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### **"Trust, But Verify"**

Trust is a fabric that holds society together. Without it we would be lost, unable to build friendships or coalitions or businesses or countries. Democracy is constructed of that same fabric. It is strong, very strong, but not infinitely strong. Sometimes trust does not get the attention it needs to stay strong. Sometimes it is abused. A friendship can break. A business can fail. In the extreme, even a democracy can collapse when the trust that created it and held it together is abused. Abuse of trust can make you rich. If no one is looking you can rob a bank. You can lie and get ahead in business if everyone trusts you and believes you. You can use trust to control others. When is it time to distrust? When is it time to put trust to the test? The answer is, always. It is always a good time to question our assumptions. Testing and verifying our trusted relationships does not make those relationships weaker. It makes them stronger. Unquestioned, unverified and unaccountable trust is like signing a contract that you are not allowed to read -- a blind covenant.

### **The Emperor's New Orange Jumpsuit**

Once upon a time, long ago and far away, in the capital city of the Empire of Great I-Believe-ia, a narcissistic emperor sat on his throne. In walked a salesman carrying suits and sashes fit for an emperor. The salesman was well dressed and his arrival was long anticipated. He had sent a slew of

letters of recommendation, glowing reviews from royal clients far and wide. The emperor was eager to commission a new suit that would dazzle the court and strike loyalty into the hearts of the people. What he was shown was even better than that. It was a magic fabric that could be seen only by his loyal followers, but which would be invisible to any who harbored doubt about the legitimacy of his Majesty's royal lineage.

The salesman hung three empty hangers in the middle of the throne room and waved his arms. "Behold! This beautiful suit, pants and sash can be seen only by those who believe in the legitimacy of your reign. Those who doubt you cannot see it, just as they cannot see the truth of your grace's royal lineage. "

The Emperor was quick witted and did not flinch. He praised the beauty of the suit and the skill of the tailor to have made it so perfectly. The emperor was well aware of his own doubts, but that did not matter. What mattered was the loyalty of his court.

The Emperor asked each member of the Court to comment on the suit. All attested to its beauty, all except one, who said "I don't see it."

"Guards!" Cried the Emperor and the denier was taken away. The emperor would have no traitors in his court.

Having proven the usefulness of the new clothes, the Emperor paid the salesman and drafted an announcement to the people of the capital city that he would lead a parade the following day. The people were warned of the magical properties of the new clothes, and word went around that the suit was beautiful and only one person so far had been unable to see it, and that man had been taken away.

The Emperor marched naked down the city thoroughfare followed by his fully-dressed advisors, followed by his generals on horses, followed by the the newly minted Invisible Clothing Enforcement police, or I.C.E. "ICE". The people, with their eyes on ICE more so than on the naked emperor, clapped and cheered the emperor's new clothes.

All except one. It was a small child, a boy. He said very loudly, "the emperor is naked! The emperor is naked!"

A shudder went through the crowd. Could it be that the boy was telling the truth? Could it be that the emperor was really naked and the whole magic fabric thing was a lie?

The people looked at each other. No one was saying anything. Must be me, each one thought, silently, to him or herself. There's no way he could have conned all of us.

"I see it." they said to each other. "I see the clothes."

No one wanted to be the first to admit they doubted the royal lineage.

The people scowled at the boy. "Guards!" shouted the emperor. The boy was taken away and everyone cheered. End of story.

But in an alternative universe, there was a different outcome. The first boy cried "The emperor is naked!" Just as he had in the first universe. But this time another boy chimed in. "He's right! The emperor has no clothes." Then a third, a girl who was not brave enough to be the first to shout but was just

brave enough to throw her support to the first two, shouted even more loudly than the first two.

Then all hell broke loose. The people turned on the corrupt and narcissistic emperor, they scattered the I.C.E and the royal advisors and the generals and they took the emperor into custody, where he would later be tried, and dressed, in prison clothes. And everyone could see the emperor's new orange jumpsuit.

**=====Scarborough Fair=====**

## Trust, But Verify

**Disinformation** has been with us since the dawn of time. These two fables, the *Boy Who Cried Wolf*, and the *Emperor's New Clothes* both teach us to **question** what we **see** and what we **hear**. They highlight a natural tendency for people to **believe without verification**. Fairy tales and fables play a role in the education of the **young**, using stories **constructed** by the wise. They teach the children to be **wary**, in this case, of bad information, and they teach them to **not lie**. They work by **shocking the listener**. A child of antiquity would **start** at the mention of a **wolf**, and shiver at the thought of a wolf attack not being defended by the villagers, leaving the boy (or perhaps just his sheep) to a gristly fate. The idea of a naked emperor is equally shocking. It's not the emperor's **con game** that shocks the listener, it's his **nakedness**. In each case, we can't forget it, because it grabbed our emotions. In each case the story is tied to a moral message -- the **moral correctness of telling the truth**. If you lie, then people will not trust you, and you may be left in a lurch when you need them the most. **See** the truth, says "The Emperor's New Clothes", and **tell** the truth, even when no one else is **seeing it** or **saying it**. You may risk

being shouted down, or even imprisoned, but on the other hand, you may be **hailed as a hero** when your truth overcomes the lie and becomes everyone's truth. These two stories say, respectively, (1) don't lie and (B) don't let others get away with a lie.

That's today's topic. **Don't lie**, and don't **let others lie**. But I am going to focus more on the **latter**, since you are all good people, *not naughty shepherd boys*, and I trust you are *not* going to be the ones who try to get away with lying. So we'll focus on recognizing falsehoods. The five questions we are asking today are

(1) *Who do you trust?*

(2) *How do you trust?*

(3) *Why do you trust?*

(4) *Who is lying to you? and*

(5) *How do you know they're lying?*

Today we live in a different world of freely flowing information. **Information** is **pervasive**, **invasive**, and **evasive**. It is **electronic**. It is **everywhere**. It gets to us ***whether we like it or not***. And it is sometimes ***tuned to the***

**listener**. That means information is a little slippery. On social media, your information may be different than mine. We might have **alternative facts**.

**Misplaced trust** makes us vulnerable to **disinformation**.

But we can't throw away trust. ***Trust is the stuff that human society is made of***. If we could not trust each other we would not have an economy, a democracy, a system of education, peace and security. **None** of that is possible without trust. Without trust, humanity would be stuck in a world of independent hunter gatherers, all acting alone, all acting on **self-interest** alone. Trust arose within human society **because it worked**. Because we could **benefit** from each others' expertise. If I can trust the shepherd to herd my sheep and count them correctly, then I can **focus my time** on making and selling sweaters out of the wool, and **not worry** about the wool supply. .. Meanwhile the shepherd **trusts** that he/she will be **paid** at the end of the week. Back in the day, humans societies that successfully built **bonds of trust, built empires**, driving the non-trusting hunter gatherers into extinction. You might think of trust as something that evolved in a Darwinian way, by natural selection. Societies that didn't have it **fell**

**behind**. Societies that did have it **moved ahead**. Pretty soon all humans were **bounded** and **surrounded** by **bonds of trust**.

It didn't take long for **trust** to get **corrupted**. The **selfish gene** came **first** after all. The **altruist** gene came **later** and is relatively **weak**. So when someone had established a bond of trust, and no one was watching, checking up on them, that person **might** have been tempted by the selfish gene to take more **for themselves**, to **overcharge**, to **steal**.

*Trust, it seems, is an enabler of corruption by its very nature.* Trust means you are *not* overseeing. You are **not** making sure so-and-so is doing the job they were paid to do. After all, if we have to look over everyone's shoulder at all times, what's the point? Efficiency goes down the drain. If we have to follow the shepherd through the hills, to make sure he is doing a good job protecting the sheep, then we don't have time to make sweaters! If we can't trust, then we may as well be **hunter gatherers**, and that's a rough life. So we have to have trust.

And,

**Trust** leads to **corruption**. Its inevitable.

But then,... **corruption** leads to **accountability**. As soon as trust is broken, When trust is broken we have **distrust**. When we **distrust**, we move to **investigate**. From **investigation** we gain the *identities of the culprits*, and we find ways to *prevent further corruption*. The **wheels of society** are put in motion to **find ways to prevent** corruption. You can think of **laws** as a result of this process (although laws are only one part of the societal forces that keep things on the up-and-up). *Culprits* are punished to deter **others** from trying the same thing. And Laws are **enforced** to provide **accountability**. Trust leads to corruption. Corruption leads to distrust which leads to new laws.

In other words, **trust and accountability are connected**.

Because the selfish gene exists **in us** and has power **over us**, we must always bring it into check by accounting for our actions. Using laws, moral codes, and social pressures of various kinds, we hold each other accountable. And life is good.

**Trust and accountability, together form a covenant.**

A **covenant** is a *system that works*, a system that *holds society together*. A covenant makes *one from many*. The manifestation of **trust plus accountability** creates a **one-ness**, a sense of **identity**, a type of **love**. Covenants exist at every level of human society from *family* to *nation*, and they are different at each level, but they **all** are made from **trust** and **accountability**.

And, to the extent that **covenant** is stronger than **selfishness**, life **is** good.

**But** when technology evolves, society experiences growing pains. The existing laws may not protect from corruption that involves **new technology**, since those laws were written **before the technology existed**. New laws are needed at this stage. When cars were invented, we needed **traffic laws**. When guns were invented, we needed **gun laws**. (and we still do) Laws don't exist until you **need** them.

Now we need laws to put **guardrails** on **social media**. Without laws it will be controlled by the **few** and the **powerful**, the ones who **hold the data** and who **write the algorithms**. If there are no guardrails, those people,

their actions will be guided by the **selfish gene**, the instinctive need for more. They will **steal** the data, **tailor** the data, **filter** it, **skew** it, sometimes **propagate** it, and sometimes **suppress** it, all with the goal of *molding the minds of the public* to become **buyers**, and **voters**, and **believers** of the **narratives** that gain them **money and power**. Everyone has the selfish gene, but when they **also have power**, that's when **guardrails** need to be put in place.

And they have not been.

You may be thinking that you are not vulnerable to disinformation. Perhaps you don't **use** social media, or you only use a **trusted source**. Are you safe?

For **sure** you are safe from disinformation,... if you live in a cabin in the woods and you talk to nobody...

But if you are surrounded by the **consumers** of **unregulated** social media (and it is **all** unregulated), then **you** will be exposed to whatever has infected **them**. And some of that may be disinformation.

You may not necessarily have the bandwidth to fight against disinformation yourself, especially if it is coming at you through a firehose. So you will **bend** ... to the power of the crowd psychology. If disinformation is coming at you from friends and family, then by fighting it you risk alienating **friends** and **family**. Not a happy situation. Most will not take up that fight.

When you are alone in your belief and everyone else believes something else, even if you believe you are right, you will have little energy to put up a fight. So you join the chorus. **If you can't beat them join them**. By joining the disinformed, you reluctantly, but **safely**, contribute to a **dreamy** sense of unity, a **cult-like** feeling of solidarity. And solidarity at least **feels** like truth. *Could so many believers all be wrong?* Seems unlikely.

The **trust gene** drives us to believe what we are told without checking.... We have that gene because **trust** has **saved** our species, from the ignominious fate of an animal with no claws, no sharp teeth, and no hard shell to protect us. Trust **evolved** because it is more powerful than any of those **physical features**.

And now trust is driving us towards a world that is **increasingly divided** between the **rich** and the **poor**. An unwelcome world for most of us, a world of **division**, of **anger** and **pain**.

All because we have ***trusted without verifying***.

There is in my fantasy, another universe, one that runs parallel to ours. In that universe, **whistleblowers** were paid attention to, instead of being **silenced**. In that universe, people had the **bandwidth** to investigate **claims**, and they were **heard** when they broadcast their findings. In that universe, disinformation was checked before it could establish a foothold, before people were faced with the terrible pressure of conformity. In that universe, disinformation was immediately recognized for what it was, and was **denounced immediately**. In that universe, the rich are **not so rich** and the powerful and **not so powerful**, because they cannot use **disinformation** to mold the minds of buyers and voters. **Guardrails** are in place in that universe.

We don't live in that alternative universe, but we can **move there** if we so choose. We can learn how to recognize disinformation, to separate it from good information. And we can carve out some **bandwidth** for the time-consuming effort of **fighting that fight**, of countering the efforts of the social media algorithms. If we start on that pathway today, it will lead to **laws** and **regulations**, and their **enforcement**. Information providers will be held **accountable**, and with this new **accountability** we will have a stronger covenant, and we will be able to **trust again**.

**Trust** leads to **corruption**, which leads to **distrust**, which leads to **accountability**, which leads back to **trust**. **Distrust** is part of a cycle.

How do we **know** when to **distrust** a message? How do we **know** it is time to **speak out**, like the boy who cried "the emperor is naked"?

To answer that question, we must consider the anatomy of the human brain. Deep in the midbrain, there is a place called the **amygdala**, which is the part of the brain that takes in information from the senses and which drives behavior. It is also the **emotional center** of the brain. The amygdala

is responsible for the **fight or flight response** to danger. It reacts **very quickly**, not waiting for the higher brain to weigh in. The amygdala is responsible for a horse's reaction of **garden hose**, which looks a little like a snake. By acting fast, the amygdala has saved many a horse from real snakes, and this has earned its place in our brain, but it also makes mistakes.

The other part of our brain that drives our behavior is the **cerebral cortex**, the **higher brain**, the **rational** brain. It is **not as quick** as the amygdala. But when the cerebral cortex is in charge, our behaviors and our actions are **measured** and **deliberate**. The cerebral cortex has the ability to weigh our pre-existing experiences, our knowledge, and call for a behavior that is consistent with that knowledge. But the cerebral cortex does not have direct control of our behavior, it must send its recommendations back to the amygdala for final decision-making.

How does this answer the question of **when** to **distrust** information? It tells us to use the cerebral cortex not the amygdala, in making our decisions, in choosing our **words and actions**.

How do you know you are using the **cerebral cortex**? You will know because the amygdala makes decisions **laden with emotion**, but the cerebral cortex **lacks** that emotional content. You will know because the cerebral cortex is **accountable**. You can name the reasons for your belief only if it is a **rational belief**. If it is an emotional belief, it resists being analyzed. This is the difference between the proverbial **head** and the proverbial **heart**. The "heart" is really the amygdala, the quick decider. We need to trust with the **head**, not the **heart**. The cerebral cortex is more likely to hold the key to the truth, since it allows the information to be **weighed** and **compared** to what we already hold in our memory. When **ideas** are **harmonious** with **data**, they are more likely to be true.

So we recognize disinformation by reacting **slowly, unemotionally**, resisting the quick, automatic response of the amygdala. We do it by **breathing**. We slow down. Doing so helps dispel disinformation.

Just breathe, and you will not be conned.

Sometimes it is not as simple as that. Sometimes our amygdala gets **trained** by **repetition** to respond quickly to something, and we **can't stop it**. Repetition leads to a quick response because the same message returning again is recognized as a familiar message, one your brain doesn't need to waste time thinking through again. So the reaction to information that is very familiar becomes **automatic**, and difficult to stop by simply breathing. You can still correct yourself by breathing and slowing down. It's called "having second thoughts". Often second thoughts are developed more slowly and are **less likely to be false**.

Disinformation when **repeated** over and over again, and when it is created **intentionally** for a **selfish purpose** is called **propaganda**.

The infamous Nazi propaganda chief Joseph Goebbels is quoted as saying *"If you repeat a lie often enough, people will believe it, and you will even come to believe it yourself."* Goebbels convinced Germans by repetition that "Jews ... are plundering our people", and that Jews were "subhuman", along with communists. By repeating the lies on **radio** and in **film**, on **signs**, in **leaflets** and **fliers** and **articles** in **newspapers**, the lies trained

some people, many people, to react without thinking. They were trusting their information sources, trusting but not verifying.

Crowd psychology did the rest. When all your friends are saying the same thing, your resistance melts. "**If you can't beat 'em, join 'em.**" you say. With strong social pressure to conform, few Germans had the strength to speak out against the lie, and those that did were rounded up by the "brown shirts" the Sturmabteilung, Hitler's thought police.

Are we going that direction in the US today? I am not going to address that. But the possibility of such a future should move us to action. How do we combat disinformation at a societal level? We can combat it at the **individual level** by breathing and letting our head be rational and critical. But what about **everyone else**? How do we get everyone else to **breathe**?

We can fight that fight by championing the **minority opinions**. We can look for **harmony** between **ideas** and **facts**. We can demand **investigation**. We can build a system of fact-checking that stops disinformation before it goes

**viral** and **infects** the **collective amygdala**. We can trust with a **clear head**, not clouded by anger or fear. We can distrust when it is **right** to distrust, and by doing so we can **demand** that our information sources be **held accountable** to the facts.

Let us raise up the whistleblowers and champions of minority opinions. Let us raise up **Rachel Carson**, who fought against the pesticide industry. Let us raise up **Clair Patterson**, who discovered the lead from gasoline was finding its way into children's brains and fought against disinformation from the petroleum industry. Let us raise up **James Hansen** and **Michael Mann**, who fought for climate change awareness and were shouted down by propaganda. Let us raise up the recently departed **Jane Goodall**, who encouraged awareness of the danger of global human overpopulation, and whose words were received with stubborn silence.

When **repetition of unfounded beliefs** trains our brains to respond emotionally and automatically. When the **oligarchs of the world** are manipulating our thoughts for their selfish gains. When **minority** opinions are **crushed** and **majority** opinions are **unfounded**. We must **breathe**. We

must **build the guardrails** of the **next generation** of the **information economy**. We must **trust, but verify**, and by doing so we will build a stronger covenant.

**And life will be good.**

===== Benediction =====

### **Seeking That Which Unites Us . By Sara Eileen LaWall**

Spirit of Life and Love,  
In this time of uncertainty  
Of fear and angst  
Our nation holds its collective breath  
In this time  
When rhetoric blusters about  
And words are used as weapons  
Our nation clenches its fists  
Tightens its shoulders  
Eyes squeezed shut  
Some are preparing for a fight  
May we remember we are a people of resilience  
We have faced uncertainty before  
We have weathered storms  
We have been consumed by flames  
We have risen like the phoenix from the ashes  
And we will again  
We the people

May we remember our shared humanity  
Our universal kinship; our interdependence  
As we unclench our fists and breathe together  
Breathing in love and breathing out peace  
May we recognize the spark of the divine inside all of us  
Even those we are not quite sure about  
In this time of uncertainty  
We remember the good will go on  
As we work to move forward together  
We the people  
Seeking that which unites us  
With our arms reaching out wide  
For life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness  
May love prevail.  
In the name of all that is holy we pray, Amen.