

Newspeak and Truthspeak
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First a disclaimer: this sermon smacks of elitism. I just want to note that I have self-awareness about this. And yet, if it's elitist to take a stand for the truth, to speak truth to power, to "truthspeak," then so be it.

Not everything in "1984" translates directly to the current predicament we find ourselves in, this new age of fake news and foreign campaigns to alter US elections. "1984" says that dystopia is communist, or at least anti-capitalist. At any rate it is totalitarian to its most imagined extent, when not only words become obsolete, but also the thinking with which those words is done. It's reminiscent of "The Matrix," with its phrase, "Orthodoxy is unconsciousness." Not only shall the masses be unconscious, later in the Matrix, they shall also be harnessed for electricity.

This sermon is not meant to be alarmist. Dystopia has been employed in literature and film for ages, as a device to wake people up from their complacency. It warns and it prods, "if you don't protect that which you currently take for granted, here's what can happen." As your UU minister, it's my job to lift you out of complacency from time to time – not only to protect democratic principles that we hold sacred – but also to inspire us to live good lives of integrity and civic participation. We believe participation in service to something larger than ourselves is a path to worldly salvation.

This sermon invites us to be of active service to democratic ideals we have taken for granted perhaps all our lives. Ideals, such as the sanctity of an independent press, such as standards of communication that allow the public to think and act with reason, are suddenly threatened as we become conscious to the extent and pervasiveness of the problem.

In some ways the problem is nothing new. Our consciousness now, as it did back in Roman times, has to contend with bread and circuses. How seduced shall we allow our brain power to be? Shall we only think for work and then after work, sitting in front of the screen? Or shall we use our brain for more than just this – such as activism and reading literature and reputable analysis that helps us understand the world we live in and its current challenges?

There's a new book out that I might like to read called, "The Age of Anger: a History of the Present" by Pankoj Mishra. He argues that the fury of the populist wave we see here in the states and the UK is similar to the fury of disaffected Muslims who pledge themselves to ISIS. Its root is emotional, a mixture of envy, bewilderment, and disappointment about not fitting into the modern economy or culture. Being told to achieve what is unachievable has resulted in rage and humiliation.

Trump spoke to this anger so well that he got elected. If populism could take power in the US and Britain, it could also take power in more of Europe. America is currently the standard-bearer of Western values, where we stand for freedom, equality, and human rights. To erode these values in America sets a horrible example for the rest of the world. There may be more leaders like Trump about to take power in places like France, the Netherlands, and Austria.

Our faith, the Unitarians and the Universalists, have a solid history of reminding American power that civil liberties and human rights deserve better protection, as a matter of strengthening and protecting democracy. From its beginnings, Universalism challenged its members to reach out and embrace people whom society often marginalized. One of the earliest churches in Gloucester, MA included a freed slave among its charter members, and the Universalists became the first denomination to ordain women to the ministry, beginning in 1863 with Olympia Brown.

Unitarians were directly involved with the Civil Rights Movement. Unitarian Minister James Reeb was murdered in the March from Selma. It was a Unitarian who leaked the Vietnam Pentagon Papers to the New York times, direct proof that the American public had been lied to.

To this day, we stand for justice, equality, the truth, and transparency in our democratic institutions. We demand facts so we can make informed decisions about how and by whom we are governed.

That all sounds well and good, but we've forgotten about the "proles" or the proletariat – those who have never benefitted from Enlightenment values because no one put much thought into their education. These are not bad folks – they live for work, play, and family, good ol' American values. We all value these things, but the difference between them and us is that whereas we employ critical thinking as we go about our lives, they do not. They do not know what critical thinking is or care. And yet the refrain in "1984" is classic – "if there's any hope, it's in the proles."

In fact, there is far more than critical thinking they have rejected. I was fortunate to have a 3rd row seat at a recent speaking appearance of William Barber at Occidental College a few weeks ago. Barber is the architect of the Moral Mondays movement in North Carolina. Every Monday there is civil disobedience at the Capitol building, in protest of weakened voting rights and cutting funding of social programs. Before he spoke there was a video about his work, and again, it was gratifying to see so much gold in the background, the color of the Standing on the Side of Love presence, a UU effort.

The point of Barber's talk was to speak of redemption after rejection, that "prophetic preaching lifts hope out of despair and then becomes subversive." He said that the election of President Trump signifies 4 or 5 things our electoral collage has rejected:

- 1) The quality of statesmanship in personal manner of our elected leaders (think reserve and grace ala President Obama)
- 2) Real answers and issues in favor of lies and deception. He said there are great swaths of our society who would rather be lied to than told the truth, he says instead of calling them alternative facts we should call them alternative lies
- 3) Half the electorate rejected participation altogether in our democracy and stayed home on election day, about 95 million people
- 4) The rejection of authentic faith for an inauthentic faith that trods on the poor, his point being that no authentic religious faith trods on the poor
- 5) And finally, there is the on-going rejection since the birth of this nation to reckon with systemic racism.

As Barber pointed out, the only thing that could make so many people believe the lies of candidate Trump is racism – wanting that badly to believe that, despite voting against their better interests, whites are better than blacks or browns or any personage of color. Egos so battered and bruised, they would rather give up life-saving benefits, such as affordable health-care, than acknowledge they have more in common with poor people of color than their more urban and well-educated white counterparts. Barber reminded us that 2/3 of the people who voted for Trump need the healthcare they are threatening to repeal.

In such a climate, the white proles of today believe anything. They ate up the Russian propoganda infiltration like hungry children, every story that affirmed what they already suspected: that the elite don't care about their fate, never did and never will. The Russians saw our urban and rural divide clearly and leveraged it to propel Trump into power.

And now, after another eventful week in the White House, we wait to see if the Republican-held congress has the cajones to call for an investigation of Trump involvement with Russia, independent of the Justice Department, where such an investigation would go to die in the hands of new Attorney General Jeff Sessions.

Time out: as part of my training to be a preacher, I learned and came to understand that you should never do what I'm doing right now, which is to rant about the political sphere. My favorite mentor to this day tells me over and over, "Hannah, a politics of religion is too shallow to get any traction." That such ranting and raving is not what people come to church for, or need, that it can't really feed or nourish anyone. Perhaps he is right about this.

But I am struck, lately, again and again, at how crucial a role whistle-blowers play at this time. Whistle-blowing, for better or for worse, is something for which religious liberals pride themselves.

We don't need to be a superhero to whistle-blow – we can kindly point out to our friends, family, and neighbors when something is real and when it is not. It appears that upholding the standards for reporting and the free press has never become more important. We must defend education and critical thinking, we must keep the English vocabulary more vibrant and dynamic, lest it lose its power and we *may not be able to* think critically.

So, as part of our moral, whistle-blowing duty, we must retain and encourage the critical thinking within our own circles, our own “echo chamber” as the phrase goes these days. We can ask our friends on social media to check their source when they post something they think is real news but turns out not to be. But second, we also have a moral duty to meet people at where they are, and consider the disadvantages of the poorly educated. It's not fair that public education in a suburban setting should so outshine public education in a rural or inner-city setting, or in a state that has reactionary values.

Religious liberals have always been great proponents of education, and one hands-on thing we could do is help tutor the children in our city who don't enjoy the advantages with which many of us grew up. We can teach these critical thinking skills to young people and adults who otherwise might not learn them. There are literacy agencies where we might volunteer – fully 15% of adults living in the states are illiterate, and that includes many right here in Los Angeles.

As you know, people are picking up 1984 by George Orwell and having another read-through. While the story here is so extreme and horrible, there are echoes of the familiar there, echoes that chill.

Manipulating and shredding the English language into “Newspeak” is one thing, and we recognize that in the general dumbing down of American culture. But what rang even truer was the rampant apathy, or the inability for people to remember current events, to the point that it became impossible for people to think critically, and therefore impossible to care, without the tools we today so take for granted. For example, I texted my dear friend Chris on Thursday, after top security advisor Mr. Flynn was forced to resign, and asked him, “Is it just me, or are we on the brink of civil war?” And he replied, “You assume enough people give a shit.”

I had to text back, “I see your point.”

I've talked to so many friends and family who have shut down since the election. They say they don't know what to listen to, and so they're just not listening to anything. While I sympathize, I want to shake these people and say, “Don't you see? They don't want you to care! It's not enough people caring that got us into this mess in the first place!”

So while I don't recommend being alarmist, as that seems to shut people down, it's good to make suggestions in a non-anxious manner. Such as talk about what you do

believe in – truth-telling and transparency in our government – not some shadow, new-world order. As religious liberals, we are truth-tellers, we believe in truthspeak. Point them in the direction of articles and news programs you’ve vetted.

It’s not that such vetting guarantees our claim on the truth. This is a very important point, because we know there are times when we get the truth wrong. And, because we know *no one group has a claim on the only truth*, therefore no one entity gets to solely define the truth. This is a bedrock liberal religious value. We recognize humanity is flawed, and that, in order to arrive at the truth, it’s often necessary to explore something from a variety of angles and positions. Our understanding of reality and the truth has evolved with humanity’s evolution. We must always be open-minded and concede that much of knowledge cannot become a static thing.

So even when it seems like a good idea – say, for example, what is being considered in Europe, literally a Ministry of Truth, whose mission it would be to identify and illegalize fake news. There was a very interesting dialogue about this on Warren Olney’s NPR’s show, *To the Point* last week. A Danish journalist, the same one who caused controversy several years ago, publishing cartoons that depicted the prophet Mohammed, is speaking out against such an institution. He makes a good point about freedom of speech. If we take a hard line against fake news, against what may be interpreted as hate speech, then we run the risk of being no better than Big Brother in 1984. We cannot have any absolute claim on the truth or reality, or any descriptions of such thereof.

A free society allows for freedom of speech, period. No, you can’t cry out fire in a crowded movie theater, but that’s different. I’m talking about allowing free speech because to suppress free speech is a slippery slope we don’t want to tread. It’s a matter of giving hate speech and fake news enough rope to hang itself. Like Americans getting to see what fascism actually can look like and rejecting it, fake news will also lose its traction because it will be rejected. But we do need to be leaders in rejecting it, and take it upon ourselves to show others why and how to do the same.

If it’s a rejection of sacred democratic values that got President Trump elected, then it will be a larger rejection of totalitarian values of intolerance that eventually will kick out leaders like him. Remember, there are more of us than there are of them. That’s why they’re so mad. And it doesn’t mean that we don’t still need to meet their needs like any American’s - to find solutions in an increasingly automated world, to find a way all people can have dignity, and enjoy the things most all of us Americans love. It reminds me of the chorus of a Zac Brown song, a mainstream country artist who wrote “Chicken Fried” - a song for our modern proles perhaps, but I don’t buy that. Unless you’re vegan, everybody likes these sorts of things:

*A little bit o' chicken fried
Cold beer on a Friday night*

*A pair of jeans that fit just right
And the radio up
I like to see a sunrise
See the love in my woman's eyes
Feel the touch of a precious child
And know a mother's love*

Zac Brown notes that it's the little things in life that mean the most – and yet a lot of people no longer can afford those little things, the jeans that fit just right, the beer, a meat dinner. As part of our truth-speaking, we have to acknowledge that, and the disappointment and frustration of our huddled masses who don't know the details of a successful American life, even it's just fried chicken we're talking about. [1 in 6 people in the US faces hunger; 49,000 million Americans struggle to put food on the table.](#)

The truth does matter, but so does healing matter, remember, healing the web, like I talked about a few weeks ago in my Indian Thought-Ways sermon. We have healing work to do and to offer, as members of the techno/creative/elite, here in flagship liberal urban center Los Angeles and So-Cal in general. What have we taken for granted as part of our charmed existence? Whom of our fellow Americans have not had it so well because they were not born white or middle class or urbanite?

How do we reach them? We might GO to them . . .

My folks have a house in rural Wisconsin – I fantasize about just being able to rub elbows with neighbors there, talk about what I care about and what they care about, what they're concerned about, and vice versa. How else will urban and rural folks ever talk again face-to-face?

We have to try new things, or our Enlightenment values may slowly shred to incoherence, to distrust, misunderstanding, then extremism . . .

First, in such a conversation, we might find what bread and circuses we have in common – what TV do we both like to watch? Could a common love of *Game of Thrones* reunite America? Could a common desire for good education, decent jobs unite us? Could wanting our families to be safe from violence, especially in our own homes, unite us?

The point is that our faith speaks of this commonality, and affirms its existence. As human beings, we have more in common than we don't have in common, no matter where we are from, how we grew up, or where we now live.

For the media's part, it would be helpful if they reported on the array of bi-partisan issues that have broad support, rather than the wedge issues. For example, broad-based support issues include home financing reform, early childhood education, electric cars, or financial aid reform for education.

We have to build unlikely friendships, *and* maintain those friendships.

Finally, as a take-home message, I urge us to watch less television in general. Listen to or read your news more than see your news. Read more books, devour stories in print rather than passively view them on TV. Why? Our critical thinking skills are more attuned when we listen or read. Consider this: the brainwaves of a person watching TV are akin to the brainwaves of a person in a coma. Need I say more?

Mr. Trump can decry the free press as much as he likes, call real news fake news and the like – it's his free speech right to do so. Indeed, it's deeply unfortunate that he also happens to be our president. But this is the democracy we have earned somehow. How can we turn crisis into opportunity, and articulate more clearly than ever before the sacred tenets of a vibrant democracy?

Remember, America has always been an experiment – it's an ongoing experiment. Perhaps never has it been in sharper relief the need to reckon with our racist beginnings and present manifestations. I've heard it said by Barber and other truthspeakers – racism may destroy this country. As we expel brown people who carry our economy on their backs; as we refuse entry to Muslims who bring advanced skills we face a shortage of; as we have turned incarceration into a rural-town, supporting industry. When and how it will cease?

There's no doubt that we are threatened by Newspeak, or what I think of as today's fake news. It's not just coming from Russia, but any quarter that unscrupulously wants to earn a buck and can write a fake news story. In the face of this threat that has already had enormous consequences, our task is to, first, not panic. Second, think of the ways we can counter the fake news trend that work well for us individually, as we bolster education and critical thinking. My suggestion is that you do something that simultaneously feeds your soul AND works to protect democracy.

We shall overcome, and we shall be stronger for it. But snuggle in, because we have a long road ahead of us. Thankfully, we are on this road together, as we take a stand for truth, for free speech, for a free press, and this imperfect democracy that some of us may only truly be seeing in all its imperfection, for the first time. May each of us carry with us a thirst for justice, that can be slaked each time we make a difference in our families, our communities, and in our world.