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BART H. WELLING

Defending Truths, Restoring Worlds

“Shams and delusions are esteemed for soundest truths . . .”
—Henry David Thoreau, *Walden; or, Life in the Woods* (1854)

“Tho the heavens depart and the earth’s fountains burst,
Truth, the sum of existence, will weather the worst . . .”
—John Jaques, “Oh Say, What Is Truth?” (c. 1851)

Are we indeed living in a post-truth world? A bit of historical perspective would be useful. The US, for example, is nowhere near as violently polarized and deluded today as it was in the years leading up to the Civil War, when Thoreau was working on *Walden*. The war broke out when southern “slaveocrats” allowed their hysteria over the election of Abraham Lincoln—hysteria stoked by “fake news” reports that the outwardly moderate Lincoln was secretly a raving abolitionist—to overwhelm the “better angels of [their] nature,” producing a catastrophe many times worse than the one they had hoped to forestall by seceding from the Union.¹ In most places in the West today, far-right Internet echo chambers and other modern versions of hyper-partisan nineteenth-century media ecologies have not (yet) set off the kind of mob violence that was common in Thoreau’s day. Yes, the rise of “illiberal democracy,” with its brutal hostility to inconvenient truths and truth-tellers, is real and troubling, but fierce worldwide resistance to it shows that the “post” in “post-truth” is premature. Most westerners are still a long way off from loving Big Brother.

Thanks to the anti-Trump resistance movement, along with a still-strong commitment to the rule of law among government workers in the US and multiple investigations into Trump’s ties to Russia, the world’s most notorious advocate of post-truth-ism may not make it through a single term in office. But regardless of how long Trump manages to hold out, his election and Brexit have exposed long-term political and *rhetorical* fault lines that ecocritics in Canada, the US, the UK, and beyond will have to deal with if we’re serious about transitioning to societies that are more democratically vibrant in addition to being more ecologically sustainable. Simply refusing to live in a post-truth world will not suffice. I submit that we will fail to trigger either a worldwide alternative energy revolution or the political and economic revolution that a just and sustainable energy transition demands if we resign ourselves to the notion that the kinds of

¹ See Ratner and Teeter 85-101. “[B]etter angels”: The final words of Lincoln’s first inaugural address (Safire 828).

older, working- and middle-class white people who supported Brexit and Trump inhabit a post-truth world—i.e., that they are permanently exiled in “alternative fact” bubbles beyond the reach of science, rational thought, and common decency. We must both understand and make it clear to our global-warming-denying neighbors that our real fight is with erroneous ideas, bad policies, and our own energy-intensive habits rather than with them personally.

For example, the activists who physically blocked Trump supporters from attending the new president’s inauguration in Washington, D.C., confronting them with banners bearing the words “Deny Trump, Not Climate” and similar slogans, *were* standing up for important truths.² But they did so in a way that substantiated Trump’s authoritarian falsehoods, such as the idea that liberal protesters are nothing but “sore losers,” instead of subverting these fictions. The frustrated Trump voters who faced off against the activists, on a day that was supposed to be a celebration, most likely took away the message that progressives consider their votes and voices worthless, reinforcing a not-entirely-unfounded assumption that drove many citizens to side with Trump in the first place. How do we get out of this negative feedback loop? We need to resist not just Trump’s policies but the temptation to mirror the *style* of an autocrat who views fellow citizens and allies who disagree with him as enemies. To paraphrase columnist E. J. Dionne, the fires of resistance must be accompanied by the gentler energies of persuasion.

We should never countenance racism, sexism, xenophobia, science denialism, and so on, but we should also avoid assuming, before getting to know someone, that their support for a factually challenged position or politician is merely an expression of an –ism or a phobia. Indeed, Joan C. Williams makes it painfully clear that the left has plenty of –isms and phobias (not to mention shams and delusions) of its own, biases that can keep us from effectively preaching ecological truths outside the proverbial choir. And “preach,” to be sure, is the wrong word in this context, given that (as Williams observes) liberal condescension is one of non-college-educated white citizens’ biggest grievances. One way to earn the trust of these voters will involve publicly working through the nearly “unspeakable” embarrassment, as Amitav Ghosh describes it (29), that is occasioned by our deep and abusive relationships with energy sources we badly want to leave behind. We need to acknowledge our enormous debts to fossil fuels, the entanglement with hydrocarbons at every level that, like it or not, is one of the most important things we have in common with everyone else in our modern “petrocultures.”³ Likewise, we can admit that even though we value scientifically verifiable facts and respect science’s ability to make sense of what’s happening to the climate, we have no unmediated access to absolute Truth, no monopoly on good ideas regarding how to deal with Earth’s changes. This is precisely why all stakeholders in a bioregion need to be welcome at the table, including people whose conservatism extends to maintaining valuable “old-fashioned” life skills, and to remembering local place lore that most others have forgotten. Instead of condemning people for not belonging to the “reality-based community” that embraces science and rejects conspiracy theories, let’s figure out which aspects of reality our neighbors *do* accept and understand—especially the things they know better than we do—and build on this common

² See Maiorana.

³ LeMenager’s book is an excellent model of how to own up to these debts.

ground. We may never convince hardened skeptics that humans are changing the world's climate (or that Brexit and Trump's presidency are colossal scams), but we can collaborate with all kinds of people on projects that benefit the Earth—even activities that don't carry an obvious green label. Environmental literature abounds with evidence that people who nurture honest, respectful relationships in their local communities can make progress in restoring a sense of shared social and ecological reality. This kind of work will be crucial as we try not only to help truth weather the worst, but to stave off the worst weather in human history.

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