

Worship and Action Update, 6/13/03

Dear Friends in New York Yearly Meeting:

As Friends look ahead to annual sessions of Yearly Meeting next month at Silver Bay, it is a time to reflect upon how Truth is prospering among us. What has been rising to the surface this past year? Are there murmurings of a deeper call to witness to Truth? Where have we experienced or seen evidence of the Peaceable Kingdom?

What shall we make of pretense employed to urge us to war, or tax cuts, or vitiated civil liberties, or diminished social services, or degraded environmental protections? In matters of governance and civil leadership, we look for fidelity to truth; we do not expect to excuse falsity or exaggeration as mere puffing. How, then, do we name betrayal of expectation and trust without succumbing to cynicism and hubris?

Friends hope to hear one another's experiences, questions, and insights, when we are together, or by sending word through the Yearly Meeting office.

This week's Worship & Action Update offers excerpts from thoughtful writers--Walter Wink, Joan Chittister, and Paul Rogat Loeb--on truth confronting deception, how people come to dismiss truth in favor of falsity, our power to refuse manipulation, and the significance of our choices for connection and for speaking out.

In *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination* (Fortress Press 1992), Walter Wink explores the ascendant potential of truth over fabrication--truth's capacity to displace untruth--and, hence, the importance of being willing to confront falsity (at pages 94, 96):

We are all too familiar with the trappings of propaganda: the big lie, or the daily small ones, doctored news dispatches and photographs, planted stories, falsified scientific reports, gossip, innuendo, slander. Even more insidious are the misrepresentations of facts carried by the mass media, which avoid stories that contradict the "elite consensus," even when the data are highly visible, verifiable, and important....

But propaganda is extremely weak.... Illusion requires incessant repetition in order to mimic the appearance of reality. Propaganda works only through constant reiteration. It is only in quantity that corrupt values, false perceptions, and bogus facts can be sold. Truth, by contrast, though its lot is never easy, makes its way with but a few friends, or even a single utterance. It does not need the apparatus of salesmanship, because reality itself is waiting to confirm it.

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Christians have docilely sided with their governments, and justified the slaughter of millions of other Christians who, for their part, supported the other side, without any recognition that *both* sides were serving the values of the kingdom of death. Political elections are not a contest to see which party is capable of the greater compassion, but to see which will be truer to the delusional assumptions (increased military budgets, more prisons, stiffer sentencing for criminals). *The church has no more important task than to expose these delusionary assumptions as the Dragon's game.*

In a recent essay in the *National Catholic Reporter*, Joan Chittister, a Benedictine Sister of Erie, Pennsylvania and a member of the International Peace Council, asks "Is There Anything Left That Matters?" and shines the light of truth on our nation's recent military action:

This is what I don't understand: All of a sudden nothing seems to matter.

First, they said they wanted Bin Laden "dead or alive...." [N]ow they tell us that it doesn't matter....

Then they said they wanted Saddam Hussein, "dead or alive...." However, President Bush told reporters recently, "It doesn't matter. Our mission is greater than one man."

Finally, they told us that we were invading Iraq to destroy their weapons of mass destruction. Now they say those weapons probably don't exist.... Apparently that doesn't matter either.

Except that it does matter.

I know we're not supposed to say that. I know it's called "unpatriotic." But it's also called honesty. And dishonesty matters.

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[S]urely a president's use of global force against some of the weakest people in the world matters.... [S]urely a president's word to the community of nations and the security of millions of people matters.

And if not, why not? If not, surely there is something as wrong with us as citizens, as thinkers, as Christians as there must be with some facet of the government....

Of what are we really capable as a nation if the considered judgment of politicians and people around the world means nothing to us as a people?

We like to take comfort in the notion that people make a distinction between our government and ourselves. We like to say that the people of the world love Americans, they simply mistrust our government. But excoriating a distant and anonymous "government" for wreaking rubble on a nation in pretense of good requires very little of either character or intelligence.

What may count most, however, is that we may well be the ones Proverbs warns when it reminds us: "Kings take pleasure in honest lips; they value the one who speaks the truth." The point is clear: If the people speak and the king doesn't listen, there is something wrong with the king. If the king acts precipitously and the people say nothing, something is wrong with the people.

It may be time for us to realize that in a country that prides itself on being democratic, we are our government. And the rest of the world is figuring that out very quickly.

Joan Chittister's complete essay may be read at <http://nationalcatholicreporter.org/fwis/fw052703.htm>.)

In *Engaging the Powers*, Walter Wink also explores why only exposing falsity is not enough (at pages 94, 102-103):

Propaganda is not merely deception.... It is the manufacture of idolatry. It is not enough that people be misinformed about the nature of the System, for powerful disconfirming truths could easily slip in to shatter such illusions. But *if you can cause people to worship the Beast, you have created a public immune to truth*. As studies of cognitive dissonance show, worshipers do not surrender their beliefs in the presence of disconfirming facts. They simply adjust their beliefs to neutralize the facts.

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This deeply internalized oppression is the reason that *unmasking* the Powers is seldom enough by itself. As Reinhold Niebuhr observed, people in power generally do not capitulate simply because the ideologies by which they justify their policies have been discredited....

So besides an unmasking of the oppressors, there must also be a *healing of the servile will* in their victims.... The task of exposing the delusional system requires the development of a social psychology of domination. Simply criticizing the illegitimacy of the masters can lead to two results, both of them negative. The oppressed may decide to beat the oppressors at their own game, rather than changing the game.... Or the oppressed may be driven to even deeper alienation....

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Powerlessness is never an empirical fact, however. It is not the outcome of a realistic analysis. *A sense of powerlessness is always a spiritual disease deliberately induced by the Powers to keep us complicit.* Any time we feel powerless, we need to step back and ask, What Principality or Power has me in its spell? *No one is ever completely powerless.* Even if it is only a matter of choosing the attitude with which we die, we are never fully in the control of the Powers unless we grant them that power.... The victory of faith over the Powers lies, not in immunity to their wrath, but in emancipation from their delusions.... What seems to us impossible is usually another's limited vision or faithlessness in which we have let ourselves become trapped. Faith is the confidence that possibility transcends compulsion; freedom, necessity; life, death; eternity, time.

One piece of that emancipatory vision is offered by Paul Rogat Loeb, the author of *Soul of a Citizen: Living with Conviction in a Cynical Time* and associated scholar at Seattle's Center for Ethical Leadership and Board chair of Washington's Peace & Justice Alliance, in an essay in a recent edition of Sojo.net entitled "Reclaiming Hope: The Peace Movement After the War." He explores some possibilities for constructing connections and building on the positive experiences of the past year:

We need to challenge this politics of denial and contempt, and offer alternatives that honor our common ties: working with other nations, respecting communities at home, treating democracy as more than just a rhetorical cloak for bullying and greed. To do this effectively, we can begin by working to re-involve those millions of ordinary citizens, who, despite all the polls, do not believe the Bush administration's actions, whether at home or abroad, have made the world safer, more democratic, or more humane. For the moment, many have grown quiet - isolated, intimidated, and demoralized. But this past year, so many people got involved - either again or for the first time - they could form the core of the largest American peace and justice movement in decades.

Powerful journeys can emerge out of bleak times. The first local NAACP meeting attended by Rosa Parks, a dozen years before her stand on the Montgomery bus, addressed one of America's own buried legacies of terror, the persistence of lynching. . . .

The movements of this past year may well have brought into involvement the next Ben Spock, the next Rosa Parks, the next Martin Luther King. But the tide of new citizen activists will matter only if we can find ways to re-involve them. A prime task, therefore, has to be connecting with those people who participated at the periphery of the movement but melted away when the war began: the neighbor who displayed a peace sign; the

co-worker who went to a march or candle-light vigil; the friend who raised hesitations. We need to validate their impulse to participate to begin with, listen to their concerns, refer them to groups that are acting. We need to give them ways to reclaim their voice, and begin reaching out again in their communities. Just the process of working to raise issues together will help us recover some of our sense of power, because nothing is more depressing than watching the bad news in withdrawal and silence.

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We live, alas, in a time of lies. If we stay silent, they build up like mud piling in front of a door. The deeper the mud, the harder it is to dig out from it... We need to start local dialogues about our choices and priorities, who wins and who loses, and the long-term implications of everything from waging preemptive war, to ignoring global warming, to transferring unprecedented amounts of money from the poorest to the wealthiest. We have to start those dialogues now and with people who don't necessarily agree with us. We need to give our fellow citizens the courage not to just duck and cover when told they've no right to speak out, and stand by those who are attacked.

(Paul Rogat Loeb's entire essay can be found at:
<http://www.soulofacitizen.org/articles/reclaiminghope.htm>.)

Friends, in what ways are we called to speak Truth to power in the present times? Are we prepared to uphold one another in doing so? And how might we be called to join with others in creating a culture of peace?

Peaceable greetings,

Linda Chidsey, Vicki Cooley, and Fred Dettmer
NYYM Worship and Action working group