

# Half-Truths

by Bill Herbst

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During this age where, in the wrestling match between truth and lies, truth has been damn near pinned to the canvas by falsehoods, it may be helpful to reflect a bit on what makes lies so powerful, and certain lies so much more potent than others.

Some of the power of lies is inherent in the neural hard-wiring we call human nature. Human beings are, quite simply, full of shit. We believe (whether totally or partially) all sorts of things that are not true and not real, many of which go unchallenged and continue to reside comfortably in our psyches for a lifetime.

Like all primates, humans are a profoundly social species. Our need for social approval — particularly in the relatively impersonal experience of belonging — is now recognized by psychology and science as a central motivating factor for people, dethroning the popular conception of self-interest or personal gain as primary drivers of behavior. Acceptance by others, it seems, is even more important than wealth. So, lies that gain traction within social groups carry expanded power to root, grow, and seduce more of the members. Our need to belong makes lies approved by our peers more infectious and easily transmitted.

Neural science tells us that just hearing a lie repeated — even an outrageous one that we know to be false — reinforces the likelihood of its being believed. Sociopaths and other criminals (many of whom occupy positions of respect and privilege) recognize this and use repetition of lies to foster their unfair advantage. And that works.

But what amplifies the power of lies more than most other factors is the presence within the lie of some dimension of truth. It doesn't have to be much, and it doesn't even have to be relevant or make sense, but when at least some shred of truth — whether obvious and self-evident or subtle and buried — is included, as is the case with so many falsehoods, the cachet of the illusory, deceptive assertion is dramatically enhanced. People are more likely to accept or believe the lie and less inclined to reject it. The old saying that "*a spoonful of sugar helps the medicine go down*" applies to lying. Mix the lie with a little bit of truth, and it becomes much more palatable.

Poet Sarah Sousa talks about the “truth-nerve” in the writing of poetry. It’s like a radar sensor that signals “*YES, reality is present here.*” Activating that truth-nerve not only makes for better poetry, it also opens the door to more successful lying.

Liars — good ones, anyway — learn (either by acquired skill or innate cunning) that their lies are much more effective in deluding others when they include an element of truth. Often, these inclusions take the spicy form of logical fallacies, but no matter. Most human beings don’t think straight anyway, and we barely teach it in schools. Even when we try to do so, training in logic pales compared to the emotional appeals to which the midbrain responds. Logic is the first thing that gets thrown out.

Many decades ago I read a working definition of a *blasphemy* as a half-truth. Now, I know that the dictionary definition of blasphemy as it applies to religious orthodoxy is different, more in the direction of insulting God, but I’ve always remembered that shorthand meaning. I think it applies to much of what’s going on in America and the world. I don’t care what we call it, though — blasphemy, half-truth, whatever.

A particularly powerful dimension of half-truths occurs in conspiracy theories believed by Americans. First off, do actual conspiracies exist? Well, duh. Of course they do. Second, consider any of the myriad looney-tunes conspiracy theories currently polluting the landscape of the national zeitgeist. Take *QAnon*, for instance. What kind of conspiracies does QAnon promote? QAnon espouses a wide-ranging and interconnected set of outrageous narratives about evil in our midst, but central among them is the belief that a highly-organized network composed of immensely powerful and uber-wealthy elites have created what is essentially an invisible but massive black market, one that has commodified on a global scale the abduction and enslavement of children for purposes of predatory and deviant sexual molestation. According to Q, these perverted elites are comprised entirely of left-leaning Hollywood celebrities and highly-placed Democrats, such as Bill and Hillary Clinton, Bill Gates, George Soros, and others.

OK. Is this just completely fucking nuts? One might assume so, but no. It’s partially true and partially false. Sexual molestation of children, including their kidnapping and imprisonment, does indeed occur around the world. That’s the true part, the hook. Human beings are capable of despicable acts, especially to act out their sexual desires and fulfill their fantasies, no matter how abhorrent, unacceptable, and immoral those desires may be.

The Norman Rockwell paintings enshrined as Saturday Evening Post magazine covers of the 1950s, such as those that show happy, loving families gathered

together at Thanksgiving, represent a mythic meme in America that simply hasn't stood the test of time. We've learned the hard truth that many, many families are vulnerable to abusive relationships. Beyond personal kinship, we know also that predators exist in the world who willfully prey on unsuspecting strangers, and that women and children are especially vulnerable to these devils. All real. All true.

For people who have succumbed to the demonizing narratives of the right wing, it's a short trip from acknowledging the ugly fact of child molestation to believing that a massive conspiracy has arisen from the political left to not only take over the world, but do so alongside sexual deviancy. All the different lies in these QAnon conspiracies are connected, and the partial truth cements them together. I'd consider it brilliant were it not so despicable.

QAnon may be crude to the point of silliness, but it's proven effective in gleaning millions of followers. Still, most half-truths are not so obvious or outrageous. Want to see lies and half-truths galore? Turn on the television. Go onto the Internet. Check out social media. Talk to your friends. You'll find as many lies as you can stomach. We are bathed in this toxic sludge, virtually marinating in it.

What most impresses me is the willingness (and often eagerness) of so many people to come up with and foment such monumental falsehoods. I attribute that to the sad state of human consciousness. It's not new, of course. Lies are at the very heart of civilization. Peel away all the layers of bullshit, and a core of even more bullshit is revealed.

Donald Trump, the Republicans, and the far-right didn't invent lies. (Nor did the Democrats, for that matter.) But damn near everyone in business and politics engages in the practice of promoting half-truths without hesitation or restraint, so much so that nothing is dependable or trustworthy anymore. This is the current state of humanity, a terrible predicament from which we haven't a clue how to extricate ourselves.

I'm not religious. Hell, I don't have an opinion about whether or not a Deity exists.

But God help us.