



“Everything you think is wrong” day... A reflection on the Christchurch massacre

Clay Nelson © 15 March 2020

I’m sure that not long ago I thought there was no such day as “Everything you think is wrong” day to celebrate. I was wrong. I have no idea who comes up with these days, and no one knows who came up with this one or why on this date, March 15. My guess is the Ides of March was chosen because Julius Cæsar thought Brutus was his friend right up to the moment the knife entered his back.

So how does one celebrate this faux holiday? According to the anonymous founder this is a day to avoid making decisions, and by all means avoid saying “I think”. It is also a good day to spend time contemplating everything we don’t know or think we do, but don’t. We can take time to laugh at ourselves for things people used to think were true but aren’t. No, blood is not blue until it comes in contact with air. Yes, goldfish have memories. No, the earth is not flat. No, if you swallow your gum it does not stay in your body undigested. No, dropping a penny from the top of Empire State Building will not kill someone it hits on the footpath below. Yes, chameleons change colour, but not to hide. They do it to communicate. It is their way of talking. Yes, it appears hair and finger nails keep growing after death, but they don’t. The tissue around them shrinks. The five second rule is bollocks. If you drop food on the floor, eat it if you wish, but it will still have germs.

Those are some of the oldies but goodies. But we can’t help ourselves. We keep finding new things we think are true, but aren’t. You can believe it if it is on the Internet. I think that is an actual quote of Abraham Lincoln’s. Trump will make America great again. Being gay is an illness that can be treated. Jesus walked on water and died for our sins. Men are smarter than women. White privilege isn’t a thing. We earned everything we have. The poor are just lazy. They wouldn’t be poor if they pulled themselves up by their bootstraps. Climate change is a hoax. Unitarians can believe anything they want. And the latest one, during a Covid-19 pandemic you can’t have too much toilet paper.

What is it about us human beings that we seem most eager to think something is true that isn’t if it is racist, misogynist, homophobic, xenophobic, science-defying, mean-spirited or just plain dumb? That is why we need this holiday and it is not wrong to think so.

It is an unofficial holiday gently reminding us that we are all imperfect. It prompts us to accept that there are a lot of things we are wrong about and encourages us to spend some time correcting them.

The world around us is complex. There are things that we don’t know and there are things that we think are right, but are in fact wrong. These things could range from something as simple as a piece of trivia or something more complicated like our attitude towards others or our moral outlook. Donald Rumsfeld captured this truth best, “There are known knowns. These are things we know that we know. There are known unknowns. That is to say, there are

things that we know we don't know. But there are also unknown unknowns. There are things we don't know we don't know."

This is the perfect day to acknowledge that not everything you know or do is right and that you have a lot to learn about things around you.

However daunting and scary it may seem, accepting one's mistakes should not be considered a sign of weakness. Studies have shown that people who accept their mistakes are treated with more respect than those who are hesitant to take responsibility for their actions. In fact, it is widely accepted that admitting mistakes and ignorance and making an attempt to fix things is the mark of a creative and successful person.

While it is good practice to admit when one's wrong, it is also important to know that no one is perfect and that everyone makes mistakes. So, we shouldn't be too hard on ourselves or on others. The bottom line is this: making mistakes is not the problem, not taking responsibility or making an effort to fix things is.

One year ago today a gunman entered two of our mosques in Christchurch to act out his hate with semi-automatic weapons. When the rampage ended 51 of our fellow New Zealanders were dead and another 40 were injured. Today is a day to remember them and grieve for them, their families and, yes, ourselves. It is also a day to reflect on what we thought was right on March 14, 2019 that a day later was proved very wrong.

We thought we were exempt from terror attacks that were plaguing the rest of the world. We thought that white supremacy wasn't our problem when it was there all along hiding in plain sight. We thought that Muslims were the enemy and the ones who had to be watched. We thought we were an accepting and tolerant people but only because we had not listened for five years to Muslim groups like the Federation of Islamic Associations and the Islamic Women's Council who had told us repeatedly how commonly they are harassed in this country. And they had told us how their appeals for help were ignored by both National- and Labour-led governments. Sadly, the harassment hasn't stopped, but many of us have stopped turning a blind eye to it.

Keeping our balance in the difficult times we have endured just this year is important, which is why after being humbled by our wrongness today we get to bounce back tomorrow. Tomorrow is "Everything we do is right" day. Of course that is a ridiculous proposition, but it is a reminder that a lot of what we do is right. We saw it a year ago. We came together as a community. The first and most important thing that was right was the forgiveness offered by the Muslim community. "Certain things in life destroy everything," said Imam Alabi Lateef Zirullah. "They split friends, brothers and sisters, societies." He was not speaking of terror. "And one of them is: not forgiving. Nothing good can come from that. Getting angry opens the door to dark things."

The second most important thing was the empathetic and compassionate leadership of our Prime Minister, and the country followed suit with vigils, flowers, prayers, financial generosity, and acts of solidarity by non-Muslim women choosing to wear the hijab. We had been brutally shocked out of our wrongness. Blinders fell from our eyes and we faced who we were as opposed to who we want to become. We took first steps by embracing the virtues of resolution and speed, with swiftly changed gun laws and with the Christchurch Call, a

working process to persuade the barons of social media to accept a duty of civil decency and respect.

Simon Wilson, an opinion writer for the New Zealand Herald, wrote yesterday, “We have learned pride, that we have a parliament and a prime minister whose instincts were compassionate and acted on, not twisted out of shape by opportunism and fear, and who took all this to the world.”

So it is a year later. What are we thinking is right today, that maybe wrong in retrospect? There are two important elections this year. The one in the US will be filled with rancour and lies. It may be impacted by interference from foreign countries. The other is ours. We may think today ours will be much better. Later we may discover that the demagoguery of Shane Jones, who is trying to out-trump Trump in his attacks on Indian students, has appeal.

We might think we are more tolerant of “the others” in our society, when already Simon Wilson observes that “Chinese New Zealanders report other people walking widely around them on the street thanks to Covid-19. Noodle houses and yum cha restaurants have emptied out, unlike all the pizza and pasta places. Some schools went through their own awkward moments, thinking it best to exclude children who were, or maybe just seemed, Asian.”

We maybe think that we have made gun violence more difficult with the passage of reasonable gun laws. We would be wrong to think that won’t change as the National Party that once supported them seeks to roll some of the requirements back.

We would not be wrong to think that there are many people in this country looking for ways to act out their hate, but we would be wrong to think there aren’t some. A young man was arrested in Christchurch this month after terror threats were made against the Al Noor Mosque; University of Auckland students began their semester last week to discover someone had stuck up white supremacist publicity. Fetid imaginings are smeared across the internet.

We would be right to think we are not what we were a year ago, but we would be wrong to think we are now what we could be. Maybe tomorrow we will do what is right.