

Peak Bull
A sermon by Rev. Steven Epperson
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UCV

Because of my interest in the British essayist William Hazlitt, I did a fair amount of reading last summer that focused on the half century in Great Britain between 1780 and 1830 when Hazlitt was alive. Unitarians happened to figure prominently in the history books I read. I learned the British government organized a campaign of persecution and harassment against Unitarian preachers and their congregations. Their letters were opened; prominent Unitarians were imprisoned; some were transported to Botany Bay; authors like Mary Wollstonecraft and Anna Barbauld were attacked in the press and silenced; the home and laboratory of Joseph Priestley were torched and destroyed, and he and his were forced into exile.

Their offence? Being part of a cultural network of letters and ideas, from homes to coffee house and congregations whose members shared a principled faith which advocated *“enlightened rationality, free inquiry, and freedom of speech and assembly.”* A faith which led them to celebrate revolutions in America and France, and to invite radicals like Tom Paine to address students and faculty at Unitarian academies in Warrington and London—for they spoke warmly of “the pleasure we take in the affable, frank and open company and conversation of others,” as well as sensuous joy in the natural world, and in seeking the good of others. In a climate of revolutions, all this Unitarian doing, thinking, and meeting was seen by the British government, the Church of England and the Tory press, as seditiously dangerous to the standing order of monarchy, hierarchy, and inequities in power, representation and wealth in not-so-merry-England.

This episode in Unitarian history is important in its own right; and I honour our ancestors in the faith who passed through the fiery furnace of those tumultuous decades. Crucial as well is

the fact that they affirmed and passed along to us values embedded in the Principles we affirm and promote by covenant in our own times: the dignity of persons, the free and responsible search for truth and meaning, the use of the democratic process, and values of liberty, justice and equity.

Enlightened rationality, free inquiry, freedom of speech and assembly, and seeking the good of others—these are not just 18th century practices and principles. Never so much as today, I believe they are of great worth and importance. Especially, as, by all accounts, we are living in times a hallmark of which is a floodtide of BS.

Now we know that BS, bunkum, claptrap, hot air and malarkey aren't anything new; human cultures probably have always had hucksters, sellers of snake oil, confidence men, bloviating politicians and scribes of false information. What seems unprecedented today is the sheer scale and breadth of BS. We're drowning in manipulative tribal rhetoric; politicians are unconstrained by facts; we're getting "science" conducted by press release and industry-sponsored research and publishing; the imitation of human connection in social media; and algorithms tailoring the information we consume to comfort and reinforce our prejudices. We're drowning in legalese and corporate double-speak. BS is infecting our public life, corrupting our discourse, wrecking our trust in major institutions and political life, and lowering our standards for truth. Mistrust, cynicism, tribalism. BS is a challenge to our society and a challenge we face as individuals.

In North America, warnings about the corrosive effects of the onslaught of BS started back in 1969, when cultural critic and educator Neil Postman spoke at a national convention of English teachers. "As I see it," said Postman, "the best things schools can do for kids is to help them learn how to distinguish useful talk from BS." While he said there are dozens of varieties,

Postman focused on three. He called out *pomposity* as BS: “the use of fancy titles, words, phrases and sentences that obscure insufficiencies” of thought and experience that make kids (and us) “feel less worthy than they have a right to feel.” Postman called out *fanaticism* whose essence, he said, is the near zero “tolerance for any data that do not confirm its own point of view,” and that accepts from start to finish “official definitions, rules and categories without regard for the realities of particular situations” and people. And finally, he called out *inanity* as BS—that is, “ignorance presented in the cloak of sincerity and unearned authority.” In particular, he called out celebrities and others “who are in no position to render informed judgments on what they are talking about yet do it anyway with elan”—with energetic enthusiasm—though “there is no factual or scientific basis” for what they’re saying. (Postman: “Bullshit and the art of crap-detection,” a paper delivered at the National Convention of the Teachers of English, November 28, 1969, http://media.usm.maine.edu/~lenny/Bullshit/crap_detection.pdf.)

About twenty years later (1986) in a landmark essay, the philosopher Harry Frankfurt highlighted a crucial distinction between someone who lies and a BS artist. Whereas the liar actually has a direct relationship with the truth value of what they’re saying, and kind of honours the truth by denying and opposing it, someone who’s BSing simply doesn’t care about whether their statement is true, half-true or outright false; they’re indifferent to how things really are; they don’t bother with accuracy. What they *do* care about is what people *think* of them—their sincerity, their brilliance, their toughness; and they care about what their BS *achieves*: demonizing enemies in order to rally the faithful, securing research funding by letting an industry ghostwriter author a journal article to which you affix your name, or passing along so-called news you’re already pre-disposed to agree with and you *feel must* be true, no matter its source, in order to accumulate Facebook likes. Said Neetzan Zimmerman of the gossip website

Gawker, “Nowadays it’s not important if a story’s real. The only thing that really matters is whether people click on it.”

“Someone who lies,” writes Harry Frankfurt, “and someone who tells the truth are [actually] playing on opposite sides...of the same game. Each responds to the facts as he understands them, although the response of the one is guided by the authority of the truth, while the response of the other defies that authority and refuses to meet its demands. The bullshitter [person who bses] ignores these demands altogether....He pays no attention to it at all. By virtue of this, bullshit [BS] is a greater enemy of the truth than lies are.” (For the whole essay see: http://www2.csudh.edu/ccauthen/576f12/frankfurt_harry_-_on_bullshit.pdf.)

Inflate the size of an inauguration crowd; claim most homicides of white people are committed by people of colour and that crowds in predominately US Muslim neighbourhoods celebrated 9/11; ram through approval of a court judge by withholding archived documents and smear a women’s reputation and wave away facts by conjuring up the fog of faulty memory and clichés reeking of misogyny. The world ends up not being about facts, but about identities and moral commitments. The result?—it becomes increasingly difficult to come together with trust in essential institutions and the mutual respect required by democratic deliberation.

If the rot just set in from the top, Neil Postman wouldn’t have told teachers fifty years ago the best thing they could do for kids is to help them learn the difference between truth and BS. Harry Frankfurt wouldn’t have said our culture is awash in it, that we tend to take it for granted and grow increasingly cynical though it’s tearing apart the fabric of our societies and getting countries where one half just doesn’t know anything at all about the other.

Some examples: a school district runs a program for “gifted” students but graduates from elementary schools too many of these students to place them in the much smaller high school “gifted” program, though they all merit placement. Solution? Administer a subjective test that will weed out those less “psychosocially fit” to belong in an “elite” academic culture. And so, twelve-year kids were asked: “Have you ever cried at school?” “Does your family go to the

opera?” “How many books are there in your home: less than 100, 100-500, more than 500?”

One of those young people came home afterwards and asked his parents: “***Was I supposed to give the “right” answer, or the true answer?***” He was deeply worried that a super smart friend of his who came from a working- class family had answered the test truthfully and wouldn’t be placed in the program. My eldest son was right to worry. The great sorting out into silos abetted by BS begins very early in life....

Another story: a young mother won’t let another young woman hold her infant, telling her, “every time you do, he falls asleep, and that messes up our intentional sleep intervention schedule.” Turns out, press releases from a bio-medical and nutrition journal claiming a study showed that intentional sleep regulation in early years was more effective in preventing subsequent childhood obesity than promoting of breastfeeding, nutrition and physical activity. (If only we could all sleep our way to slimness!) The result? “*Don’t comfort my fussy baby to sleep.*” Problem is, subsequent critical reviews of the sleep study called its findings “preposterous,” pointing out lack of details, small, select cohort group, and that the model sets up parents and infants to fail.

No wonder two University of Washington professors are now teaching an SRO class titled “Calling Bullshit” to students majoring in social and natural sciences on how to think critically about data and statistical manipulation, misleading graphs, fancy algorithms and flawed conclusions unsupported by the facts, written in highbrow nonsense academise. Say professors Carl Bergstrom and Jevin West: “the world is awash in it... Politicians are unconstrained by the facts. Science is being conducted by press releases. We’re rewarding BS over analytic thought...with very real-world hazards” as a consequence, “and we’re sick of it.” (see <https://callingbullshit.org>)

A couple of years ago, a CBC story published what they called “secret data” from the Finance Department showing that Canadians between the age of 25-34 are the richest they’ve ever been, and that the 2008 recession didn’t seem to affect their wealth holdings and earning potential. Conclusion? *What are all these young people complaining about?* Problem is, the whole study was skewed by the incomes of the top 10% of the age cohort in the data study. The *median* income of millennials is \$37,000, not the *average* worth cited in the report which placed it nearly three times that number. The average student debt load after graduation is \$27,000 and growing; couple that with their unemployment rate of 13%, that 30% + of young are subsisting on temp jobs; and that with a national average home cost of \$400,000, it would take twelve years to save a 20% down payment. Result? Real world hazards indeed—job precarity, chronic debt, delaying starting a family and having kids. Vancouver based investigative journalist Jessica Barrett had a one-word conclusion for the Finance Department’s secret data: “Bullshit.”

(https://www.vice.com/en_ca/article/bn3bmd/the-secret-government-report-claiming-young-canadians-are-richer-than-ever-is-bullshit)

I could tell stories like this all day; I’m sure you could as well. One more.

Two years ago, people in Great Britain woke to a depraved news story: as an Oxford University student, the then prime minister had committed “an obscene act with a dead pig’s head.” The story sparked an immediate furore and was broadcast around the world. Then, after a full day of on-line merriment and *schadenfreude*—that secret pleasure in learning of the humiliation of some big-shot—some shocking news: the author of the story “admitted she did not know whether her huge scandalous scoop was even true. Pressed to provide evidence for the sensational claim,” the journalist “admitted she had none.” But the damage was done. (see

<https://www.theguardian.com/media/2016/jul/12/how-technology-disrupted-the-truth>)

“*Was I supposed to give the “right” answer, or the true answer?*” a twelve-year boy asks his parents. “*Don’t rock my newborn to sleep,*” says a young mother under the influence of

some bad science. “*What are all these young Canadians complaining about?*” say boomers impressed by a CBC report based on a flawed study. “*Told you our prime minister was an unhinged elitist,*” said god knows how many tongue clucking readers swayed by a piece of sloppy journalism.

BS abounds and bleeds across the land and into the soul. And layer upon layer it accretes and calcifies into toxic shells of mistrust, cynicism, and the hiving off into tribes.

“Democracy,” writes Michael Blake, “requires us to work together, despite our disagreements about values. This is easiest when we agree...what evidence for and against our chosen policies would look like.” For example, we may disagree about a tax; we disagree about what it would do and whether it’s fair. But in a world of fact, not BS, we acknowledge that eventually *there will be evidence* about what that tax does and that this evidence will be available to both of us. If we are allowed to BS without consequences, we lose sight of the possibility of facts, which leads to being thrown to the not-so-tender mercies of gut instinct, mood, and prejudice. “To abandon facts, is to abandon freedom,” Timothy Snyder warns us. “If nothing is true, then no one can criticize power because there is no basis upon which to do so. Post-truth is pre-fascism” (<http://theconversation.com/why-bullshit-hurts-democracy-more-than-lies-96331>)

How can we personally fight back against the clear and present danger of BS? How do cultivate good BS detection?

The first rule, according Scott Berkun, is to expect it; and the first tool for detecting BS is to ask: *how do you know what you know?* If someone says, “our design is ground breaking,” it’s OK to ask: “Really? What “ground” is that that’s being broken? And who, besides the designers/investors, has this opinion?” If someone says (and this happens all the time!), “studies show...” It’s OK to ask: “What studies? Who ran them and why? Who funded the studies? Did

you actually read them, or a one-page press release? Are there studies that claim the opposite?” Which leads to a second tool, which is also a question: *What is the counter argument?* Someone who’s BSing won’t have researched or thought this through. Asking for a counter argument will lead someone to either back up their position or end it until they’ve done due diligence in order to answer your question. Which brings up tool #three: *Time*. Don’t be rushed; withhold judgement. Invite people whose expertise and common sense you trust to review the claim, the so-called study, especially if you’re dealing with inflated language and jargon used to hide huge quantities of BS designed to intimidate you into acquiescence. (see <http://scottberkun.com/essays/53-how-to-detect-bullshit/>)

A fourth BS detection tool comes closer to home. Speaking at a commencement ceremony in 2013, Jon Lovett, who was 30 years old at the time and a veteran political speech writer for Barack Obama, told graduating students this: “you’re smart, talented, educated, and conscientious.” That said, “don’t cover up for your inexperience...because there’s a lot that you don’t know.” That piece of advice echoes wisdom from the medieval Jewish philosopher Maimonides—it’s a saying pinned to the wall in my office which reads: “*teach thy tongue to say I do not know, and thou shalt progress.*” (see <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2013/05/life-lessons-in-fighting-the-culture-of-bullshit/276030>)

Which leads me back to 1969 and Neil Postman’s remarks to English teachers, and tool #5. “It seems to me,” said Postman, “one needs...a keen sense of the ridiculous. Maybe I mean to say, a sense of our impending death.... [Though we] try to put this thought out of our minds... reflections on one’s mortality curiously make one come alive to the incredible amounts of pomposity, inanity and fanaticism that surrounds us, much of which is inflicted by ourselves.”

A sense of the ridiculous? When the 24/7 news cycle BS barrage onslaught just becomes overwhelming, I find the following words from Isaiah strangely, deeply helpful, comforting

even: *“Behold, the nations are as a drop in a bucket. They are nothing more than dust on the scales. The Divine picks up the whole earth as though it were a grain of sand.”* (Isaiah 40: 15) A sense of the ridiculous? There’s a story in the Quran: Solomon has marshaled all the troops in orderly array: soldiers, sprites, and birds, and is about to lead them down into a valley when he hears a small strong voice at his feet; it’s the Queen of the ants calling out to her people: *“Ants, go into your nests!; don’t let Solomon and his troops crush you unawares.”* And Solomon hearing this, laughed at his own self-glory, and said: *“My Lord, keep me grateful for your grace; [for I was unaware that there are other worlds and beings who cherish life].”* (Quran 27:17-19).

Confronting an age of peak bull is not, finally, a technical problem of rhetoric, or logic, or what class, kin or cohort we necessarily belong to; it’s embedded in a value system that affirms and promotes a certain way of being in the world and a certain kind of person in relationship with others. And here, in ending, I return to those Unitarians I talked about in the beginning—the ones who were seen as so dangerous because of their advocacy for *“enlightened rationality, free inquiry, and freedom of speech and assembly”*—for a lifestyle that celebrated *“the pleasure we take in the affable, frank and open company and conversation of others.”*

Peak bull may mean that we are at a tipping point. Those who push back against the noise and nonsense, who refuse to accept untruths in politics, commerce, science, entertainment and elsewhere, who desire to do good in this world, to be responsible for others and to carry oneself with integrity....may yet succeed in a world that’s coming to see how valuable the courage to confront BS actually is and how vital those enlightened values of our Unitarian ancestors are needed now more than ever. May we live our vision, embody those values and be those people.