

“On Keeping Those Fingers Crossed”

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That lies should be necessary to life is part and parcel of the terrible and questionable character of existence. ~Friedrich Nietzsche

READING

The following is a true story: In the Eighth Century BCE in China there was a king known as You of Zhou.

King You of Zhou fell desperately in love with one of his concubines, a woman named Bao Si. Soon, she gave birth to a son. King You was so enamored of Bao Si and her beautiful son that he divorced his wife, who also had a son, and married Bao Si.

Bao Si was one of those people who are not easily amused. As a matter of fact, she seldom even smiled. King You wanted desperately to make his queen happy.

One night, he devised a plan: he had the emergency warning lights lit that called his nobles to the palace. Seeing the warning lights and thinking King You was in danger, the nobles came running.

This amused the queen greatly, and Bao Si laughed and laughed.

After a few weeks of never seeing his queen smile, King You had the warning lights lit yet again. Again the nobles came running. Again the queen laughed and laughed.

I suspect you know where this is headed: King You of Zhou repeated this trick many times. Always, the faithful nobles came running, but with increasing frustration.

So it was that one night, King You's former queen and her son, who considered himself the legitimate heir to the throne, attacked the palace. King You had the warning beacons lit . . . but the nobles assumed it was yet another trick, and, fed up with the deception, they all stayed home.

King You, Bao Si, and their son were killed and a new dynasty came to power.

INTRODUCTION

Though the tale of King You of Zhou, Bao Si, and their son is apparently a true story, you see that it is much like Aesop's fable "The Boy Who Cried Wolf." Real history has few morals to share, but this story and Aesop's fable have a clear moral: lying may be fun, but it is a bad idea.

Despite edifying stories such as this one, studies indicate that men tell an average of six lies a day; and women lie on average three times per day. That's forty-two lies a week for men; twenty-one lies a week for women, on average.

Besides, we start early: studies indicate that kids learn to lie at about three years of age. As soon as we become proficient at stringing sentences together, we use them to deceive.

Even animals lie.

You may know about Koko the gorilla who was taught human sign language. You may also know that Koko was given and cared for a pet kitten.

One day Koko the gorilla got agitated and pulled her sink off the wall and smashed it.

When researchers asked Koko what had happened, she responded that her kitten had broken the sink.

Like Koko, people lie to deflect blame, thus avoiding the consequences of our actions. We also lie for the purpose of deception—withholding truth in order to manipulate others. Those are the darkest lies.

We lie to others.

We lie to ourselves.

And, often, we believe lies because we just don't care enough to investigate what is true.

With all those lies within lies, how are we to trust ourselves, trust others, or build trust between ourselves . . .

A couple of weeks ago I considered the idea of promises—why we make them to each other and why they are so important to us.

This week I want to think about why we lie and how we can make promises to each other in a community even in the face of basic human nature.

So far I've been reporting the bad news about lying . . .

The good news is that the majority of those lies we tell each day are what researchers call “social lies;” that is, lies told not for the purpose of deception and gain but to make others *feel better*—“that looks GREAT on you;” “you don't look a day older . . .” “I was just about to call you!”—that sort of lie. White lies.

ONE

Just as there are white lies, there are also—maybe—*noble* lies. According to Plato, Noble Lies form the base—the foundation—of our social structures. A Noble Lie justifies the way things are to the masses in order for the ruling elite—who know better—to remain the ruling elite.

In *The Republic*, Plato has Socrates propose two Noble Lies as examples: One, citizens are to be told that human beings are born not from human parents but from the earth itself. And, two, citizens are to

be taught that each person, upon birth, has a bit of metal inside her or his soul: the aristocrats gold; the soldiers and traders silver; and the peasants iron.

Plato knew that these propositions are absurd, but he uses the absurdity of the propositions to point out that noble lies—what we nowadays call myths or even *foundational myths*—keep social structures stable . . . even when they *are* absurd.

If citizens believe the myth that they are of the earth, they will be less likely to adhere to family and clan connections and more willing to die for their country. As to the second Noble Lie, it serves to keep people in their social classes: those born with iron in their souls will accept that they have no business trying to become part of the ruling elite who have gold in their souls.

In Plato's consideration of the issue, there are Noble Lies, but no "Noble Truths," because truth is too contradictory and complex for most people to understand, and too complex and contradictory to be used for the purposes of government.

(Yes, this is an elitist argument as Plato presents it, but public education can train people to question their own social conditioning.)
Plato's question remains: What happens to democracy when citizens

believe Noble Lies—myths—instead of examining reality and finding truth?

“Wait a minute!” the citizens of Athens said—“you’re talking about us! And our religion and civil religion, aren’t you?” And so Socrates was executed for corrupting the young.

Plato’s idea brings up another question: what happens to democracy when the ruling class actually *believe* that the lies—the myths—are true?

Hmmmm. You get the United States Congress, don’t you? And the US Supreme Court, don’t you? You get “issue” voters. And, my favorite term, “low information” voters.

TWO

“Truth is power.” I don’t think many people disagree with that statement. Truth is power.

Unfortunately, lies are power too. That’s why lying is taboo—to lie is to achieve power over another by using our essential human need to trust. Truth is power. Lies are power.

In addition to this, we often miss that little “is,” functioning as an equal sign: Truth is power, but also . . . power is truth. That’s an equally “true” statement. As the old proverb goes, “Until lions have historians, tales of the hunt will glorify the hunter.”

I pondered this recently when my wife Theresa and I spent a pleasant afternoon at a cafe on the piazza of Santa Maria de Trastevere in Rome. Santa Maria is a stone’s throw from the Vatican. It’s the oldest *legal* Christian church in Rome.

Nowadays, Santa Maria is a scenic antique in a beautiful old neighborhood. When the church was built, it offered only another flavor of religion in the Roman banquet of religions. Then the church became a bastion of power as Christians seized control of the Roman Empire.

When that church was new, Christians were poised to destroy one of the most religiously diverse societies in human history. A diversity we are only now re-approaching—this time through the internet. As Santa Maria was being built, Christians were rooting out the cult of Mithras and his ilk and rooting *in* the cult of Christ.

Soon enough “pagans,” as they would soon be called, would suffer the same persecuted fate that Christians recently had. And the

Roman world would sink into seven hundred years of murderous parochialism, what we call the Dark Ages—a parochialism only reversed, eventually, by the ancient ideas preserved in the Islamic world, in the caliphate that the ISIS hoodlums are trying to reestablish today . . . and getting all wrong.

Truth is power. Lies are power. Power is truth. Clearly there are more ways to have power than there are ways to have truth.

If only Santa Maria de Trastevere had shared the beauty of its truth without the sword.

Last week I related a midrash from Medieval Judaism, a story in which God casts the Angel of Truth onto the earth—because Truth is a problem-angel, causing dissension in heaven. And so, according to the story, Truth lives here, on this earth, and causes his truth-y problems here.

Why is it that—given our propensity to lie—we are so insistent about our own truths?

Each week in my welcoming remarks I say something about this congregation being a place to share *dangerous* truths.

Each week I read our aspirations—our vision of what an ideal congregation does. Two of those are,

“Pursue wisdom through reason, science, art, and the stories of civilization.”

and

“Support one another’s journey toward meaning and connection in the here and now.”

My conviction is that a predominately humanist congregation is a perfect place to explore religions and philosophies. Humanism is one step back from the religious battles that still rage in our nation and in our world. Ideally, humanism is a religiously neutral zone in which we can begin to do the work of seeking the complex truths that Plato was talking about.

But we must remember to do that with a scalpel rather than an ax.

Yes, humanism was the enemy of Christianity at the beginning of the Renaissance in Europe. The power of the Roman Empire had transformed into the power of Roman Catholicism. Humanists were burned, tortured, imprisoned, marginalized, and silenced.

But at least in *some* of the nations of the world nowadays we can think and say dangerous ideas, that “forbidden knowledge” that fundamentalists are so afraid of. At least here, in this congregation, we aspire to speak our truths . . . and listen as others do the same.

We do well to keep in mind that the power of humanism does not lie in violence or cruelty or terror but in the power of our good ideas.

Roman Catholicism is not the religion it was in 350 or 1350. And that’s because of humanist ideas.

Protestantism is not what it was in 1650. Or 1950. And that’s because of humanist ideas.

The religions of the world have been dragged, kicking and screaming, out of the Iron Age and into a humanist vision of the world—a place where science trumps myths and social mores evolve over time.

Fundamentalism is fundamentalism—Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Hindu, whatever—because fundamentalisms resist our good ideas. Resistance is their very definition, their “raison dee tray,” as the Cohen Brothers would have it

Truth doesn't require power. Or violence. Or even getting into someone's face. The Hundred Years War between Catholicism and Protestantism took a hundred years because . . . *nobody* was right. It was merely politics in the cloak of religion. (So is the war in Syria.)

Anti-choice activism. Anti-gay activism . . . Anti-environmental activism . . . the list goes on, as you have noticed—all those are politics in the cloak of religion. (Unfortunately, too many of our leaders don't know they are repeating founding myths, not truth.)

When we hear religious leaders saying, "Islam is a religion of peace;" "Christianity is a religion of peace," "Judaism is a religion of peace," they're telling the truth . . . when you take out politics.

You boil down Islam. You boil down Christianity. You boil down Judaism or Hinduism or Buddhism, they all have a humanist message, because they are all about creating meaningful lives, creating just and loving human relationships, creating just and humane societies.

That's why a secular society—the separation of church and state—is so important to humanism. To *level* the playing field for *all* religious and philosophical beliefs. Then . . . humanist ideas sprout in any and all religious soils. (That's what scares fundamentalists.)

THREE

A little trivia for you: the term “father of lies” comes from the Bible, the Gospel of John. Jesus is, as usual, wrangling with the Pharisees, a group that would eventually create the rabbinic tradition in Judaism. Jesus says to the Pharisees,

You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father’s desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies. (8:44 New American Standard translation)

Well, I think you’ll agree that the “father of lies” is not the sort of dad any of us wants. But, aside from the First Church of Satan, no religious person of whatever stripe believes that she or he belongs to that particular family.

Pope Francis has recently come out against homophobia. Just last week in the Philippines he said that Roman Catholics shouldn’t—in HIS words—“breed like rabbits.” Now, you notice, he’s had to walk that back a bit—after the old white guys who surround him got wind of it.

Conservatives accuse the pope of taking on secular ideas. Well, heck yes, he is! Because secular ideas are more evolved ideas than what the Church Fathers were saying in 390 CE, when they built Santa Maria de Trastevere.

What the pope is doing—or trying to do—is saving the very human and humane essence of Roman Catholicism—by paring away antique thinking and patriarchal politics. He is embracing humanist, secular ideas.

That's also what they're doing across the street at the Methodist church. And the Episcopal church across the street. And at Westminster Presbyterian. And Plymouth UCC, Central Lutheran and the Basilica, and some of the mosques in town, and the Hindu temple out in Maple Grove, and on and on. Embracing humanist ideas.

Given a level playing field; given a free marketplace of ideas free of fear and violence—the very human and humane values of religions come out. And we hear not from the Jesus who calls rabbis “children of the devil,” but from the one who says, “what have you done for the least of these.”

***That* guy is a humanist.**

And so are many of my clergy colleagues, Christian, Muslim, Jewish, and what-have-you.

CONCLUSION

My last point: Backing to crying wolf: I grew up on a farm. I've lived around wolves all my life. Despite their bad press, wolves aren't dangerous . . . until they feel cornered.

So, be sure you don't corner a wolf. Then, you're fine. And it's the same with people: we get dangerous when we feel we have been driven into a corner.

How do we keep Somali kids from radicalizing? Don't corner them. Don't make them feel trapped. Let those humanist ideas soak in.

Here's my handy-dandy metaphor for religions:

Every car that rolls off an assembly line anywhere in the world has a little of the Model T Ford in it. Because the Model T was the first car to roll off an assembly line.

There's no reason for us to despise the Model T because it isn't a Lexus. Old ideas lead to new ideas.

My grandparents could resent the Model T, because they wanted a Model A with an electric starter instead of a crank. But we aren't them.

In the same way, we don't need to go to Coffee Hour and refight the Renaissance or the Reformation or the Hundred Years War. This congregation is here because . . . we won. We have freedom of conscience.

The "father of lies" is the guy who thinks he's got that Angel of Truth all locked away.

Let's not be that guy. Let's aspire to "Support one another's journey toward meaning and connection in the here and now . . ." wherever anyone is on that journey—just starting out, or seventy years in.

That's one excellent aspiration . . .

