

Downside UP

A Voice of Contemporary Political Economy, Volume V, Issue 9: November, 2005
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Note: The following is a slightly edited version of the talk I gave as the guest speaker at the Unitarian-Universalist Fellowship of St. Augustine's Sunday service on October 2, 2005. -- RGW

Speaking Truth to Ourselves

First of all, I want to thank Dave Anderson and any others of you who had the idea of inviting me to speak to you this morning. I am honored that you have invited me and I am pleased that Downside Up and the articles I have been writing for Downside Up have struck some of you as important and valuable enough to want to hear more about what I have to say.

It is especially pleasing personally to be asked to speak here because I was raised a Unitarian and, while I will find a moment to tweak you a bit as Unitarian-Universalists, this acorn of my up-bringing has not rolled that far from the tree!

Today, I have chosen to speak not only what I hope is truth itself, but also about truth in our society and its politics. I want to talk about speaking truth to others, to those in power, and, most of all, to ourselves. I have taken the liberty of assuming that the major portion of my audience here is progressive, liberal, or whatever you want to call us, and -- given the choices our society offers these days -- probably also mostly Democratic. God bless the last vestiges of liberal/moderate Republicans in a George Bush world!

For many people like myself, it is easy to recite the lies, deceits, and distortions which are used to frame political debate and promote right-wing political agendas in American politics today. It is often referred to as "speaking truth to power." I like the phrasing. It conjures up the courage it sometimes takes to tell the truth when the truth is out of vogue. Politicians and the media blanket us with lies, and telling the truth might get you in trouble.

Speaking Truth to Power

A list of truths needing to be spoken to power in a right-wing political arena is in fact rather easy to compile:

The Bush team came into office looking for a chance to overthrow Saddam Hussein. They didn't come to it reluctantly or as a result of September 11. They were waiting for a pretext and when they didn't get good reasons, they made up bad ones.

We have been and still are torturing prisoners and it is by design. From the president on down, Rumsfeld and Gonzalez, the memos are public. The Bush

Government was no more going to let the Geneva Accords, or the Constitution, get in its way than it was going to wait for real evidence of weapons of mass destruction.

Issues of freedom and democracy play absolutely no determinative role in US Middle East policy today.

On the home front:

The "Clear Skies Initiative" sets back air quality by 15 years.

The "Healthy Forests Act" is a blueprint for subsidized logging of pristine national forests.

"No Child Left Behind" leaves all children behind.

The Republican tax program is as much about "middle class tax cuts" as Dick Cheney's concern about raising taxes on the top 1% to pay for the war is about "small business."

In its war on science generally and the environment and women's rights in particular, the Bush bunch will not hesitate to alter the evidence and the conclusions of scientific reports, even those prepared by commissions to which it has appointed the members.

Whether it is in New Orleans or Iraq, no lie is too absurd to be spoken straight-faced, no mistake too great to be denied, and the buck never stops with the president.

Yes, speaking truth to power is important, even when it seems that few are listening. If the truth may not make you free, you can certainly not be free without it.

Speaking truth to power is not, however, enough. We must also speak truth to ourselves because without truth, we are no more than a clanging cymbal; we are nothing.

Speaking Truth to Ourselves, Creatures of the Enlightenment

When I was asked to speak to you today, I was told that I could talk about anything I wanted but encouraged to respond to the idea of "What can we do?" I have taken this to mean what can we do as liberals and progressives who think our country is going down the wrong path both at home and abroad? What can we do to confront misguided policies, avert what could become a series of domestic and international disasters, and move forward to a better world for all.

I think there are some programs which not only conform to our values but are attractive to a broad cross-section of the American people, liberal Republicans and independents as well as Democrats. At the end of my talk, I will say a few more words about these programs.

First, however, we must speak truth to ourselves, even when it is difficult and unpleasant. We cannot expect to have credibility when we confront the lies of others if we are not honest with ourselves, if we do not admit the weaknesses in our own positions, if, especially, we do not recognize the legitimacy of points of view contrary to our own. If we are to save this country from disaster, we must gain some kind of

dialogue with the other half of the population of this country that apparently thinks we are as nuts as we think they are. We have to hold to the high road or we will indeed, as the cliché goes, become just like them, people for whom the truth is no more than whatever is convenient to the ends of the moment.

The first truth to speak to ourselves is indeed the tendency of too many of us to be blinded by our own commitment and conviction.

Truth – and the honest consideration of opposing views essential to the search for truth – is the foundation of Western Civilization at its best. At our best, we are a civilization of the Enlightenment, the intellectual movement from the Renaissance into the 19th century, which created modern political democracies, brought modern science to life, impelled economic growth and the industrial revolution, and transformed the world.

Seekers of truth is more than anything who we are, what defines us.

We Are Befuddled

Unfortunately, the first truth we must own up to is that we are befuddled.

I have recently been enjoying, via email with my readers, an active discussion of the Democratic Party’s failure either to define a coherent political program or to link its programs to American culture – expressed in the so-called “stories” which give meaning to Americans’ sense of nationhood. Former Senator Bill Bradley was the first to make the programmatic issue clear to me in his March 30th New York Times op-ed piece, “A Party Inverted.” He pointed out that the Republicans had built a party shaped like a pyramid with its base in a set of clear principles and programs. This enabled them to campaign continuously and put up at the top any boob [my word] to run for president.

In contrast, the Democrats had an upside down pyramid. They didn’t have a program until they chose a presidential candidate. From there ensued a precarious effort to hold the party together long enough for a campaign.

Since then, Robert Reich and George Lakoff have teed off on the party’s failure to link its programs to the stories which define us, what Reich calls the Triumphant Individual, the Benevolent Community, the Mob at the Gates, and the Rot at the Top. More recently, Jim Wallis, editor of Sojourner, the Christian social justice publication, has reinvented the programmatic argument, criticizing an overemphasis on stories. (1)

The truth is, all the critics are right. Democrats are befuddled on both program and stories. The Republicans have monopolized the country’s stories, however mythological, and used them to put the Democrats on the defensive for 25 years. The Democrats have thrashed around between New Deal lite and Republican lite, emphasized the mythological aspect of the stories, and been unable to tie their much better programs to the vision those stories inspire.

The truth is that most progressives don’t appear to believe the visionary stories of the Triumphant Individual and the Benevolent Community in particular. In reality, what they usually mean is that the stories are exaggerated and their reality further and further from the vision, but this critique comes off as hostility to the dream

itself. It comes off to many Americans as not just criticism of their beloved country but outright hatred of it.

We need to get this straight – and much more as well:

(1) The 2004 Vote Wasn't Fixed:

Most of the Democratic outrage about the 2004 election has focused on computerized vote-fixing. There certainly was a lot of potential for vote-fixing. It is absurd that private corporations – owned in almost every case by rabidly Republican partisans – should be able to keep secret the computer code that counts ballots. There should be a paper trail for every vote and a hand-count possible. Elections, like redistricting, should be turned over to non-partisan bodies.

Yet the possibility of fraud is not the same as the reality of fraud. I have read an awful lot of articles about computerized vote-fixing in the 2004 election but seen precious little hard evidence or reliable witnesses. The most prominent example presented as evidence was in rural north Florida where the votes in several counties varied most obviously from voter registration rolls, but the Miami Herald, one of the real good guys in all this, hand-counted the votes and found no evidence that the op-scan machines had been "fixed."

Far more real was a concerted Republican effort to diminish the African American vote: Hundreds of thousands of minorities were purged from the voter rolls as felons based on lists not only compiled by dishonest companies tied to Republicans, but also known to be full of errors. There were far too few voting stations in predominately African American districts in Jacksonville, Florida, and especially Ohio, where people had to wait in line five, seven, ten hours to vote. In Ohio as in Florida, elections are run by partisan politicians.

But the truth is, even if there was this kind of vote manipulation, and even if, without it, the Democrats would have won Ohio and/or Florida and thus the election, with a war gone bad and a stalled economy, the Democrats should have won by far too large a number to fix. Instead, they failed to capture either the minds or the hearts of half the American people.

(2) Ideas Do Count, Even Theirs

For as long as I can remember, pollsters and the media have been telling us that people vote their pocketbooks. Democrats liked this idea when a bad economy put Republicans out, or a good economy kept Democrats in. Many progressives complained that people should vote for ideals and principles not crass material interest.

In 2002 and 2004, however, Republicans held onto and increased their vote in a bad economy. So Democrats began complaining that people were voting "against their own interest." But another way of seeing it is that a whole lot of Americans demonstrated that they would in fact vote for ideas if they liked the ideas. They voted for patriotism, getting the government off our backs, and God. Just because we think ideas, when promoted by Republicans, are phony, doesn't mean they aren't legitimate ideas.

(3) States' Rights and Strict Constructionism are Phony Issues for Us Too

I don't believe that progressives are any more in favor of or opposed to states' rights and strict or so-called "activist" construction of the Constitution than are Radical Republicans. Let's get a little sense of humor and admit that it depends whose ox is being gored. I am a lot more favorable to states' rights since the Bushies began running environmental policy and tried to prevent Oregon from implementing a "right to die" law. I am similarly more inclined to a so-called strict interpretation of the Constitution after the Supreme Court's intervention in the 2000 election. We're all liars on this one and it would sure be refreshing for us to be the first to admit it.

(4) Our Side Has Also Screwed Up the Truth

It is disheartening to realize that the movement in which I enthusiastically participated against classical understandings of truth has ended up, on its margins, abandoning all commitment to truth. My generation of social scientists and humanists began in the 1960's and 70's to take strong issue with the idea of truth used in the same breath as "objectivity." We argued that everyone carries with her or him a set of assumptions – if not to say prejudices – which form or determine their ways of knowing. It is impossible to explore truth outside these assumptions or pretend that they do not exist. These differ not only by race and sex but all the different ways and circumstances in which each of us has grown up.

We certainly accepted the idea that there were facts but how they were interpreted – or even selected – differed based on our personal priorities. If you believe that the psyche is the primary factor in determining human behavior, you are going to put less emphasis on economic organization. It was all something of an attack on the excesses of Enlightenment assumptions – as well as on the old guard controlling the intellectual agenda of our professions!

Then came the so-called "post-modernists," generally assumed to be on the so-called "left," the side of the Enlightenment, contending that all knowledge, even all reality, is culturally created and determined. All that we perceive, even what it means to be physically male or female, is through the prism of culture. It is not just that there is no truth; everyone's truth is as good as anyone else's!

As absurd as I regard the post-modernist extreme, I have to admit that it is, in some sense, the logical extension of my own questioning of absolute or objective truths, including right and wrong.

Now, I am faced with the other side of the same coin: the pre-Enlightenment extremists of the Right who, with arrogance and ignorance, act first and think later – maybe. They abhor and disregard science and the constraints that hard and complex thought requires. That's how they decided that the Iraqi people would welcome us with dancing in the street. Now they think that threats will stop Iran's nuclear program. That's why they have no qualms about falsifying information, whether it be evidence of weapons of mass destruction or global warming.

(5) We Had Our Chance: Mainline Protestants Ran the Show

It is really hard for us to see it this way, but if you look at the people who have been running the country for the 200 years leading up to the election of Ronald Reagan, they have mostly been us – mainline Protestants, heirs of the Enlightenment. Not just Jefferson and Franklin, deists really. From the Civil War on, it has been mostly

"liberal" Protestants, Republican and Democratic, significantly under the influence of the "social gospel," occupying the White House and dominating Congress. Abolitionism is mainline Protestant. The Progressive Movement of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the New Deal, and the Great Society, are all rooted in the mainline Protestant tradition. Before George Bush, I don't think there was ever a right-wing evangelical in the oval office. John Kennedy was so Beacon Hill you would have thought his blood was blue!

I could certainly make a good case that we screwed up our agenda very badly in the 200 years we had to mold the country. We were ultimately as selfish as the next guy. We allowed our money and our growing dependence on corporate wealth and power to unduly influence both our domestic and our international agenda. We fell way short of creating a just society or even an equal opportunity society. We became the world's bully long before George Bush decided to take on the mantle. All of which left us vulnerable to political assault from the Right.

It would not be too much to say that now we have what we deserve. The Republican Right has taken our own worst side – our greed and our cozying up to Corporate America – and made it into high doctrine crony capitalism. They have captured the hearts of all those long left out of the system who, proud of their country, continue to believe in an American idealism we failed to make real. And then they have shoved our faces in a religion that denies all our sober, rational, moderate, Enlightenment notions about faith and science, ideas and belief. Ha!

(6) Evolutionary Arrogance

We have had religion and science wrong for a very long time, and by conceding nothing, have risked losing it all. Evolution is a theory. The diversity of species is a fact but how it came to be is not. Why do so many scientists refuse to concede this point and insist that evolution is a "fact" like a birthday. Thomas Kuhn's The Structure of Scientific Revolutions demonstrated long ago that science is fundamentally about developing theories – what Kuhn called "paradigms." Theories arise out of consensus within scientific communities, and those consensus change. Scientific communities adamantly resist new "paradigms," but ultimately, in a society of open debate, adopt many of them.

I suspect that a major reason for the commitment of people of the Enlightenment to the theory of evolution is not just that it has stood for so long but that evangelicals have been attacking it for so long. The attack appears, and in many ways is, an attack on all science and thus the Enlightenment and the world created out of the Enlightenment.

I propose that we vitiate the attack by conceding the point: it is a theory, not a fact. Then we make clear that the problem with Creationism – and now "Intelligent Design" – is not the belief but the lack of scientific evidence. Intelligent Design is belief, not science. There are in it no theories derived from careful examination and observation of physical evidence. Even if the Bible is the basis of an alternative explanation of species diversity and change – and I think that is a gross misreading of the Bible – Intelligent Design does not belong in a science curriculum.

(7) Speak Truthfully of Global Warming

Along the way, we would also do well to resist the temptation to make simplistic use of very hot summers over the past decade and terrible hurricanes the past two years as if they were proof of global warming. We only undermine our own integrity when we fall into this trap; I cringe when I see good progressives doing it.

We should fight at every turn the Fox News/George Bush line that the world has always had variations in temperature and numbers of hurricanes and therefore there is no evidence of a human role in global warming. That's using science to tell a lie. What our recent hurricanes are is one piece of evidence in a chain of evidence demonstrating a human contribution to global warming. Temperatures have always varied over time, but never before have we seen so much change in so short a time. It's the hundred years of change which always before took a thousand years.

(8) We Are a Christian Nation: Stories and Programs

Finally, to return to the apparent conflict between stories and programs, I would propose that we welcome as truth the idea that we are in fact a Christian, or Judeo-Christian, nation. No matter how much we think the Evangelical Right has distorted the values of Judeo-Christianity. No matter how much of the country pretends to ignore Judeo-Christian values or seeks values elsewhere, they are the root of all that progressives believe. To say this is not to exclude other traditions nor scorn what they might contribute. It is to recognize that both Reich's Triumphant Individual and his Benevolent Community reflect the Judeo-Christian tradition and are the basis of progressives' commitment to both equal opportunity and the social safety net.

We have allowed the so-called Religious Right to hijack first our religion, then our politics, and now our country. In the process, we have lost our voice, conceding the very language we would use to describe what we believe. We are not going to get our religion, our politics, or our country back if so many of us continue to pretend religion has nothing to do with politics. The First Amendment is about keeping the State out of religion not religion, as expressed by individuals, out of the State.

To borrow from Jim Wallis's August op-ed piece in the New York Times, there are at least five areas in which progressives can match programs to stories, message to messaging as Wallis puts it, and, in the Judeo-Christian tradition, capture the support of the American people:

1. Poverty: a living family income for all wage-earners.
2. The environment: private interest should never obstruct our path to a cleaner and more efficient energy future.
3. Abortion: reduce the 1 million abortions annually by adoption reform, health care, child care, combating teenage pregnancy and sexual abuse, improving women's income, and parental notification with necessary protections against parental abuse. I would add a recognition that abortion is about life. There is a living thing or about to be a living thing in egg and sperm. By talking only about "choice," we make a human agony sound like a political decision.
4. Truly pro-family policies: supporting parents in raising children, addressing Hollywood sleaze and internet pornography, and I would add: a childcare income allowance.
5. International leadership: secure our credibility by renouncing any claim to oil or future military bases in Iraq, strengthening a real International Criminal Court,

establishing an effective international military force, and taking leadership in reducing global poverty.

I am a progressive, indeed a radical, because I am a Christian. I refuse to leave the ground of battle to the so-called Religious Right. I refuse to grant them a monopoly of my religion. I refuse to leave my faith to esoteric interpretations of the Old Testament and contorted interpretations of some of the writings of Jesus's followers.

As a Christian, I am called to stand up to the tyranny of those who would make Christianity an instrument of prejudice, persecution, greed, narrow-mindedness, arrogance, militarism, power, and exploitation. My faith lies in Jesus's own words, condemning the rich and the hypocritical and opening his arms to the poor, to sinners, to outcasts, lepers, women, and even enemies in a culture hostile to all of them. I am my brother's keeper. I am commanded to love my neighbor as myself. These are the revolutionary values of Christianity.

I challenge all of you to do the same. Learn more, not less, about Christianity. Read the new scholarship on what the Christian movement was all about and the ways in which it was distorted by the rich, the male, and the powerful. The truth of Jesus's life and teachings is no boring old stuff but something that calls us to a life of love, faith, and commitment fully relevant to our time.

Footnote

1. Robert B. Reich, "Story Time" (March 28/April 2, 2005, The New Republic; George Lakoff, Don't Think of the Elephant; Jim Wallis, God's Politics: Why the Right Gets It Wrong and the Left Doesn't Get It

Web Site: Downside Up has had a web site, and will have one again, but since I changed internet service providers, I have not set up a web site on the new server. When set up, once again all previous articles will be there and can be read and printed out with a few clicks of your computer. In the meantime, if you need a back issue, email me at downsideup2@bellsouth.net.

Expanding the Readership: If you like what you see in Downside Up, feel free to forward this on to others. If you have received this by forwarding from someone else and you would like to be on the direct email list, email your email address to downsideup2@bellsouth.net. If you want to be taken off the email list, email to the same address.

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Ronald Woodbury is the publisher, editor, and general flunkey for all of Downside Up. While publication benefits from the editorial advice of one of his daughters, a friend, and occasional other pre-publication readers, they will, for their own privacy and sanity, remain anonymous. The web spinner's name is also best left anonymous.

Woodbury has a B.A., M.A., and Ph.D. in history and economics from Amherst College and Columbia University. In addition to many professional articles, he has published a column, also called Downside Up, in the Lacey, WA, Leader. After a 36 year career as a teacher and administrator at six different colleges and universities, he retired with his wife to St. Augustine, FL, where he continues to be active in church and community. He has two daughters, one a physician and one an anthropologist, and six grandchildren.