



Auckland Unitarian Church

Love beyond belief

Maintaining Unitarian principles when we can't agree on the facts

Clay Nelson © 31 March 2019

When I was about six (that would've been about 1955) something happened that had a profound effect on me. We were visiting for the summer with my grandparents. One evening at the dinner table, my grandfather (born in 1895) went into a tirade about anyone who was not a white straight person, using every reprehensible, but common smear to describe each. Since I had not learned what that hate language even meant yet, I was not shocked. What shocked me was the fury my mother (born in 1925) directed at her father. She made it perfectly clear he was never to use such language in front of her children again. I doubt if it changed his 19th century views, but it left an indelible mark on me.

At some primal level I understood the predominantly white middle class world I was safely cocooned within was not extended to everyone. That even people I loved spoke cruelly about people I had not even had the chance to meet yet or even knew existed. Later, I would learn in horror how unsafe it could be for people who were targeted by that language. It was 1963. I lived in a predominantly white region of America. I think I had only met one other black child when the 16th Street Baptist Church was bombed in Birmingham, Alabama, killing four black children and injuring 22 others. It left another indelible mark.

It was an act of white supremacist terror by four Ku Klux Klansmen. It would take 15 years before any prosecutions were initiated and another 15 years before the three still alive began serving life sentences in prison. The tepid response to the crime only accentuated the unsafe environment black people lived in. On a human level I didn't like it, but I simply could neither relate to nor understand what it might have felt like to grow up black in America. There were no black people on TV except as comedic foils or if they could sing well. People still spoke of a great white hope in boxing. There were no black people (or white women for that matter) in elected office to speak of. News reports of crime focused on black crime. In 1963 Birmingham there were no black police or fire fighters, but that was not uncommon throughout the US I grew up in. It was normal. For the most part I don't think I would have given it a second thought if not for the film *In the heat of the night*. It was now 1967 and it left another indelible mark just as that same year *Guess who is coming to dinner* would. Seeing an interracial couple walking hand in hand on the street was still highly notable, for only in that year did the Supreme Court declare all laws prohibiting interracial marriage and sex unconstitutional. While my grandfather would have had some pretty unsavoury things to say about that, a young idealistic naïf off to university found it a sign of hope that the world was becoming a better place.

While no longer naïve, and a grandfather myself, my idealism hasn't grown cynical. I still long for a world that is becoming a better place. I still believe it is possible and much of my hope now resides in our youth. But their efforts to make it better are in a very different world thanks to the Internet and social media.

It is world that believes there are alternative facts to support my grandfather's 19th century bigotry. It is hard to imagine that there are people who whole heartedly believe vaccines are

the cause of autism, as argued by one charlatan thoroughly discounted by reputable scientific studies. And now measles, once vanquished, is breaking out in parts of this and other countries. It is hard to imagine that people still believe that climate change is a hoax in spite of 99% of the scientific community and 100% of our weather patterns and rising sea levels saying different. What accounts for this? It needs to be understood if New Zealand is to become the social laboratory our Prime Minister calls us to become to find a cure for racial hatred.

In such an undertaking the book *The Cynic & the Fool* might be helpful. It is by Tad DeLay, a scholar who writes at the intersection of psychoanalysis, philosophy, and theology. DeLay's work says that if we can't agree on the facts, how we proceed will sometimes depend on what is going on underneath our disagreement. To use DeLay's categories, we need to ask, are the facts in dispute because we are engaged with a "misinformed but honest fool"? Or are we dealing with a nihilistic cynic, who does not care about the truth, and seeks only to amass power at any cost?

We have all watched enough political interviews or Trump rallies to have wondered whether a given politician is so foolish as to actually believe what he just said or, instead, is just cynically towing a party line he knows is false. Along these lines, the late conservative political commentator William F. Buckley was famous for saying, "I will not insult your intelligence by treating you as if you are as stupid as you pretend to be".

My naïve self once believed we lived in a world in which everyone was acting above board. Unfortunately, experience taught me not every person disagreeing with me was acting in good faith, that is, with honesty and sincerity of intention.

So, when I find myself encountering Orwellian doublespeak about "alternative facts," I remind myself periodically of sci-fi writer Philip K. Dick's line, "Reality is what doesn't go away even when you stop believing in it." There is no such thing as an "alternative fact." A fact is something that is "indisputably the case." And there may be consequences for one or more parties, as "reality" catches up with the propaganda either in the short or long term. But in the meantime, arguing with someone operating in bad faith can be exhausting at best and deeply harmful at worst.

I am also reminded of the line that I find most haunting from George Orwell's dystopian novel 1984: "The heresy of heresies was common sense.... The Party told you to reject the evidence of your eyes and ears. It was their final, most essential command." Any time the powers that be begin to convince significant numbers of people to disbelieve facts, we are in treacherous times. And whenever people in power are promoting "alternative facts," concerned citizens should leverage political, ethical, technological and other forms of power to replace them with leaders more likely to act in good faith and in accordance with more-reputable information. That is a rare commodity and why Jacinda's honesty and sincerity of intention makes her the preferred leader around the world.

What about the other side of DeLay's formulation — the many who are not cynical nihilists, but merely "misinformed but honest fools"? David Dunning and Justin Kruger are two research psychologists at Cornell University known for researching the relationship between knowledge and confidence. Their most famous finding is called the "Dunning-Kruger Effect," which shows that the less you actually know, the more confident you are about what you think you know. To quote Dunning and Kruger, under-informed people "not only reach

erroneous conclusions and make unfortunate choices, but their incompetence robs them of the ability to realise it”. Of course, experts get it wrong sometimes too, but if they are good faith actors, they have also spent a lot of time studying common errors and pitfalls in their field. And here’s a related corollary to the “Dunning-Kruger Effect” called the “above average effect”: in almost every area, “everyone thinks they’re...well, above average.” Unfortunately, 50% of us are wrong.

The truth is that most of us don’t like to be wrong and love to be right. And there is good reason why. Our brains “get a dopamine rush when we find confirming data, similar to the one we get if we eat chocolate, have sex, or fall in love”. So, evolution has given us a strong incentive to maintain our current view—because it feels more pleasurable to do so—irrespective of whether it is right or wrong. Psychologists call a related effect confirmation bias, “the tendency to search for, interpret, favour, and recall information in a way that confirms one’s pre-existing beliefs or hypotheses.”

Thanks to our amygdala (our “fight or flight reaction”) is triggered when we encounter facts with which we currently disagree. “When we hear a disagreeable idea, the body’s chemical reaction is the same as if someone had pulled a knife on us in a dark alley.” And when the amygdala is activated, brain scans also show a darkening of activity in the rational, prefrontal cortex portion of our brain. These factors contribute to the all-too-human tendency to persist in believing delusions instead of painfully facing the facts. This problem is inflated by social media. We defriend on our Facebook account those who we don’t agree with us and follow on Twitter those who do. It’s like a dopamine crack house available to us 24/7 in our pockets.

In our social laboratory how are we to confront the misinformed fools confident in their alternative facts? He suggests engaging in conversations. It probably is not helpful to begin by calling them “misinformed fools”. He recommends “motivational interviewing.” This encompasses digging down to discover why they hold fast to their alternative facts. After prioritising deep listening you may reach a point where you can ask if they understand how much harm their convictions do to themselves and others.

I would add to Delay’s approach that in our lab we hold others accountable for their words and acts that threaten society or others no matter how much their alternative facts justify them in their own mind. When a bus driver slammed the door in the face of a school girl wearing a hijab coming home from a vigil, her two friends were justifiably outraged. They went to the bus company and made a complaint. CC video verified their complaint.

If we want to make the world a better place we can’t do so without maintaining UU Principles — especially the First Principle of “the inherent worth and dignity of every person”— even when we can’t reach agreement on the facts. One of the most helpful books is *Cultivating Empathy: The Worth and Dignity of Every Person — Without Exception* by Unitarian minister Nathan Walker. Walker has written, “I once believed that it was powerful to condemn wrongdoers. I believed it right to tear down another’s unexamined assumptions and to vaporize those whose presence was not worthy of my attention. I believed that others were the cause of my aggression, others were to blame for my feelings of despair, disappointment, and righteous indignation.... I was doing justice...all while being a jerk.”

For Nate, one of the most powerful tools for cultivating empathy is what he called the moral imagination, “the ability to anticipate or project oneself into the middle of a moral dilemma

or conflict and understand all the points of view.” Nate writes that, “It is possible for me to understand another person’s views...without necessarily agreeing with them or silencing my own voice. Understanding is a prerequisite for empathy.... When we observe oppression, let us develop strategies that free not only the oppressed but also the oppressor.... Do not let their unjust actions inspire us to cruelty, or else we will soon become what we set out against.”