$10 for gasoline. They gestured at an old four-door car, sitting on the side

of the road with kids in it. I handed her the money; she asked for my address so she could pay me back, which she said she definitely wanted to do. It all happened very fast. It *always* happens very fast. In the moments that followed, I concluded that I had been scammed.

A famous line from the Psalms of the Hebrew Scriptures puts it this way: “Be still and know that I am God.” (Psalm 46) To theists, there is reassurance in trusting that a God of love cares about each one of us. If we turn to this Love in times of trouble or uncertainty, we can receive guidance and strength. Yet part of this Bible verse can even be helpful for nontheists too: the first part, which says “Be still.” When we are in a crisis of decision, it can help to slow down, take a deep breath, and consider what’s going on. Be still. If we can remember to do this, perhaps we will pay attention to what we are feeling in the gut.

Dawn told us a story about getting ripped off of \$30 by a stranger in the big city who insisted on taking her and her son to a taxi. She said that faint alarm bells went off inside her, but she was in a hurry to get to the bus station, minding both her luggage and her toddler, and in an unfamiliar place. Anything that’s happening fast is likely to bring a reaction from us before we have a chance to check in with ourselves. Be still. We should never give more attention to urgent requests or demands than we give to our own thought process and our own gut instincts. Be still and know. And even if you don’t know, be still so you can sort things out.

Even though we long for more trust in the world, we do not have to trust without limits. We don’t have to surrender our discernment or ignore our instincts for self-care. We can ask for help. We can take our time. We can learn to discern who it is whom we can trust. And we must begin by trusting ourselves. We notice our feelings. We honor our experience and our wisdom. We *think through* a situation. And perhaps we can process things with a reliable person, group, or community. We can ask other people to hear what we are dealing with and ask them to share their perspective on it.

Everybody benefits from the support, wisdom, and perspectives of other people. Unfortunately, in this country we are lonelier and more isolated from other people than we have ever been. Consequently, we are more vulnerable. This means that finding and building sources of community is crucial for our wellbeing.

A religious community like UUSS is a place where we affirm that coming together with trust and care for one another is more important than having a uniform list of beliefs about theology. We strive to be worthy of trust and care. Even so, entering any community for the first time can be daunting. It is an act of trust. This is why many visitors come for the first time at the invitation of a friend, because it feels more comfortable. This is why people might check out our services online before showing up. [Waving to the Zoom camera.]

To be sure, many people had hurtful experiences in other religious communities, which left them wary. Or they have impressions from the media about religion which are filled with harsh intolerance, especially by people who politicize religion to gain power. Each of us has our own unique journey of gaining trust, losing trust, and learning to trust again. Making a free choice to participate in any community is an act of trust, not only in that community but in yourself. You can trust your own sense of discernment and wisdom. If you care for yourself, you can trust yourself.

In the book *Understanding and Building Confidence*, author Charlie Wardle writes: “A bird sitting on a tree is never afraid of the branch breaking, because its trust is not in the branch but in its own wings.”

Whatever injury, theft, or loss we might have suffered, when our trust is broken in the process, it’s an added source of harm. Often this involves blaming ourselves. And as we heard in Dawn’s example, other people’s reactions of criticism and ridicule can add to the pain we’re already feeling.

“What did you expect?” That is not a constructive thing to say after someone has been deceived. But of course, punishing remarks are never constructive, whether from a stranger, someone close to us, or from ourselves. Indulging in self-blame, repeating over and over, “How could I be so foolish,” adds no wisdom. It adds only pain.

Unless we are super lucky or totally isolated, all of us will experience betrayals of our trust, in ways large and small, from strangers as well as those we know. Given this fact, we can learn to practice compassion. We can care for ourselves and for others. For example, to ask, “How are you feeling?” is way of showing empathy. Whether someone is recovering from a broken shoulder or a financial scam, whether grieving a death, a breakup or a betrayal, it can bring comfort to say: “I’m sorry that you’re hurting.”

Moreover, we can pay attention to others when they show empathy and kindness to other people, and we can observe when they don’t show it. Doing so can help us decide whom *we* can trust. We shouldn’t stay in a harmful situation or let others take advantage of us. We can remain on our toes, noticing behaviors that indicate reasons for keeping a safe distance.

The late Maya Angelou said: “I don’t trust people who don’t love themselves and tell me, ‘I love you.’ ... There is an African saying which is: Be careful when a naked person offers you a shirt.”

How do you decide whether you will trust another person, and how much, and how quickly? Of course, we human beings let each other down all the time. We disappoint the trust of others, and we cause harm. But we can take responsibility for our actions; we can apologize, we can ask how we can set things right, we can try to do better. And the degree to which we are able to accept responsibility will be a key factor for others in deciding how much to trust us.

David Richo is a Buddhist teacher and writer and a psychotherapist. In his book, *Daring to Trust*, he gives us this advice: Whether making new friends, finding a community, or seeking a partner, we should look for people who make a practice of being worthy of trust in *all* parts of their lives. If a person seems to be honest, generous, kind, and respectful not merely toward us, and not just right now, but in how they are committed to living their life, perhaps this is evidence of who they really choose to be.

Richo says we can *trust ourselves* to observe another’s behaviors. We can learn if they are *worthy* of trust. At the same time, we act and speak in ways so that others can learn to trust us, can learn that we are, in turn, worthy of their trust. Richo says: “Our focus [can shift] from ourselves as victims of others’ betrayals to ourselves as [keepers] of our own commitment to being worthy of trust.”

Trust is not a foolproof guarantee; it is a practice. If we are wise, we look for it in others. If we want to be happy, we strive to be worthy of trust in the way we live our lives.

As the writer and singer Nick Cave says, we all have the potential to make a difference, whether positive or negative. We make a difference beyond what we can see or know at present. When we act on our potential for self-trust, empathy, and kindness, for apology and repair, and for reliability and honesty, we can make a difference in the world. He writes that everyone has “an obligation to take responsibility for your potential. It is your most ordinary and urgent duty.”

We can bring more trust into the world by demonstrating that we are worthy of trust. We can bring more wisdom and happiness to our own lives, and we can be a source of reassurance and hope to those around us. So may we strive to live and so may it be. Amen.

Personal Reflection by Dawn, Worship Associate (was delivered before the sermon)

When my son was about four – so this was many years ago – we took a trip together. He was really into public transit, so we decided to go first by train, then by bus, from NH to NJ, to visit my parents.

The train part was easy and fun. We landed at Grand Central Station. Huge. Gorgeous. Teeming with people. A tang of urine in the air. If you’ve been there, you know.

I got off the train with my four-year-old (who was dressed like a pirate). Suitcases, snacks, backpack, purse – trying to juggle it all. I wasn’t sure which exit we needed to take to get to a cab, to get to the Port Authority, for our bus. So, I stood there for a few minutes, trying to orient myself, looking quite lost, I’m sure.

A man approached, and asked if I needed help, which I did, so I said yes, I was looking for the cabs. He pointed to an exit and said he’d take me there, and I said no, that wasn’t necessary, but he started walking alongside us, engaging me (Where was I going? What were we doing?) and Eli (Anything happening these days on the high seas?). He was nice. He offered to help with our luggage, but I said no, thank you, and tightened my grip, just a hint of an alarm going off in my head.

He kept a stream of patter going as we exited the station and approached a line of cabs, saying he worked with the cabby that was up next, and we’d be all set. There’s fixed pricing between Grand Central Station and the Port Authority, he said, \$30, as I was heaving our suitcases across the back seat and getting Eli in. The man had chatted with the driver, and was now back at my side, repeating \$30, that’s the fare, so I handed it to him. He took the money . . . and ran. I burst into tears.

The driver turned around, looking puzzled. He asked why I was crying, and I managed to choke out, “He robbed me!” The driver shook his head and said, “You gave him money!? You’re an idiot.”

My parents, when I got to them, said the same. As did my sister, who lived in NY. And my city-savvy friends. Poor, naive Dawn. So easily duped. With a bit of a chuckle, like, “Well, what did you expect?”

I’ll tell you what I expected: not that. I didn’t expect to be swindled.

I was bothered by what happened for a long time. I still am. It’s not the \$30. And it’s not that there are people like that man out there, who deliberately set out to rip other people off. Well, it is that, but what bothered me *most* was the reaction I got. The fact that, in the eyes of people who loved me, this was my fault. I fell for an obvious scam. People who loved me seemed to be saying, “Don’t be like that. Don’t trust people you don’t know.” That bothered me.

I *wanted* to be able to trust people I didn’t know. Certainly, once someone shows themselves to be a bad actor, I no longer trust them, but I’m talking about the part that comes before, when there is no history. I wanted to enter those kinds of interactions in good faith, assuming the other person is acting in good faith, too.

I didn't want to change that, to give the man who robbed me that kind of power. But was that naive? Was I setting myself up for future harm?

What I'm describing happened 30 years ago. I eventually moved on. But I feel like I'm back in the same struggle now. I think many of us are. The trust that I held onto, despite what happened with that man, the belief that, for the most part, people are good, and kind, and not intent on hurting me – that's gotten pretty shaken. I still trust the people I know. And as soon as I hear someone is a UU, I trust them, too. But strangers, people I have no experience with, I'm wary in the way I hadn't wanted to be.

I think that's where we are, as a nation. Wide-scale public trust is seriously compromised. Maybe even . . . gone? And there's no easy fix, because the harm being perpetrated is real. The bad actors, and the people complicit with the bad actors, they're widespread. So, trust in one another as a default? Maybe, at this point, that is foolish. But it's painful for me to think that. It's not in keeping with who I am.

I'm trying to find the right place to come down, a way to maintain an open-heart without leaving myself vulnerable to people who think nothing of hurting me. It's exhausting, this work of constant discernment. But discernment is important, I think. We can't let the bad actors, as powerful as they might be, change the fundamentals of who we are.

ⁱⁱ "How to Grow Up: Nick Cave's Advice to a 13-year-old," *The Marginalian*, ed. Maria Popova, accessed March 1, 2025. <https://www.themarginalian.org/2023/04/20/nick-cave-advice/>