

Gullibility

by Bill Herbst

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If I never hear another word from or about Donald Trump, it's too soon. Many of us knew who Trump was a long, long time ago — way back in the 1980s: a liar, a cheat, a sexual predator, a narcissist, a racist, another asshole real estate developer who failed spectacularly at everything he tried, a cancerous pimple on the body politic. We knew without even a shred of doubt that Trump was one of the most despicable human beings to ever draw breath. Nothing that Trump has said or done over the past 40 years has altered that assessment a single iota.

And yet, Trump has reached the pinnacle of the power and publicity his ego craves. Asking why the Republican Party has capitulated totally to him or why one-third of the country still supports him (and will vote for Trump again in 2020) are vexing questions, but at this point they're less compelling than earlier. Donald is the avatar of self-marketing — the ultimate snake-oil salesman — and vindictive as hell toward anyone who crosses his gigantic ego. Personal aggrandizement is what he knows, and he's very good at hoodwinking the rubes.

As President, everything Trump says is endlessly repeated, discussed, and analyzed. He punks the media every day, and they fall for it every time. The "news media" is the perfect tool to play right into Trump's tiny hands. Lord knows, that's not surprising.

The mainstream news media is caught between a rock and a hard place. On the one hand, news channels strive to live up to the high standards of reporting taught in journalism schools. As with every other institution, of course, this effort toward integrity is sullied by a fair amount of background hypocrisy, but an attempt is made nevertheless. On the other hand, the mainstream news media is now just another division within the for-profit corporate entertainment industry. At that craven level, the job of the news media is to capture and hold as many eyeballs as possible.

Eyeballs means viewers, since viewers are the product that the infotainment industry sells to advertisers to make profit. Content — the stuff we watch, whether as fictional shows or "news" programming — is the bait used to catch the fish of viewers. And so, when profit is the goal, the news media will trot out whatever succeeds in netting the highest number of viewers. For the past three years, that has meant endless, non-stop reporting of whatever Donald Trump says, followed by equally interminable discussion about it by "expert" panels. What's amazing to me is that all these media people continue to do this with a

straight face, as if it were relevant and important (rather than the utter silliness it is). OK, I get it: He's the "President," but I for one have had enough.

Also, I never again want to hear anything about "the inherent wisdom and good common sense of the American people." Wisdom? Common sense??? That's ridiculous. Far too many Americans apparently learned everything they know from television, which is now universalized to the more ubiquitous term "screens." Back before civilization, humans used verbal storytelling to transmit knowledge to each successive generation. Then we put on plays. For a short time, we used the written word in books. For about two seconds, it was again the spoken word through radio. But that passed quickly, since we preferred the visual images of movies and television. Now we rely on video screens — two-dimensional representations that pass for reality but are not.

The main reason that Donald Trump is President — and seriously, I mean the bottom-line reason — is that he was the star of a fictional "reality-TV show" called *The Apprentice* that became a major hit on television and was watched by tens of millions of Americans, many of whom (a great many) mistook it for reality. Although many other factors contributed to Trump's improbable ascent to the White House, the foundation was cemented with *The Apprentice*. Without that seductive and oh-so-successful exposure, Trump would never have been emboldened to run for president, much less been elected. Period. Full stop. And that reveals volumes about who we are (and have always been).

A curious and disturbing fact about human beings is that we don't experience reality directly. Oh, we're *affected* by reality, and our physical senses — touch, taste, smell, hearing, and sight — *seem* to report it to us accurately, but our perceptual *experience* of reality is synthesized in our brains and presented as reality (although it isn't) — a little like television, only more multi-dimensional.

When our primate species was developing biologically, the ability to survive long enough to reproduce was central. Darwin said that maximizing the perpetuation of species was achieved through what he termed "natural selection." For an early proto-human walking along a narrow path on a high cliff, there was a definite advantage to the species of your not falling off the edge and dying. If you saw the edge more clearly and survived, your chances of reproducing (i.e., having children and thus perpetuating the species) were enhanced. So, a random genetic mutation that highlighted edges in the vision centers of brains, making those edges stand out more clearly (a little like turning up the contrast on a television's picture), was advantageous. A proto-human with that mutation was less likely to die by stepping off the cliff. Over time, that artificial modification of visual reality was "selected." Those who didn't have it were slowly culled from the herd. Eventually, edge-enhanced vision became standard for human beings.

Also, vision seems to provide us with pictures of reality "out there," focused through our eyes. Actually, though, the eyes are merely the sensors. Vision itself — the real-time moving images — is synthesized inside the brain, then returned to our sensory consciousness at the apparent location of the eyes. What we

accept as being “out there” isn’t actually out there at all, but “in here.” In other words, vision is partially true and partially fake.

Variations of this kind of artificial and synthetic “enhancement” occurred for all our physical senses. They also took shape beyond the senses, in the much more complex realms of emotions and beliefs. This raises all sorts of nasty questions and troubling uncertainties about the essential human condition.

Although the implications are wide-ranging, the one that interest me here is this: Humans are very easily fooled, in damn near every way imaginable. Most of the time, we don’t have a clue that we’re being duped. As that famous American huckster, P.T. Barnum, reputedly quipped, *“There’s a sucker born every minute.”*

By and large, Americans believe whatever they see on their screens. That’s not random, of course. Algorithms track everything we watch, then offer us more of the same. So, we live in endless feedback loops of “confirmation bias” within our virtual realities. And we — silly puddings that we are — believe that our synthetic realities are actual realities. Sometimes they are. Often they’re not. Too often.

This isn’t new. Americans have always been patsies for a good story, and thus we’ve been easy prey for con men, cheesy magicians, politicians, and advertisers — all of whom are engaged in selling hooey to a gullible public. The very essence of marketing is the creation of attractive lies that reinforce existing desires or spawn new ones within a target group of consumers.

But then, we’re all liars. Intentionally or unintentionally, and more often than most of us would care to admit, we deceive others and ourselves. Many people make lying the basis of entire careers, and some get rich doing so. What amazes me is not as much the utter lack of conscience on the part of the liars as the widespread acceptance of lying by the public.

Humans seem to prefer fiction to reality. I suppose that’s understandable, given that reality is often harsh, unyielding, and less than pleasant. At this point, however, Americans are so far down the road of illusion and deception (including self-deception) that we’re in danger of having been reduced to the equivalent of toddlers who are lulled to sleep with bedtime stories about Santa Claus, the Easter Bunny, or — in somewhat scarier fashion — Grimm’s fairy tales.

Add to this the fact that “the truth” is very slippery (think greased pig). It’s not always obvious and is frequently relative. What is generally true may not be specifically true, and what is true for me may not be true for you. As a diabetic, certain foods — carbohydrates — are deemed harmful to my health. That’s not necessarily true for non-diabetics. For millions of Americans, the reality of the Coronavirus pandemic will not be believable until someone they care about gets sick or dies. That alone doesn’t mean that they’re crazy, but it does tell us something about their particular reality filters. They need to be impacted personally before they accept certain things as real.

On the other hand, many of these same Americans believe in and accept as real many other “truths” they *haven’t* experienced personally. How they arrive at such beliefs is a topic of some complexity for another essay, but, in one way or another, they’ve bought a pig in a poke. Maybe it’s real, maybe it’s not. An example of particular relevance in these trying times is the firm belief held by millions of people in this country concerning their absolute personal freedom (without an accompanying sense of social responsibility), as if it were their God-given right as Americans to do whatever the hell they want without the slightest concern about the consequences for others of their actions. As a result, they refuse to wear masks in public. And that *is* crazy, not to mention dangerous.

Similarly, the current debate about reopening schools is yet another example of what-the-hell-are-these-people-thinking? The matrix of beliefs required to insist on sending children back to crowded classrooms at this point in the resurgent first wave of the pandemic is about as insane as it gets.

Truth is kaleidoscopic and paradoxical, but reality is the final arbiter. It’s just that reality has to hit humans on the head very hard to get us to accept it. When the COVID-19 Coronavirus first geared up in America, back in March, I wrote in a commentary that a million Americans might die. Given what’s happened since then, I see no reason to alter that assessment now.

If science can’t save us from our foolishness here, could spirituality come to the rescue? Well, maybe. One facet of the esoteric goals of spiritual development — achieved presumably through various disciplines resulting in a more refined consciousness — is the possibility of transcending the artificial and synthetic experience of reality concocted by our brains to perceive more directly the truer reality underlying all our many worlds.

Some spiritual traditions hold that this experience of transcendence occurs naturally, even often, but only sporadically — in “Ah-Ha!” moments — which are typically ephemeral and pass quickly. Most of us have experienced awakenings triggered by loss (Pluto), inspiration (Neptune), or shocks (Uranus), which take us beyond our habitual programming and allow us to experience reality with fresh eyes. Mostly, however, those awakenings prove temporary. The challenge is to experience transcendent and inclusive consciousness more consistently and enduringly.

Of course, the possibility that so-called “spiritual” disciplines could or might make a difference in guiding us toward deeper, more profound, or encompassing truth is no guarantee that they will. A lot of what passes for “expanded consciousness” is just more sleight of hand and trickery by the cunning ego. I’m not referring so much to outright lies (which can often be spotted), but instead to quite sincere intentions that may nonetheless produce little more than new forms of old falsehoods, which take us right back to square one.

Still, hope springs eternal for human beings, and perhaps there’s some truth here, even if it’s buried under piles of horseshit.