

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, New York

“Valuing Truth More Than Power”

Rev. Samuel A. Trumbore March 8, 2020

Sermon

We all know that lying is part of what politicians do. They do it because they want our votes. They will shade the truth or tell outright lies to solicit our support or at least keep our anger at bay. It isn't news to any of us that Presidents lie and lie a lot. Barry Goldwater said:

Nixon was the most dishonest individual I have ever met in my life. He lied to his wife, his family, his friends, his colleagues in the Congress, lifetime members of his own political party, the American people and the world.

Some of us were around when Nixon was President so we might remember “tricky Dick” as we referred to him then.

But there is something different about the way our current President lies extravagantly. He does it daily, repeatedly, without apology. Angie Drobnic Holan lists some of the president's most frequent falsehoods at the beginning of 2019:

- U.S. Steel is opening six plants (it's not);
- Barack Obama's administration had the same policy as Trump's of separating children from adults at the border (it didn't);
- Trump signed the largest tax cut in history (Ronald Reagan, among others, has him beat);
- other countries owe the U.S. a lot of money for NATO (this is false);

I was shocked watching him move through the nomination process to become the Republican candidate in 2016. Calling him to account, again and again, for his constant lying didn't seem to have any effect. Neither did any of his sexually abusive behavior with women. All he needed to do was, deny it, distract the press with some shiny object and by the next news cycle we were on to the next outrage. His bluster, distraction and never apologizing for anything kept the news media surprised and off balance.

This president is a different kind of non-politician stepping into public life. As a performer, celebrity entertainer, he gathered support based on a cult of personality. His fans already knew his process of self-aggrandizement and bullying behavior. When they saw that on display on the political stage, they cheered it rather than criticizing it. This base is big enough and vocal enough that it intimidates the Republicans who might hold the President accountable for fear of facing a primary challenge.

What is remarkable is how much the political landscape has changed regarding lying. [Five years ago](#), the American Press Institute showed that more than eight in ten Americans had a positive view of political fact-checking suggesting far less tolerance of lying. When the President's supporters are questioned at rallies about his lies and fabrications today, his supporters go almost immediately to what he is doing that they support. His legislative accomplishments have been limited, first by senate filibuster and now by a divided Congress. He has had a lot of effect, however, through executive action.

If you didn't like Obama or his presidency, you'll be very pleased with the current president. He has made it his personal mission to try to undo every one of Obama's executive actions, whether good or bad, trying to erase every vestige of his presidency. If you primarily care about the makeup of the Supreme Court and putting conservative justices on it, you'll be very happy. If you hate immigrants you'll be very satisfied with this President. If you want to lower energy prices by stimulating fossil fuel exploration and production he is your man – though he hasn't brought coal back yet. If you choose to ignore the reality of climate change, the President is consistent on that. If you'd like our nation to retreat from being a global leader and let the Chinese and Russians take over, this President has fulfilled your desires. His effectiveness on trade deals and commerce is yet to be seen but hang in there. His biggest test will be how he deals with the Coronavirus and the scary economic downturn coming our way. It is likely to erase all the economic growth seeded by the Obama administration that came to flower in the last three years.

Focusing on the ends that the President has achieved rather than the methods he uses like lying and bullying points to an interesting area of philosophy called *consequentialism*. It is a doctrine that the morality of an action is to be judged solely by its consequences. Another way to say that could be: "the ends justify the means." If this were a philosophy class, we could have a lot of fun analyzing the different schools of thought to support or critique it. I had to restrain myself this morning because this is what I enjoy doing. Realistically that isn't appropriate for a sermon, or so my professors admonished me. Let me just say, that there are some significant problems with the ends justifying the means. The one I do want to discuss is the effect of lying on democracy.

The theory of limited government rests on division of powers between the legislative, executive and judicial branches, and the consent of the governed. The way ends are achieved isn't by force of will of an autocratic executive leader. It happens by legislative vote first, executive implementation and by the judicial rule of law. A majority is assembled, or a decision is made by a judge, not through force or the threat of violence but through the process of persuasion, sometimes rational, sometimes emotional, but usually not through the exercise of brute power. Critical to the process are shared facts, analysis, discourse, discussion and debate. Government leaders respond to the truth of the situation guided by reason and the common good.

A web of lies, disinformation, deception, deceit, deflection, distortion and denial do not serve this process, even though it isn't possible to eliminate them. Constantly lying however has a corrosive effect. Calling truth "fake news," disrespecting upstanding truth tellers, silencing opponents, and constantly generating false stories and data, all have the effect of disorienting people, even the folks who know the truth of the situation. Talk of the "deep state," and conspiracy theories further undermines the legitimacy of our civil servants, the courts and confidence in our government.

What this president has discovered is he can "game the system" using social media to generate chaotic conditions that confuse people and serve as a smoke screen. Twitter allows the president to directly inject disinformation, lies and distortion into political discourse in a way that can control its direction. And controlling the public attention serves his political interests.

One of the motivators for my words this morning comes from [McKay Coppins' article](#) in the Atlantic Monthly for March titled: "*The Billion-Dollar Disinformation Campaign to Reelect the President: How new technologies and techniques pioneered by dictators will shape the 2020 election.*" Brace yourself for an election season that takes lying, especially on social media, to a new level. McKay ends the article with this sobering paragraph:

The political theorist Hannah Arendt once wrote that the most successful totalitarian leaders of the 20th century instilled in their followers “a mixture of gullibility and cynicism.” When they were lied to, they chose to believe it. When a lie was debunked, they claimed they’d known all along—and would then “admire the leaders for their superior tactical cleverness.” Over time, Arendt wrote, the onslaught of propaganda conditioned people to “believe everything and nothing, think that everything was possible and that nothing was true.”

Or as Carl Sandburg put it in his poem, “The Liars” (1919)

A liar lies to the nations.
 A liar lies to the people.
 A liar takes the blood of the people
 And drinks this blood with a laugh and a lie.

So much for the bad news. I could go on and on about all the bad things that might be coming down the road in the next eight months before the election. The threats to democracy are real and terrifying.

Yet we don’t know if using money to manipulate social media can buy Presidential elections. Michael Bloomberg couldn’t buy the Democratic nomination or even move the needle his way much after spending 500 million dollars. Local elections can be strongly influenced ... but not bought outright. The people still must decide by casting their vote.

Through all the upheaval of the last three years, I still have some confidence (not a lot mind you but some) in the aggregate wisdom of the people. There are plenty of individual voters, the ones you’ll see interviewed on television or quoted in national news articles, who drive me to despair hearing how they decide who to vote for. Yet there are also many very thoughtful people casting votes as well. Not every election mind you, but over time things do change.

I also am hopeful that the electorate gets more discerning over time, especially a younger generation who are far more social media savvy. Philomena and I worked with a young car salesman recently. We talked some about politics and news gathering. His father is extremely conservative and his brother extremely liberal – must make for interesting holiday dinners! Our politically independent salesman listens to both sides, both CNN and FOX, and reads internet war zones like Redditt, and comes to his own conclusion. This is someone who isn’t going to be taken in by lies from either side and parses the noise for the truth as best he can. I hope there is a generation of folks like him who are not going to be led by the nose and accept being told what to think or believe.

Ultimately, the American temperament is to be suspicious and to treasure our freedom to make up our own minds. We do not like being lied to nor do we like being manipulated especially in life threatening matters of public health. If the President’s lies went against their perception of their self-interest, I anticipate their loyalty would be thin. Over time, lies will not build his power.

People with integrity who speak the truth, however, have their own power even if you don’t like what they say. This was the power of the Rev Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. He spoke truth to expose the lies of the powerful. And he did it from a deep religious conviction. He loved his powerful enemies. Not a sappy sentimental love – but an intense religious love that honored his opponents’ inherent worth and dignity as human beings created and loved by God *without exception*.

What King always had in mind was that he was fighting inherited toxic systems of oppression. He wasn't at war with the people in the thrall of these systems. He wanted to love them into the truth and liberate them from evil systems that plague humanity. Truth was one of his allies in that work.

These evil systems of exploitation and destruction of the human spirit deeply infect our current president. The riots in Charlottesville made this abundantly clear as he defended the "good people" at the march. In a sense he is right – every person there had inherent worth and dignity. He was wrong not recognizing and denouncing fully *the beliefs* they brought with them. Beliefs that infect the founding of this nation that need to be recognized, understood, rejected and removed.

This is one of the great callings of contemporary Unitarian Universalism. In our internal institutional structures, in our actions in the world, and in the way we live together in community, we are called to recognize, understand, dismantle and remove the toxic system of white supremacy that infects all of us. It is not our fault – we inherited this from countless generations before us. It is our responsibility as religious people to do something about it.

This can be unpleasant, challenging work for everyone but the benefits for everyone are liberating and realize the vision of justice, liberty, freedom and community found in the vision of American democracy.

Keep the faith in truth and love to stop hatred and lies. Keep the faith in truth and love to overcome the politics of fear and division. Not immediately. Not without setbacks. Keep the faith truth and love are worthy of our ultimate commitment independent of what we see happening around us in the public square or social media. Let us make truth and love the center of our political action in the next eight months and allow them to work their transformation on us and on the world.

Let us commit to learning how to free ourselves and free each other for the good of all.

Benediction

In difficult times when we are surrounded by disappointment, danger and distress, it is vital to hold a dream of the way the world can be that has yet to be. Centered in that hope and awareness of human potential, a new world is born. I hear that spirit in the words I will leave you with by Paul Robeson:

Sorrow will one day turn to joy. All that breaks our heart and oppresses the soul will one day give place to peace and understanding and everyone will be free.

May it be so.