

STAND UP FOR TRUTH AND REALITY!

Handout 1 of 4 10/1/17

Helping Restore a Strong Truth/Reality-Based Majority in America

The Rev. Keith Thompson, former pastor of First United Methodist Church, Boulder, Colorado

Will we, in our significant communities and not just as individuals, answer the call to stand up for Truth and Reality at this crucial time when the very existence of our liberal democracy is at stake in America?

If this sounds unreasonably alarmist, have you noticed the growing number of respected commentators on our national scene who are sounding this precise warning?

And if “Truth and Reality” seems too abstract to be an important component of a call to join a social justice movement, please read on.

This is the first of four handouts designed to provide what I believe are some of the most significant--and often surprising--information about the deepest roots of this long-developing threat to our democracy and what we can do about it. They will be available one per month during the fall of 2017 along with opportunities to meet and discuss them.

My hope is that early in 2018 secular and religious communities will use this information to decide how they--as communities--can take their own unique actions to stand up for Truth and Reality to strengthen our democracy.

The topics of the four handouts are:

I. Oh, Come On! The Very Existence of Our Liberal Democracy In Danger?

The Issue: Do “Post-Truth” and “Alternative Reality” really threaten our nation?

Primary Resource: (A) *On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons From the 20th Century* by Timothy Snyder (2017)

II. America: Fantasy Trumps Truth and Reality (pun intended)

The Issue: Why do such large percentages of our population fervently believe things that are demonstratively false?

Primary Resource: (B) “How America Lost Its Mind” by Kurt Andersen (14 page article in the September 2017 issue of *Atlantic Magazine* - a summary of his 2017 book *Fantasyland: How America Went Haywire--A 500-Year History*)

III. The Decades-in-the-Making Enormous U.S. Socio-Economic Class Gap

The Issue: Why did so many middle class whites vote for Trump’s extremist nationalist/populist agenda?

Primary Resource: (C) *The Retreat of Western Liberalism* by Edward Luce (2017)

IV. The Essential Roles of Faith and Repentance for Communal Social Justice Action

The Issue: Why is it so difficult for American communities, religious and secular, at the local level to develop and sustain healthy, effective ways to promote social justice?

Primary Resource: (D) *The Church for the World: A Theology of Public Witness* by Jennifer M. McBride (2012)

Note: The four handouts will be inserts in the worship bulletins on 10/1, 10/15, 11/12 and 12/17. They will also be available on the church’s website the week before these worship services. There will be opportunities for discussion of the first handout at the 9:00am Adult Forum 10/8 and of the remaining three after worship 10/15, 11/12 and 12/17. For more detailed reviews of the resources see my website: www.centristfaithandpolitics.com.

(See next page for the back of the handout)

I. Oh, Come On! The Very Existence of Our Liberal Democracy In Danger?

The Issue: Does “Post Truth” and “Alternative Reality” really threaten our nation?

*Primary Resource: (A) *On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons From the 20th Century* by Timothy Snyder (2017)

(1) Don't believe it can't happen here.

Immediately following Donald Trump's election as President, historian Timothy Snyder felt compelled to write a little book (*which I strongly encourage everyone to read*) warning us not to be “tempted to think our democratic heritage automatically protects us” from the forces of tyranny that have felled so many democracies. (A, p. 13)* He says, “To abandon facts is to abandon freedom. If nothing is true, then no one can criticize power, because there is no basis upon which to do so. If nothing is true, then all is spectacle. The biggest wallet pays for the most blinding lights.” (p. 65) “Post-truth is pre-fascism.” (p. 71)

Many of us thought we would be free from danger of tyranny for some time when President Obama was elected the second time. Johathan Alter said in 2013, “I make no apologies for suggesting that the United States dodged a bullet in 2012 by rejecting” extremist views... “We are a centrist nation and will remain so.” (A1, p. xiii)^ But four short years later our centrist democratic values and institutions seemed to be under severe threat. The strain of extremist conservatism that Alter had seen victorious in the 2010 election--“an ideology of enlightened selfishness” (p. 19)--was back again in a new guise and armed with what was called “post-truth” and “alternative reality.” William Butler Yeats comes to mind, “Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold/...The best lack all conviction, while the worst/Are full of passionate intensity.” (“The Second Coming,” 1919)

(2) What do “post-truth” and “alternative reality” mean?

“Post-truth” was named 2016 Word of the Year by Oxford Dictionaries. It was defined as “relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief.” However, even a decade earlier Stephen Colbert had satirized the serious abuses of the word “truth” by hilariously calling them “Truthiness.” (10/17/05, see YouTube)

One telling example of the strength of “post-truth” today is the 8/22/17 *Washington Post* online article containing a video that rapidly streams through quotes of President Trump's 1057 demonstrably false and misleading statements in his first seven months--it took six minutes! But what is even more unbelievable is the fact that a sizeable number of Americans either don't see, don't care or are willing to overlook this constant, dangerous stream of falsehoods. This calls out for the famous response by Daniel Patrick Moynihan, “You are entitled to your own opinion, but you are not entitled to your own facts.”

And as for “alternative reality,” President Trump supplies another striking example. In a pre-election *Washington Post* column, Fareed Zakaria claims that Trump is not just a liar but a “bullshit artist.” He draws on the moral philosopher Harry Frankfurt's 1986 book *On Bullshit* from which he quotes: “In order to invent a lie at all, [the teller of a lie] must think he knows what is true...The B.S. artist, however, has lost all connection with reality...By virtue of this, bullshit is a greater enemy of truth than lies are.” (A2)^

Can there be widely accepted postmodern definitions of “Truth” and “Reality” that can counter the dangerous effects of our so-called “post-truth”/“alternative reality” world? Yes, definitely; but our addiction to fantasy threatens to derail them. Look for these in Handout 2. It's important to know that Trump is a symptom of the problem, not the cause. It will be with us long after he is gone.

^Other Resources: (A1) *The Center Holds: Obama and His Enemies* by Johathan Alter (2013); (A2) “The Unbearable Stench of Trump's B.S.” by Fareed Zakaria, *The Washington Post*, 8/4/16.