

Seeing Things Not as They Are But as We Are

the Rev. Edmund Robinson
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In the current political campaign we are experiencing what you might call truth decay. In any political campaign truth is an issue. But it has become more central in this contest and has taken some bizarre turns. Back in thick of the primaries, liberals were appalled by one candidate who seemed to be appealing nakedly to racism, homophobia, sexism and xenophobia and, worse, succeeding wildly in doing it. What was most puzzling was that those supporting him said that this candidate alone seemed to be putting aside political correctness and telling it like it was. They were supporting him because they thought he was telling the truth. Of course, to liberals, saying all Muslims are potential terrorists and all Mexicans are rapists is not telling it like it is, it is using gross racial and religious and national origin stereotypes to inflame passions we would like to see disappear from American life. We are here worried about racism in police-citizen encounters which seem to be taking the lives of innocent black citizens, and there is whole section of the body politic who seem to live in a world where all people of color are suspicious if not dangerous and we'll only be safe when everyone is armed to the teeth.

Truth is very much at issue. Websites called fact-checkers submit the claims of each candidate to a rigorous research to determine if they are true. And it is discouraging when a candidate can get low marks on truthfulness and still maintain support.

In this connection a few weeks ago, I came across this saying which stopped me in my tracks: we do not see things as they are, but as we are. If I were to put this morning's message into one sentence, it would be that everything any of us thinks is true is filtered through the processes of perception and understanding in our individual brains, which processes are informed by our histories and by our assumptions about the way the world is. Let me start with a humble exercise. This involves the sense of sight, and I realize we have people with various degrees of sight impairment among us, and they might want to think about how what we are about to do might apply to the other senses, because I think the principle I will get to applies. If you choose to do this, close one of your eyes and raise the hand on the side of the open eye so that it is straight out in front of the open eye. Close the fingers of that hand and point the thumb up, so the up-pointing thumb is right in the middle of your field of vision of the open eye. Now continue looking straight ahead, but move the hand slowly outward from the center line of your visual field; if it's your right hand, move it right, if your left hand move it left. Keep your eye looking straight ahead.

Do you notice what happens? At about 15 degrees out from the center of your field of vision, your thumb disappears! Then as you continue to move it outward, it reappears. If you missed it, try it a couple of times. You can try it with the other eye and the other hand.

What you have just shown yourself is that the vision in each eye has a blind spot. The blind spot is perfectly normal and has an anatomical explanation: it corresponds to the spot on your retina where the optic nerve comes in. But the remarkable thing about this blind spot is not that we all have it; it is that we don't know we have it. It's as if your brain has stitched up this hole in your field of vision so that it's not noticeable.

Here's how my favorite neuroscientist David Eagleman describes it: "[You don't notice the hole in your field of vision] because the brain 'fills in' the missing information from the blind spot. Notice what you see in the location of the [thumb] when it's in the blind spot. When the [thumb] disappears, you do not perceive a hole of whiteness or of blackness in its place; instead, your brain invents a patch of the background pattern. Your brain, with no information from that particular spot in visual space, fills in with patterns around it." David Eagleman concludes, "You're not perceiving what's out there. You're perceiving whatever your brain tells you."

The brain is like the blue guitar in Wallace Stevens' poem: Things as they are are changed upon the blue guitar.

And the same principle applies to the other senses: you're hearing, tasting, feeling smelling what your brain tells you.

Now this is not a course on neuroanatomy, but a meditation on the nature of truth. Many UU congregations recite a covenant every Sunday which declares that the quest of truth is our sacrament.

When Jesus was on trial for his life before Pontius Pilate in the Gospel of John, Pilate asked him: "So you are a king?"

And Jesus answered, "You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice."

Pilate's reply to this was the arresting question: "What is truth?" (John 18:37-8) That question echoes down through the ages.

What is truth? Many religions as well as many political systems claim to have a lock on truth, they set up statements of orthodoxy and punish anyone who deviates from the official truth. By contrast, we are descended from heretics, and

our approach to religion is that truth is always in play, and what is sacred is not the final answer but the quest for truth itself. Unitarian Universalism is sometimes called the religion which questions all your answers. We instinctively agree with the poet when he says things as they are are changed upon the blue guitar. So we know that different people have different ideas of the truth, and we embrace this diversity as we do other diversities. It is the bedrock assumption of liberal education that truth will emerge in the clash of ideas.

Let's return to this adage: we do not see things as they are, but as we are. Each of us is made differently. Each of our brains are wired according to our own individual life experiences. But even within one brain, as Eagleman points out, we can have different factions pulling different ways. We use these brains to see with and to hear with, they are the central repository of all our senses and the sense we make of them. After discussing the blind spot, David Eagleman goes on to show how for each sense – sight, hearing, taste, feeling and smell – there is a cortex, an area of the brain which stores everything you've seen, felt, smelled heard before, and then the incoming data from your senses in the present is matched against that stored record. If your eyes are seeing something that you've never seen before, this visual cortex might not recognize it and might not even pass the sensation on to your conscious mind.

Eagleman tells the story of a man who lost his eyesight in a disease in early childhood, but several decades later, after he had lived blind most of his life, a new medical breakthrough restored his sight. But when the bandages were removed from his eyes, and he saw his children for the first time, he could not make any sense of the swirl of colors falling on his eyes. It took weeks for his brain to learn to process the signals coming from his eyes, for him to really see with those eyes. We do not see things as they are, but as we are. What Eagleman describes at the level of sensation also applies to the more abstract level of beliefs and values. I came across an article by a scholar named Jer Clifton at the University of Pennsylvania who studies what she calls the impact of primal world beliefs on behavior. Primal world beliefs are about “the nature of reality writ large” such as “the world is fascinating.” Clifton says “Primals are the most super simple, essential, and general beliefs we have.” She identifies 28 major primal beliefs, 24 of which collapse into three big categories – Safe, Enticing and Alive. They correlate with all kinds of factors and can predict such things as depression and satisfaction and well-being. But in this political season, Clifton decided to focus on what primal beliefs differentiated likely voters for the two political parties. Surprisingly, dangerousness was not a factor – perceiving the world as full of dangers did not differentiate voters of one party from those of another. The two key factors that Clifton found were hierarchy and justice.

As Clifton explains, “The “hierarchical” primal concerns the nature of differences. Namely, does difference imply that something is better or worse? For those who believe that reality is hierarchical, if two things are different that tends

to ... imply that one is better than the other. Likewise, for those who see reality as nonhierarchical, differences are likely surface and meaningless distinctions and probably distractions. Under the latter view, any attempt to organize the world into “better” or “worse” things will either fail or be inaccurate and superficial. However, for folks who see the world as hierarchical, most things can be fairly usefully ranked and ordered from better or worse.”

So this was one of the two significant primal beliefs which separated people politically. Those who were inclined to vote Republican believed in hierarchy in this sense, and those inclined to vote Democrat did not.

The other politically significant primal belief was justice, and Clifton describes this as follows: “the second biggest distinction between Republicans and Democrats concerns whether or not the arc of life trends towards justice. Does life find a way to reward those who do good and punish those who do bad? Is the world a place where working hard and being nice pays off? With plenty of exceptions, Republicans tend to say ‘Yes’ and Democrats say ‘No.’” Now this is tricky. We UU's love to quote Theodore Parker, the arc of the universe is long but it bends towards justice. President Obama has that quote embroidered on a carpet in the White House. Liberals are concerned with justice. But in terms of a belief that the world as presently constituted is just, we aren't there. We're out bending the arc because it needs bending. A belief that the world as it is, is just, that anyone can succeed through hard work as the system is now, is more characteristic of the conservative mindset.

When I was just starting my legal career in the Public Defender's office, I got to view the legal establishment from the point of view of the most powerless, and behind my desk was a favorite cartoon from the New Yorker, showing three fish with their mouths open. The littlest fish on the right was about to be eaten by the middle-sized fish in the middle, who in turn was about to be eaten by the big fish on the left. Each of the fishes had thought bubbles. The littlest fish's thought bubble said “There is no justice in the world.” The middle-sized fish's thought bubble said, “there is some justice in the world.” The big fish, about to devour the other two, had a thought bubble which said “the world is just.”

We do not see things as they are but as we are. Who we are, or who we want to be, is people who are woke. People who understand that justice is not here yet for everybody, that there are still people left out of “we the people.” People support different platforms, candidates and programs because of different assumptions about the world. This does not just apply in electoral politics but in social policy such as climate change, anti-racism efforts, growth or no-growth incentives for Cape Cod.

Now does this mean that things as they are in themselves don't exist? No, far from it. It just means that the only thing we can know about them is how they

appear to us, filtered through the categories in our minds. To me this seems close to the adage, we don't see things as they are, but as we are. We see them as our mental faculties are tuned to perceive them.

Okay, what is the takeaway here? The current political campaign has exposed disturbing diversity of opinion among sections of the body politic. Some of us were under the impression that the election of a biracial man as President signaled a step forward in dealing with race. What this campaign has plainly shown is that there is also a strong backlash, a faction within the electorate which has never accepted a black president. This is disturbing, but I want to make a plea for us not to demonize candidates or each other. I want to ask us to understand how different mindsets can produce different realities as we each look at the same thing. We live in realities made by our brains, and different brains will construct reality differently.

In this time of truth decay, it is good to remind ourselves that none of us sees things as they are, but rather as we are. And we are a bundle of contradictory impulses, fears, hopes, beliefs. Let us in this highly-polarized and hyper-excited political season cut each other a little slack.

Amen.

Readings for things as they are

Opening:

Wallace Stevens, "The Man with the Blue Guitar" (excerpts)

I

The man bent over his guitar,
A shearsman of sorts. The day was green.

They said, "You have a blue guitar,
You do not play things as they are."

The man replied, "Things as they are
Are changed upon the blue guitar."

And they said then, "But play, you must,
A tune beyond us, yet ourselves,

A tune upon the blue guitar
Of things exactly as they are."

II

I cannot bring a world quite round,
Although I patch it as I can.

I sing a hero's head, large eye
And bearded bronze, but not a man,

Although I patch him as I can
And reach through him almost to man.

If to serenade almost to man
Is to miss, by that, things as they are,

Say it is the serenade
Of a man that plays a blue guitar.

III

Ah, but to play man number one,
To drive the dagger in his heart,

To lay his brain upon the board
And pick the acrid colors out,

To nail his thought across the door,
Its wings spread wide to rain and snow,

To strike his living hi and ho,
To tick it, tock it, turn it true,

To bang from it a savage blue,
Jangling the metal of the strings

Sermon reading:

From Eagleman, David, *Incognito: The Secret Life of the Brain* New York:
Vintage Books 2011, p. 107-8

Just like a good drama, the human brain runs on conflict
In an assembly line or government ministry, each worker is an expert in a small
task. In contrast, parties in a democracy hold different opinions about the same
issues – and the important part of the process is the battle for steering the ship of
state. Brains are like representative democracies. They are built of multiple,
overlapping experts who weigh in and compete over different choices. As Walt

Whitman correctly surmised, we are large and we harbor multitudes within us. And those multitudes are locked in chronic battle.

There is an ongoing conversation among the different factions in your brain, each competing to control the single output channel of your behavior. As a result, you can accomplish the strange feats of arguing with yourself, cursing at yourself, and cajoling yourself to do something – feats that modern computers simply do not do. When the hostess at a party offers chocolate cake, you find yourself on the horns of a dilemma: some parts of your brain have evolved to crave the rich energy source of sugar, and other parts care about the negative consequences, such as the health of your heart, or the bulge of your love handles. Part of you wants the cake and part of you tries to muster the fortitude to forgo it. The final vote of the parliament determines which party controls your action – that is, whether you put your hand out or up. In the end, you either eat the chocolate cake or you do not, but you can't do both.