

The Tower of Babel

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Version 1.3 (posted on 26 December 2017)

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The story of the Tower of Babel is a brief but powerful origin myth in the Bible. After the Deluge, the descendants of Noah, presumably in Babylonia, angered God by their hubris in attempting to build a tower that would reach into the heavens, thus demonstrating their own greatness. God's punishment was to confuse the workers by causing them to speak different languages rather than a common, shared language. As a result, the tower was never completed, and the people were dispersed around the earth as different tribes that couldn't understand one another.

That story has evolved to imply diverse meanings in our times. Dictionary definitions include "a confused mixture of sounds or voices" and "a scene of noise and confusion." The story can also be interpreted to encompass the human tendency to misunderstand each other or engage in (and believe) falsehoods.

I had hoped that the passing of the Saturn-Neptune last-quarter transit that was effective from late 2014 through late 2017 would alleviate at least some of the current deluge of falsehoods that hit us like a tsunami over the past years. I never thought that passing away would mean more truth and fewer lies, but I held out a small hope that the end of that transit (which corresponds to difficulties in distinguishing reality from fantasy) might allow us to come to more widespread agreement about what is true versus what is false. Apparently not.

So far, at least, the cacophony of "information" that so muddied the waters of public and political discourse over the past three years has continued unabated, with no indication at all that our fractured crazy-quilt of beliefs is beginning to re-unify. The chaotic conflict between truth and lies may yet eventually subside, but I'm no longer as optimistic about that as I was even a few short months ago, and I have no expectations at all that the bell curve of public opinion will better reflect reality (or sanity) any time soon. Here as elsewhere, the fault lies with difficult aspects of human nature.

Witness the egregious falsehoods that formed official policy in the Soviet Union during the terrors of the Stalinist era, from the 1930s to the collapse of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s. Nearly every pronouncement or statistic was a lie. No information was trustworthy. Truth was tossed out the window in favor of ever-changing fictional narratives. History was routinely rewritten to suit the

current aims of Stalin and the Politburo. Not only did people vanish in the millions, but their entire lives were wiped from the records, so that no trace remained of their ever having existed. Photos were even doctored to remove from the Soviet past former leaders who had fallen from favor.

The legendary 20th-century journalist, publisher, and fourth estate watchdog, I.F. Stone, stated quite famously that "*All governments lie.*" I would expand that statement to "*All human beings lie.*" The idea that anyone could get through an entire life without telling or acting out a single untruth seems preposterous to me. Not only do we frequently not know what the truth is, but our egos are dedicated to covering our often guilty little butts. Even when caught red-handed in a bald-face lie, the human tendency, initially at least, but often forever, is to deny that we have been caught or to defend the falsehood by insisting that it's true. We will lie our asses off and then swear on a stack of Bibles that we didn't.

Why do we do this? As individuals, I'd suggest that it's because we are fallible, vulnerable, and frightened, like small children who never grow up. For governments and institutions, lying is the means to maintain or increase their power by controlling the narratives that shape public opinion.

I've written often that, in my opinion, the great triumph of modern psychology in the 20th century was not in the areas of therapy or mental health, but through the development of successful techniques in propaganda and mass mind control, most obviously through advertising, public relations, and politics.

One profound realization of Madison Avenue was the psychological power of association. Marketers who advertise products or services, as well as policies or beliefs for which they seek public approval, have learned that by associating those products, services, policies, or beliefs with images that are attractive to the public, they can bypass the critical faculties of the potential customer and directly gain unconscious influence.

Another realization was the power of repetition. Repeat anything often enough, and it becomes "normalized" and more acceptable. This applies to everything, including lies. That's why we are subjected to "ad campaigns," where the same ads or a series of similar ads are run thousands of times. Repetition works to gain mass acceptance. Not everyone will be won over, of course, but that's not the goal of marketers. They don't need everyone; they need to "capture" only a relatively small segment of the bell curve. Advertising is a numbers game, and repetition increases the numbers.

In product advertising, the level of unreality is stunning. Fantasies, dreams, and wishes are apparently at the very heart of the consumer culture. Reality is unimportant; only dreams matter. The essential (and potent) allure of such ads lies in the promise of fantasy fulfillment.

As children, we are exposed to, learn, and believe many stories, some of which are presented as factually true: George Washington came clean after chopping down a cherry tree or threw a silver dollar all the way across the Potomac River, Abe Lincoln never told a lie, Santa Claus comes down the chimney, and Americans are always “the good guys.” As adults, we realize that the vast majority of these stories are false. They’re fictional myths, not truths. But such stories aren’t told only to children. In the modern world of technological media, we are bathed in such stories 24/7. And they are all presented as true.

In my own life, I’ve studied science and spirituality — science to better understand the cosmos, the earth, humanity, and civilization; spirituality to better understand the human quest for meaning. I also began a dedicated personal study of history in my 20s — American history mainly, but also World history — that continues to this day, almost half a century later. On all three fronts — science, spirituality, and history — my journey toward knowledge and understanding has been at times revelatory, at times shocking, and at times disillusioning.

An old saying is that history is written by the victors, and that’s certainly true. That’s why “revisionist” history is relevant. Our comprehension of the past is as malleable as our perception of the present.

Consider, for example, one event in American history: Custer’s Last Stand at the Little Bighorn in 1876. Largely because of the sustained efforts on the lecture circuit by Libby Custer, the widow of the 7th Cavalry’s commander, that defeat was accepted by the American (white) population as an heroic battle by a small force of U.S. Army soldiers against overwhelming odds against “savages” — thousands of Lakota Sioux, Comanche, and warriors from various other tribes. The event was myth presented as truth and believed by popular American culture for the better part of a century, even though Native American accounts conflicted with the myth.

In the 1980s, a rare wildfire swept through the hills of the Custer Memorial Battlefield, burning away the grasses and brush, uncovering the bare ground. That provided a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for a sizable team of forensic anthropologists to painstakingly go over the ground with metal detectors to recover artifacts, mainly brass cartridge cases. The entire battlefield was inventoried and mapped by computer to pinpoint which participants fought where, what kind of weapons were used, and how many bullets were fired from a given position. The entire sequence of the battle was reconstructed from the physical evidence recovered.

It turned out that the Last Stand mythology was a complete fabrication, and that historical accounts of the encounter by Native American Tribes (through oral tradition and pictorial representations of the battle) had been uncannily accurate.

In fact, no heroic "Last Stand" had occurred. Custer had divided his small command of five companies into three positions spread over the hills to the north of the village in the valley. His 265 troopers were armed with single-shot carbines, accurate at long range, but no match in sheer firepower for the repeating Henry and Winchester rifles of the Native Americans, whose warriors used the cover of gullies and washes on the hills to approach and eventually infiltrate the skirmish lines of the troopers. Once the warriors were close enough to bring their superior numbers and weaponry to bear, panic set in among the troopers, and each of the three dismounted cavalry positions was quickly rolled up and overcome. The standoff prelude took 4-5 hours, but, once the deadly rout began in earnest, the actual battle that took place was over in about 30 minutes. It was a sudden and progressive collapse that led to disaster and annihilation for Custer and his men.

The Little Bighorn was a pyrrhic victory for the Native Americans. What they had from that point on was the downward slide to the tragedy of Wounded Knee and beyond into the 20th century.

Attitudes about the battle at the Little Big Horn had been changing since the 1960s, as mainstream American culture began to be aware of and slowly reassess our culture's responsibility for the genocide of Native Americans. The forensic reconstruction of the 1980s, however, was a major step forward in acknowledging the truth of what happened.

Not everything is so clear-cut, of course. The old adage that the truth eventually comes out may or may not be so, but secrets are hard to keep forever. Even the most potent falsehoods tend to decay over time. The problem we face now, however, is not as much about truth (which may indeed be an endangered species) as it is about trust and belief.

Over my adulthood, I've relied on the principle "*Consider the Source*" to assess the veracity of information. That has served me moderately well, but less so now than ever before. Facts don't seem to matter, or they're too often used selectively to support a specific perspective, argument, or desired outcome.

Anyone who is paying attention is aware that we're living through a time in society, culture, and civilization where public trust and faith in traditional authorities and institutions have eroded to an all-time low. We've seen politics devolve from pragmatic cooperation to bellicose partisanship. And now different demographic groups have splintered into warring tribes that profoundly disagree about reality. Public discourse has lost any semblance of civility.

Meanwhile, the burgeoning technological revolution has made dissemination of and access to "information" so easy and instantaneous that we are bombarded with a continual tsunami of "24/7 news" that may or may not have any relation to the truth. The upshot is that millions of people, perhaps even billions, live in

echo chambers — virtual bubbles — where the information they read, see, and hear reflects and confirms only the attitudes, opinions, perceptions, and beliefs of their particular tribe. All contrasting or conflicting information is ignored or denied, and judged to be false, frequently with accusations of conspiracy.

A wide range of differing and conflicted beliefs has always existed among the population, of course, but extreme opinions tended to be limited to the far wings of the bell curve, sometimes termed the lunatic fringe. People kept those kinds of outlandish opinions mainly to themselves, partly out of fear of cultural censure or loss of social acceptance. The middle of the curve was characterized by general agreement, or at least the appearance of it. Not that popular unity of belief is any guarantee of truth or sanity. Mob rule is notoriously damaging. Many of our former collective beliefs don't stand up to scrutiny, and entire nations can and have gone crazy. At any rate, that broad middle of collective agreement has shrunk dramatically. The tech revolution has emboldened those who held formerly unacceptable beliefs, since they are no longer isolated and alone, but easily connected through the information superhighway to others who share their assumptions and theories and espouse them as true.

For myself, I no longer feel certainty about what or whom to trust. I wonder often about the biases and fictional narratives of sources that once seemed to me dependable and reliable. Some sources I reject out of hand, for instance, anything that Trump or the minions in his administration say. And any information from profit-based corporations, whether through advertising or public relations, seems to me wholly unreliable. But my reaction to almost all information from any source has become cautious skepticism. Nor am I alone — that kind of doubt now cuts across the demographics of the entire American landscape. I suppose this could be considered a kind of purge or cleansing from our formerly naïve trust in traditional authorities and institutions, but if so, I fear that the tonic might kill the patient.

Various spiritual traditions offer the advice that *"He who knows does not say."* This adage, I think, is not a promotion of secrecy, but rather a subtle acknowledgement that the truth is slippery and often elusive, especially when translated into words. Thus, the title of this commentary, *The Tower of Babel*. At times, silence can be more eloquent than speech. That hasn't prevented me from writing these commentaries, but I don't write them from the presumption of telling the truth. I do so to reach out to others who may feel as I do — a deep unease that civilization seems to be coming apart at the seams. I write to connect at least virtually, in the hope of our not feeling quite so alone. Obviously, my versions of reality and sanity will not please everyone, but I think there are enough of us who share similar views to justify continuing.

That won't reunify America or alter the course of history, of course, but it might help some of us get through what are disturbing and frightening times with at least slightly less anxiety.