

Anchoring One's Values

“At least I can be honest with myself.” Russian ballerina Truth is an axis that aligns a human being’s internal voice or conscience with the will of that person’s higher power—a kind of human-centric GPS alerting us to stay honest with ourselves. A ballerina who defected from the Bolshoi in Russia after Putin’s invasion of Ukraine said, “At least I can be honest with myself.”¹ Without truth, “greatness,” “making great again,” “we are better off,” and/or other claims can be delusion, which is why care is needed with what we call “truth.” **The axis of the existential dimension of our identities tracks whatever dialogue is engaged in between an individual’s perceptions and what that individual believes is greater than one’s own self**— whether that “greater power” be belief in a divine power, or the state, an individual’s will to power, the AI of a super computer, advertising, sport heroes, fantasies, lady luck, the solipsism of the self, etc. Truth is “the oxygen in the air of democracy,” Bill Moyers said.² Rep. Jamie Raskin (D-MD) expressed hope that the legacy of the House Select Committee’s work of investigating the January 6 attack on the US Capitol would be their “unswerving devotion to the facts, evidence, and the Constitution.”³ Martin Luther King, Jr. reflects that “man dies when he refuses to stand up for truth.”⁴ Despite such inspirations, truth did not fare overly well during the pandemic years. TIME Magazine’s man of the year was someone who calls lies “truth,” a very Orwellian take on language! Multiple books and articles have drawn comparisons between political entanglements in America and Orwell’s 1984, Huxley’s *Brave New World*, and the *Matrix*. The decline of civil discourse reached new lows. Politicians seemed unable or unwilling to discern even generally agreed upon facts apart from their personal fictions and wills to power. Referring to a possible vacancy on the Supreme Court, Sen. Lindsey Graham (R-SC) told *The Atlantic’s* editor-in-chief, Jeffrey Goldberg, “If an opening comes in the last year of...Trump’s term, and the primary process has started, we’ll wait till the next election.”⁵ But after the death of Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, Graham attempted to rationalize his subsequent about-face with references to shifts in power. Even Graham seems to have little regard for his own words: “You could use my words against me and you’d be absolutely right.”⁶

Mitch McConnell seemed to call a spade a spade when he stated Trump’s refusal to admit defeat in 2020 and work for a peaceful transfer of power as called for by the U.S. Constitution, was “a disgraceful dereliction of duty, politically and morally.”⁷ Then he flip-flopped and said okay, he would support such a person again. Steven Colbert spoke only slightly tongue in cheek when he remarked on the way some have come to believe “truth” is whatever they decide it is:⁸ For example, I can decide when the Panama Canal was built or where the boundaries of Ukraine are located. Or perhaps that was your car, but hey, now it’s my car! The superpower in which we put our trust determines not only the truth we hear back inside of us and respond to, but also our deeds, i.e., the way in which we treat others. Christians believe we access truth with our minds and our hearts: “I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts.” (Jeremiah 31:33) “All who belong to truth hear my voice.” (John 18:37) Today, perhaps we have deprioritized truth? Fixing an economy, resolving a war, achieving what seems impossible—all mean nothing if our claims are not rooted in truth because without truth, nothing has meaning. Without a compass guiding conscience with a magnetism or gravitational pull that is not of our own making, propaganda flourishes and we spin in a world of spin, going nowhere. In such case, what is heard center stage are the largest number, loudest voices, most dramatic conflicts, and/or most brutal forces of power. That accounts only for what we do to ourselves, apart from disinformation campaigns deliberately spread by hostile domestic and foreign actors. Veteran journalist and Nobel Peace Prize winner Maria Ressa issues a dire warning about the defense of truth in the digital age. She says we risk losing the information war to adversarial artificial intelligence and to authoritarian governments who can weaponize technology. Micro-targeting differs from overt advertising in that it “sells your weakest moment to a message, to someone who will pay for it....And that nudges you. And when it becomes relentless, it becomes information operations.”⁹

After I showed her pictures and news articles about Tank Man, I recall a friend of mine from China still did not believe the 1989 massacre at Tiananmen Square *really* occurred, as many in the U.S. today still do not believe Joe Biden *really* won the 2020 election. Not only was there a lack of integrity in many of our political leaders during much of the pandemic, but some in the public had trouble believing even the *science* of those who worked non-stop to develop vaccines in order to save lives. Doctors and nurses, surrounded by front line deaths, begged us to get vaccinated and wear masks. But information fluctuated as new data kept changing the certainty of what even scientists knew. Both the changing data as well as some inevitable propaganda—each side accusing the other of “weaponizing” something—intensified public skepticism. Climate change—when out of sight—was also out of mind, and thus conveniently kicked down the road. It did not help matters that during the pandemic, the country was providing weapons to Ukraine after Russia’s invasion of that country, and even more so to Israeli in its wars with Hamas and then Hezbollah. Because, as has long been acknowledged, the **first** casualty of war is...truth. And so it seems we ended much where we began, except that the pandemic had morphed: we were left not with an invisible and deadly virus completely and coldly indifferent to the destruction of human lives, but with viruses of anger and hatred now infecting human hearts—eroding trust in our nation, in each other, in our selves. “One’s word—trust—is the coin of the realm,” Mark Shields once commented.¹⁰ Trust is built on truth. Rep. Jamie Raskin (D-MD) states, “In a democracy there’s a great hunger for truth.”¹¹ We hunger for truth because it is what makes us free. It heals divisions. Even in traditional media, however, lies have increasingly become a form of “humor,” which many seem to find entertaining. Although a character is shown doing otherwise, a woman tells her daughter she did not wear the daughter’s dress. At the start of the pandemic, a character in an ad for a new *comedy* states, “That’s all I do is lie to my kids—drive them places and lie.”¹² In 2021, an ad for a Toyota Highlander shows a father in the car asking children in the car if they remember what they are not to tell their Mom. The ad states the car is “perfect for not so perfect families.” Presumably, the “not so perfect” lies the father reminds the children about are...amusing?

Someone jokes: “Big Brother lies about lying and then you have to lie, so you lie to get out of the lie.”¹³ Those who still draw distinctions between what is true and false might consider that regardless of how we conceptualize falseness today, lies have become standard. And many do not seem to take them all that seriously. Something else once considered fodder for the many jokes about “we-all-know-this-kind-of-thing-goes-on” was the humor used to excuse sexual assault. Recall that before the #Me Too movement, much of sexual assault slipped by our social conscience precisely because a segment of society refused to take it seriously. Too often disrespect and/or disdain is *embedded in entertainment* so that the habits about which society jokes and laughs are excused. Similar to the way the #Me Too Women’s Movement brought sexual assault to the fore of our consciences, might we not consider lies just a little *less* humorous? When propaganda merges with entertainment, it becomes particularly subversive. Tim O’Reilly suggests we use the next iteration of social media as a mirror to learn how we can improve.¹⁴ The mirror has long been a metaphor in literary interpretations, which makes O’Reilly’s suggestion about *improving* society ironic. Today, if we look in the mirrors that algorithms produce, we find lies, anger, controversy, endless wars, hatred, discrimination, depression, intrusive monitoring, hacking/threats of foreign influence, ransomware, pervasive bullying, harm to reputations, trolling, doxing, abuse of young people, suicides. What are we to learn from these mirrors in the *next* iteration of social media? Another way of side-stepping truth during the pandemic occurred when many Christians, evangelicals and others, looked to *political* power as a way to protect social habits they may have become accustomed to. When we seek to align our comfort zones with an agenda for greater *secular* power, the primary value placed on existential truth can be subverted by political propaganda. Beliefs can also be weaponized. When beliefs are weaponized, we fail to question the claims that attract us—often because those claims articulate something we already want. But Jesus is clear: “My kingdom is not of this world.” (John 18: 35) Using personal beliefs to serve political goals is a tell-tale sign of propaganda.

Richard Rohr uses the example of St. Francis of Assisi who was able to “distinguish between institutional evil and the individual who is victimized by it. He still felt compassion for the individual soldiers fighting in the crusades, although he objected to the war itself. He realized the folly and yet the sincerity of their patriotism, which led them, however, to be *un-patriotic* to the much larger kingdom of God, where he placed his first and final loyalty.”¹⁵ Ed Stetzer, who holds the Billy Graham Distinguished Chair of Church, Mission, and Evangelism at Wheaton College, is aware that Evangelical readings of the Gospels have not always been used to hear those who are most in need in America. In “After Donald Trump’s Presidency, Evangelical Christians,” Stetzer ponders if the largely conservative movement failed to integrate its spiritual heritage with social justice.¹⁶ Stetzer calls for a thoughtful reckoning that occurs when spiritual and political goals are combined: he questions openly if evangelicals betrayed service to God in order “to attain...worldly power.”¹⁷ Christ relinquishes human power in order to take on the pain and heal the wounds of our humanity. He asks us to follow his command of love and service to others: “I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you.” (John 13:15). That example is having compassion for and serving the needs of other members of the human race—not exercising power over them. That love story, written to the entire human race, is an invitation to hear the sacred as well as to *recognize* the nature of humanity’s power or ability to respond—one’s response-ability to God, to others, and to ourselves. There is room for caring more deeply, more compassionately, for an important asset close at hand—each other. A solidarity of kindness in people working together provides a formidable counterforce to the anger and hatred that uproots trust in each other. Good Samaritans from multiple beliefs demonstrate good will and continue to do so, especially after disasters. After Hurricane Helene devastated western North Carolina and treacherous fires burned again in California, spontaneous and continuous efforts by other human beings from all over the country—as well as outside of it—poured in, volunteering to help the people and communities affected. Many continue to rebuild trust in each other and demonstrate the resilience of people helping people. It is not surprising that we see the best of humanity when helping others because these efforts unite us with other human beings in ways mediated by divine law and people’s good will rather than by digitized connections or the influence of political propaganda. The pandemic forced many of us to slow down. The loss of everyday routines made the difference more pronounced between the shadow of time passing in front of us and time that remains beyond the boundaries of our individual lives. If we have allowed ourselves to be touched by each other’s pain, to expand our lens outward to caring for others—others we may not even know—but who like us have suffered during the pandemic, then our own pain may find solidarity with the abundance of kindness of people working together in service of a larger purpose, of a greater love that heals, renews, and provides solace to all. Recognizing and holding ourselves accountable to “the Spirit of truth that lives within us” (John 14:17) makes possible a sense of community with renewed and intentional love for all.