

Lies and Our Odd Relationship with Truth

Tom Atlee

There is a lot of attention right now on the US government lying to We the People, probably with intention to mislead. In some circles there is also dismay (and cynicism) at the ability (and sometimes apparent eagerness) of We the People to be misled.

There are many political dimensions to this, being reported by many qualified commentators. But here I want to dig a bit into our odd relationship with truth. It is a complex relationship and, I think, an important one to pay attention to.

Much courage is required to dissent from a dominant but incomplete "truth." Even greater courage is required to remain open to ALL types and sources of information and perspective, recognizing that all "truth" is, in the final analysis, incomplete. This recognition doesn't have to degrade us into vague moral and intellectual relativism. It might instead make us more curious, interested, compassionate, open to what is new, different, and challenging.

We so often say we want the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. And we say we don't want to be lied to. But when you come right down to it, few of us REALLY want to know all there is to know about anything, nor to be confronted with too much complexity, seeming contradiction or mystery -- all of which are natural companions of Truth as it becomes more comprehensive.

When we say we want the truth, what we usually mean (without saying it or even admitting it to ourselves) is that we want to hear acceptable truths couched in acceptably bent truths, half-truths, reframings and appropriately excluded information -- all crafted into a picture that "makes sense" to us.

In other words, we want a story that fits with all the other stories we tell ourselves about the person or subject under consideration. We don't want the messy big picture so much

as we want coherence, because it is the coherence of these stories that we use to "make sense" of our world. Supported by that sense of coherence, we can then call our stories The Truth.

But when we open ourselves to the actual vastness of multifarious Truth, we find it much bigger and more complex than any one story could ever contain. That's a hard reality to grow into. That's why I think the ultimate truth in the universe may be "There's more to it than that." No matter what's going on... no matter what we're being told... no matter what we believe, it helps to remember that "There is more to it than that."

Yes, we can be sure of that one truth in every circumstance -- there's always more to it....

Lately I've begun to wonder if Truth is, in fact, a fabric woven of many stories. Some of them are neat and tidy. Some look neat and tidy on the front, but are quite messy on the back, like tapestry. Many of them go on forever, and to be terribly connected to everything else. A disturbing number of them seem to contradict each other or to disturb our own favorite stories. It's almost as if when things seem very simple, that's a sign we're not really keeping our eyes, minds and hearts open enough for more Truth to get in.

But there is a kind of sense-making that comes from opening ourselves up very wide -- wide enough to include every story that comes along, or at least to allow it to participate in shaping the larger story that emerges in respectful conversation. But in the face of many hotly conflicting stories, I find it a real challenge to be that open -- especially when my own dependable stories seem threatened.

Furthermore, I think that many seemingly divergent stories can only make sense together when we view them in good light, from a distance -- or from very close, through our hearts. In order for this to happen, of course, these stories must be fully heard -- which is quite rare nowadays. Sometimes healing or transformation happens simply because someone fully heard someone else's story. Real listening seems to turn walls and battlements into doorways, paths, sometimes even glorious sky-wide sunrises....

There is such a close kinship between story and truth (or reality). The poet Murial Rukeyser tells us "the universe is made of stories, not atoms."

So how much of "truth" is actually to be found in facts, and how much is to be found in the stories we tell ourselves and each other about what's happening and what that means? Facts may, indeed, get whatever power they have from the stories they tell.

In myself and others I see selected facts and logics coalescing around good stories they support, while other facts and logics (which don't fit so well) are ignored, actively rejected or even fought. After all, if we let the misfits in, we might have to change a good story or two -- even lose confidence in the fundamental stories we use to make sense of everything else -- our Truth. We might have to live in uncertainty, puzzled or excited, vulnerable to whatever came next that could shake up our world.

This is not a comfortable place to be. But I can imagine it being closer to The Truth -- where The Truth is not a story or anything very solid, but an opening into greater vastness, greater detail, greater diversity, deeper layers of every story that comes along, and the natural co-creativity that bubbles up out of all those stories interacting -- an awed partnership with the wild unfolding of the universe.

It might be healthier place to live, in the long run, than any of the places where we decide we know enough to leave our uncertainty and openness behind.

If we got accustomed to living there, I suspect we might even become wise. But I'm not sure we'd even notice we'd changed. We'd be too busy exploring each other's worlds and finding our way together into shared stories that make temporary but powerful sense to us all.

So perhaps the lies of politicians are best seen as mirrors in which to see more clearly our own ambivalence about Truth and our passionate love affair with Story, that we may step through the looking glass together, with eyes open, to co-create a new civilization where power is less toxic and Truth is in love with Mystery.

On the other hand, perhaps we should just fight the lies, since official lies lead to mass ignorance which leads, in turn, to wave upon wave of collective catastrophe. Or perhaps there are new institutions we could create that would officially make more of the truth more available to more of the people more of the time. Or perhaps it is time to take stock of our own half-truths and biases, dictated by the need to create positional stories solid enough to survive the political battleground. Perhaps it is time to re-think the trade-offs involved.

The journey towards greater Truth proceeds along a thousand paths. There is room for all.