There’s an anonymous story online that goes something like this. Once upon a time, a man spread rumors that his neighbor was a thief. As a result, the neighbor was arrested. A few days later, the neighbor was proven innocent of the charges. The neighbor felt humiliated after his release, and decided to sue the man for falsely accusing him.

In court, the man told the judge, “They were just comments! They didn’t harm anyone!” Before passing sentence on the case, the judge told the man to write down all the comments he made about his neighbor. He was to then cut up the pieces of paper and, on the way home, release the pieces of paper into the wind. After he did that, he was to come back the next day to hear his sentence.

The man did as the judge instructed and, upon returning the next day, was told that, before sentence would be passed, the man had to go and find all the pieces of paper he threw out yesterday.

“I can’t do that!” the man exclaimed, “The wind must have spread them and I won’t know where to find them!”

“The same way, simple comments may destroy the honor of a person to such an extent that one is not able to fix it,” the judge replied. Suddenly, the man realized his error, and asked his neighbor for forgiveness.

What strikes me about this story is we’re never given a glimpse of the man’s thought processes. Did he genuinely believe his neighbor has committed the theft? Did he have what he believed to be evidence that seemed to show the truth of his words? If he was hooked up to a polygraph prior to his neighbor being proven innocent, would he have been shown to be telling the truth, or at least the truth as he saw it?

The moral for me is that our truth can easily destroy the lives and reputations of others, to no fault of their own. Words and actions, even those we believe to be true, can have devastating consequences for other people. When they do, no amount of apologies can ever truly fix things, because the consequences are carried throughout the world by the various winds.

What if the neighbor hadn’t been proven innocent? What if they sat in prison for years for a crime he didn’t commit? Imagine if their family and friends had turned their backs on them, wrongly believing that their loved one was someone whom they didn’t truly know, turned into a monster by those they loved the most?

Some may say I’m exaggerating the situation, but people’s lives have been irreparably altered over false accusations. Remember Richard Jewell, the security guard who was falsely accused of planting a bomb during the 1996 bombing of the Atlanta Summer Olympics? The word of several news outlets led to false accusations which destroyed Jewell’s reputation. Even though these outlets could argue they were merely searching for the truth, was their search responsible if it destroyed the career and reputation of an innocent man?

In the search for truth, for who committed a deadly crime, an innocent man’s life was made a sacrifice. A man’s life hung on the fate of wild rumors which were spread about him and tossed into the wind to go where they would.

Our focus for the month of November is on our fourth principle, the free and responsible search for truth and meaning. Understandably, given our movement’s traditional advocacy of religious freedom, it’s the “free” part that is usually emphasized when talking about this principle. This is not to say that freedom of religious conviction is unimportant. However, our spiritual ancestors, in their wisdom, realized that freedom had to be tempered, that unrestrained freedom could lead to abuse and potentially tear apart congregations and even our movement.

To give an example from our Unitarian Universalist history, consider the widespread support the theory of eugenics once enjoyed within our ranks. Throughout the late-nineteenth and early- to mid-twentieth centuries, many within our ranks directly or indirectly supported the theory of eugenics, the idea that the perfect human race could be created through scientific interventions into human evolution. A well-known quote from Supreme Court Justice and Unitarian Oliver Wendell Holmes declared:

We have seen more than once that the public welfare may call upon the best citizens for their lives. It would be strange if it could not call upon those who already sap the strength of the state for these lesser sacrifices... It is better for all the world if, instead of waiting to execute degenerate offspring for crime, or to let them starve for their imbecility, society can prevent those who are manifestly unfit from continuing their kind... Three generations of imbeciles are enough.

The problem with eugenics is that it advanced a free search for truth and meaning without considering the consequences for the people who fell short of this perfect benchmark. Women, usually poor, mentally ill, immigrants and/or women of color, were forcibly sterilized without their knowledge or consent in what was believed to be a necessary act to prevent more of Holmes’s “imbeciles.” Immigration from non-Western European countries was either severely limited or forbidden altogether. And eugenics provided an excuse to deny people of color, the economically poor, immigrants, and the physically and mentally disabled their full rights.

Eugenics propagated a theory of supremacy and tossed it to the wind without any regard for where its seeds would land.

It was only World War II and Hitler’s adoption of eugenic theory that caused many Unitarians and Universalists to reconsider their support. By then, the damage had been done in the lives of so many innocent people, sometimes permanently in the case of women who were denied the ability to ever have a family.

And, like the neighbor in my opening story, the consequences of these actions were far and wide. The devastation of finding out one would never have children. The pain of seeing fellow humans treat you like a subpar object that doesn’t belong in the world. And, for our movement, it meant that we’ve never been able to live up to our stated aspiration of attracting all people who would covenant to walk with us, regardless of class, race, ability, and national origin. Classism and racism are legacies which continue to influence our movement to this day with little end in sight. Most Unitarian Universalists, even today, are white middle- and upper-class people.

On a more personal level, I see examples on a near-daily basis of people irresponsibly engaged in personal conflict while calling it a free search for truth and meaning. To give an example, our current culture includes an element of “calling out” wrongs, of publicly shaming people we disagree with for even the smallest infractions. The #GamerGate incident from a few years ago in which feminist journalists and writers were harassed and even received death and rape threats simply for criticizing certain video games is a prime example, as is the recent rise of call-out culture on college campuses, as documented by *The Atlantic*, which has lead many college students to call-out even the smallest infractions among their fellow students and professors on social media.

Like our neighbor, casual words uttered about situations we have not fully thought through can be devastating, spreading distrust into the wind. Our words, once they are ought there in the world, cannot be taken back, and will continue to affect long into the future, even when forgiveness and reparation has been offered.

It’s not that there aren’t times to call out bad behavior as a form of accountability; certainly, the recent accusations of rape and sexual assault against men such as Bill Cosby, Harvey Weinstein, and Roy Moore are examples of when such call outs are necessary. But calling out people when we could more easily call them back in is a toxic behavior that breaks down trust and does little to encourage others to change the behavior we find so objectionable, whether they really should or not.

Can we possibly justify such reactions as responsible? They’re free, sure, but they do nothing to engender any sort of trust, relationship, or change in the greater world. To paraphrase a colleague with whom I recently had a conversation on this topic, any search for truth and meaning that denies the other six principles is not responsible.

Like our story this morning, the consequences of an irresponsible search for truth and meaning can be devastating. adrienne marie brown, author of the brilliant 2017 book *Emergent Strategy*, suggests that what we sow at the personal level spirals out into the wider world. The seeds we plant with our words and actions have the potential to nourish the world or break it down. So, when our personal lives are full of toxicity, she says, this spills out into our families, our culture, and the organizations we are a part of. “[W]hat we all in our home and love realm shows up with our friends, or with our families, or with our coworkers, bosses, or partner organizations. It is our pattern, our shape.”

brown names some of the ways people do this:

“We learn to bond through gossip, venting, and destroying, rather than cultivating solutions together.”

“We learn to manipulate each other and sell things to each other, rather than learning to collaborate and evolve together.”

“We learn to compete with each other in a scarcity-based economy that denies and destroys the abundant world we actually live in.”

Or, to borrow some of writer Maisha Z. Johnson’s signs that a call-out is toxic, the behavior is not focused on the outcome, not in the best interest of the larger community, and centers yourself.

Such ways of being with one another break down trust and promote ways of being with one another and the world which, if allowed to run unchecked, deny the basic humanity and interconnectedness of other people and pit us against one another.

Yes, brown believes, if we are to create real change in the world, we must find new ways to be with one another, new ways of being in the world, that don’t promote such toxic culture, more responsible ways. She believes you do not have the right to traumatize even abusive people, to attack them personally or publicly, or to sabotage anyone else’s health. There is hurt in abusive actions, and, while healing that pain is not your responsibility, exacerbating that pain is not your justified right.

brown suggests that we must understand the other by constantly asking, “Why?” through a frame of compassion. She believes that this can provide a basic framework for transforming the conditions around us. In the words of author Margaret Wheatley, “You can’t hate someone whose story you know.” I dare say that a responsible search for truth and meaning requires each of us to understand one another better, especially when we don’t agree with another person, or when we are tempted to deny their humanity. Even supposed human monsters have pain and trauma behind their psychosis.

This isn’t to say we should excuse people’s behavior, or that there aren’t consequences. But it is to say that we must learn to understand it. Had the neighbor sought to understand the man’s behavior, he might not have made false accusations. I daresay there’s probably some pain in the neighbor’s background as well that lead him to behave as he did. We must understand him as well, through the lens of compassion, dignity, and trust.

As an example of what a responsible search for truth and meaning can accomplish, I turn to All Souls, one of our largest physical congregations, located in Tulsa, Oklahoma. Carlton Pearson, a local Black evangelical minister, had an epiphany in which he became a universalist. As a result, he was excommunicated from his denomination and lost three-quarters of his congregation.

Now the folks at All Souls could have made a lot of assumptions, such that Pearson’s congregation were vastly different or just wrong in their charismatic interpretation of Christianity. They could have chalked it up to the toxicity of fundamentalist Christianity. They could have found a thousand different reasons Pearson and his flock were different from them.

Instead, they reached out to them in their time of need, and entered into a long dialogue with them. They even offered Pearson worship space on Sunday mornings, and, gradually, some All Souls members began attending the more charismatic third service at the church. The bond became so close that, when Pearson decided to leave for a new congregation, he instructed his group not to call a new minister, but to become a part of All Souls. Today, All Souls is one of the few truly racially and theologically diverse congregation in our movement, and all because they decided to take a risk and reach out to people who, on the surface, seemed different from them.

All Souls’s search for truth and meaning required them to reach out to others in times of need in order to be responsible. They did not dismiss Pearson and his congregation for being different, or deny their inherent worth and dignity. They acted from a place of trust and compassion, and are a stronger congregation for it.

I believe that, without responsibility, our search has the potential to destroy communities, churches, families, relationships, and even the world, but, with it, we can strengthen every soul we touch. We need new ways of being with each other and the world, ways which are not currently being promoted by the larger culture, if we are to thrive, maybe even survive, as a species. So, no, to emphasize a point from a sermon a few weeks ago, you cannot engage in any behavior or believe whatever you want and be within the seven principles. What if our congregations, though, could promote a free AND responsible search for truth and meaning as a way of upholding our other principles. We are a covenantal faith after all, dating back to the origin of our faith, so we’ve been talking about how to be in community our entire existence. Maybe, just maybe, church is a place where we could learn to create and experiment with these new ways, and be the change that transforms the world for the better.

May it be so.