

Whither the Truth

Among all the talk about values in the current political campaign, there is one that is consistently in short supply: the truth. It is tragic that we Americans have become all too accepting of the political campaign as just another form of marketing. Candidates are sold to us through carefully controlled images and rhetoric. Power is the prize. Emotion is the means. And the truth is often the victim. But in the end, the greatest victim when we lose the truth, is democracy itself.

Political campaigns, of course, are marketing machines. Our votes are sought through manipulation of visual images, slogans, and the terms used to frame the issues and the characters of the candidates. The truth about policies and their consequences—if it can be found—is reduced to the status of mere opinion.

Even the best of the news media do little in the way of significant investigative reporting. Instead, we hear from representatives of political interests, skillfully spinning the facts to make their candidate look appealing and their opponents unqualified. I can't even hear the words "fair and balanced" without skepticism that what we are about to get is likely something far from the meaning of those terms.

But this does not mean that there aren't more or less accurate perspectives on issues or what candidates are about. The moral obligation of the news media is to present these perspectives as objectively as possible, without regard to profits or ratings. *Our* obligation is to hold them to *their* obligation, and to make the effort to learn the facts as best we can. Look at www.factcheck.org, for example.

In today's context we have become increasingly skeptical, if not cynical, about the idea of truth itself. This skepticism is both dangerous and healthy. We have learned that what we understand to be true about the world is always filtered through some variety of biases. The truth is rarely a matter of facts alone. We all interpret the facts in our speaking and listening. Our skepticism is dangerous, though, if we conclude wrongly that the truth is therefore nothing but mere opinion. It is healthy if it leads us seek to overcome bias in great measure, even within ourselves.

A commitment to the value of knowing and acting on the truth must therefore be, first and foremost, a commitment to the prospect that we ourselves might be mistaken. Our obligation is to not to be certain, but to doubt even our own convictions. For the honest effort to overcome doubt leads to a greater likelihood of seeing what is true.

One of the biggest dangers in our current political world is the temptation to mistake certainty for truth. In times that are characterized primarily by uncertainty and fear, certainty is comforting. Clarity and simplicity are appealing. Nuance is frightening. We don't want the gray area of complex moral judgment or the prospect that we may have done wrong. We want black and white—with self-righteous pats on the back.

In our world, therefore, the often-praised virtue of decisiveness can become a dangerous vice. Decisiveness on behalf of ideological certainty can be worse than flip-flopping, if it is not tempered by the capacity to seek greater knowledge and to admit that the most justifiable act is to change one's mind for the sake of the truth and doing the right thing.

In a forthcoming book, *True to Life: Why Truth Matters*, philosopher Michael Lynch gives us many reasons why we should care more about the truth. First, we need to be able to distinguish right from wrong answers—a way to appraise our beliefs and claims about the world. Second, our most fundamental moral concepts—such as human rights—depend on our believing that they are true. And most importantly, Lynch argues that “governmental transparency and freedom of information are the first defenses against tyranny. . . . Unless the government strives to tell the truth, liberal democracies are no longer liberal or democratic.”

I believe it no exaggeration to conclude that the very things we claim to be fighting for around the world—freedom and democracy—are seriously eroding at home. Our obligation as citizens is to seek the best for our country and our world, not by clinging to party and ideology, but by demanding of our candidates and our media an honest accounting of candidates' views, how their decisions are made, whose interests are promoted, and the consequences of their policies. Some facts are fairly certain, and we need to know them.

To be sure, truth will always be a matter of more or less. But it remains the best standard to which we should hold people accountable. The alternative is the gradual and imperceptible slide into cynicism and indifference. It is time to expect more.

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