

Maintaining Integrity in a Post-Truth Age
Sunday, November 4, 2018
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I was considering the other day that truth is based on shared realities. For example, if at this moment a baby started crying and crying, some of us would reach to take care of the baby, comfort the mom, others would smile and think, oh well, that's life, others would become aggravated. The fact is that the baby is crying but the truth is that the baby becomes something different for different people depending on the shared reality of the people who hear the baby. Do you like babies, have a history of babies crying around you while others respond with joy, hang out in places where there are noises you cannot control and find this okay, or need things to be predictable and on cue?

All of this determines your truth about that crying and your opinion therefore about what should or should not be done about that baby crying.

So what is a post-truth age, as it has been coined by many since the election of this administration? Is there a truth that conforms to facts that are universal? Does this matter? I consider the process of naming alcoholism as a disease for instance. This truth based on this fact has allowed healing and restoration. It is what I will call a truth that leads to responsible communities.

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If we did not all agree that it is true that this is a good place, worthy of supporting, it would fall apart; if we did not agree in the inherent worth and dignity of all people, we would not have gathered for a vigil for those shot at the Tree of Life Synagogue, if we did not agree that it is true that this we and this world are unfinished and it is our jobs to contribute some beauty to the project, we would not be here right now; if we did not believe in climate change, we would consume and waste in ways that we do not.

These truths lead us to being a responsible community, for accepting the consequence of our interconnectedness, for being accountable to one another, in doing so we become what I would call a responsible truth community.

As Thanksgiving approaches, I consider an example of a truth community based on destroying mutuality by twisting facts to manipulate reason. Racism is an example of this, anti-semitism, homophobia, misogyny as is the The Manifest Destiny document , a

document that is one of our founding documents as a nation that is an example of taking many facts and ideas and using them to achieve domination and control of all of the American land and native people by manipulating the the votes of those who would agree that this breaking of lives and land and a people, this making of a war, was not only right, but part of a Divine Will.

We all know how settlers of European descent justified the subjugation of the Native American people who inhabited this continent for nearly 10,000 years before the settlers arrived. The concept of Manifest Destiny held that the European civilization was more “advanced” than Native American civilization, and therefore the European settlers had the right, or even the duty, to “civilize” (and also Christianize) the native population.

Prof. Ken Chestek in his sermon title, “How the West was Won: Manifest Destiny and the Myth of Divine Right” suggests that Manifest Destiny is based on a much more deeply-embedded master story. It is based on the Myth of Divine Right. More troublesome, he says that our modern society is still locked in the fallacies of exceptionalism this myth fosters. Chestek writes that understanding how this myth unconsciously affects our thinking is the first step to avoiding the problems it creates.¹

Manifest Destiny, one of the founding documents of our nation, reasoned that only white Christian people had the right to be free and well; everyone else was ignorant, barbaric, savage. This was seen as based on facts. It created a community of truth that saw itself as free to dominate and convert the Native American peoples and call it Divine destiny in the process.

It seems less relevant to argue about whether we as a nation are in a time of post-truth than to consider how truths and facts are being used to include or exclude, to heal or erode, to provide for or bar from entry, to increase consideration or arrogance, to foster community or division, to create peace or foment hatred.

Perhaps taking responsibility for the creative power of truths and facts would get us further than arguing times and dates and amounts and portions. When one set of facts and not another is accepted, what kind of reality is supported? Who benefits and how? Do we grow toward health, community, awareness, well being, peace, accountability? If not, perhaps the facts we are using to construct our truths need to be reassessed, not only for their accuracy but for their salience in a world that requires reasoned discourse, measured response, and accountability in order to go on.

¹ <http://www.uularamie.org/2014/01/27/february-9-how-the-west-was-won-manifest-destiny-and-the-myth-of-divine-right-ken-chestek/>

This example seems relevant:

On Tuesday, October 16, President Donald Trump started tweeting.

“The United States has strongly informed the President of Honduras that if the large Caravan of people heading to the U.S. is not stopped and brought back to Honduras, no more money or aid will be given to Honduras, effective immediately!”

Vice President Mike Pence also tweeted:

“Spoke to President Hernandez of Honduras about the migrant caravan heading to the U.S. Delivered strong message from @POTUS: no more aid if caravan is not stopped. Told him U.S. will not tolerate this blatant disregard for our border & sovereignty.”

The apparent impetus for this outrage was a segment on Fox News that morning that detailed a migrant caravan thousands of miles away in Honduras. The caravan, which began sometime in mid-October, is made up of refugees fleeing violence in their home country. Over the next few weeks, Trump turned the caravan into a national emergency. Trump told his supporters that there were “criminals and unknown Middle Easterners” in the caravan, a claim that is unsubstantiated. Defense Secretary James Mattis ordered more troops to the border. A Fox News host took it upon herself to ask Homeland Security Secretary Kirstjen Nielsen whether there was “any scenario under which if people force their way across the border they could be shot at,” to which Nielsen responded, “We do not have any intention right now to shoot at people.”²

Representative Matt Gaetz of Florida wondered whether George Soros—the wealthy Jewish philanthropist whom Trump and several members of the U.S. Senate blamed for the protests against Supreme Court Justice Brett Kavanaugh, and who was recently targeted with a bomb—was behind the migrant caravan.

Chuck Holton, an NRATV’s viewer, told NRATV’s viewers that this carava, which he calls an invasion, is being sent to the United States so the migrants could vote: “It’s telling that a bevy of left-wing groups are partnering with a Hungarian-born billionaire and the Venezuelan government to try to influence the 2018 midterms by sending Honduran migrants north in the thousands.”³

On Laura Ingraham’s Fox News show, one guest said, “These individuals are not immigrants—these are people that are invading our country,” as another guest asserted that they were seeking “the destruction of American society and culture.”⁴

On Saturday morning a gunman walked into the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh and killed 11 people. The massacre capped off a week of terrorism, in which one man mailed

² <https://www.theatlantic.com/amp/article/574213/>

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

bombs to nearly a dozen Trump critics and another killed two black people in a grocery store after failing to force his way into a black church.

Before committing the Tree of Life massacre, the shooter, who blamed Jews for the caravan of “invaders” and who raged about it on social media, made it clear that he was furious at the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, a Jewish group that helps resettle refugees in the United States. He shared posts on Gab, a social-media site popular with the alt-right, expressing alarm at the sight of “massive human caravans of young men from Honduras and El Salvador invading America thru our unsecured southern border.” And then he wrote, “HIAS likes to bring invaders in that kill our people. I can’t sit by and watch my people get slaughtered. Screw your optics, I’m going in.”⁵

We all have some responsibility to one another to tell the truth, which means not only naming the facts to the best of our abilities, but assessing the impact of the truth that these facts nurture. The community of truth built around this arrangement of fact and fallacy works to create fear, hatred, anger and violence and is one that we must oppose, not with slogans or signs but by building another community of truth that demands compassion, integrity, accountability and reasoned response. The facts that support this need not be fabricated. Our interconnection is alive from our physics to our mystics. It is as old as other foundational truth-building documents founded in principles of democracy and equality that Americans also gather around to support and live out.

There is more than one truth alive amongst us and it is our obligation in this community of truth to enact truths of welcome, accountability, compassion, commitment, and thoughtful interchange every day with the way we live our lives.

Where are we to find the courage and stamina for this when political and moral irresponsibility are all around and through us? When despair, which I believe is a sense that we cannot effect change on something that is deeply wrong, has entered the background of our lives and seems to play there like a bad commercial jingle we just can’t shake!

I come back here. And breathe. And rest in this our beloved community, not to bypass the immensity of the horror of what is around us, but to remember and take in the salve of the truth that we are all accountable here which is the good news because it means we can still make a difference.

What can this difference look like? I think it needs to be an integrity that we have not before laid claim to, which is about recognizing the effect of truths we tell and withhold. Which truths do we watch, support, engage, amplify with our lives? I am not suggesting we bury our heads, just that while we are plugged in and raising our voices at the television and computer screens, we must promise ourselves the maintenance of more life giving truths as an act of resistance.

⁵ <https://www.theatlantic.com/amp/article/574213/>

Tell me, what sustains you, what gives you life, and hope and courage and fosters compassion in your heart? Shout it out:

Telling the truth that we are all one people, interconnected beyond and through time and space, bound through fate and climate and economy and tide, is a radical act of creative truth telling that offers us all more room to live, offers us all the capacity to imagine that but for the grace of love, the caravan that passes by our souls and calls out for us to join it possessionless, homeless, comes for us all held only at bay by love, by love.

Our 4th principle is a free and responsible search for truth and meaning. Truth creates meaning. Freedom creates a responsibility to carry truths that are worthy of us, that foster what is required of us, that build around and between us beloved community. Anything else is beneath us as peace longing people.

May it be so.
Amen.