

Truth, Lying and Fear

by Karen Sullivan

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There's so much happening everywhere, all at once. I want to take a few minutes to talk about about truth, lying, and fear.

George Orwell called truth a revolutionary thing during deceitful times. The thing about truth versus a lie is this: maybe you might not be *too* upset if someone lies to you, but you might wonder if you can ever trust them again. We all find truth through quiet reflection and deepening our understanding of things, but in the current climate of daily emergencies, there's no time for that. Memory then becomes a casualty, reflection goes to ground, and we're left with a constant present moment that dissolves and then re-creates more frenetic anxiety. In the minds of this regime's so-called leaders, there is no contempt for dishonesty.

So, there are two ironies I need to point out here: The first is, if you're a federal employee or service member who has sworn an oath to the Constitution, you are a bulwark of truth against corruption. You are bound by law to report waste, fraud, abuse, or malfeasance. Unfortunately, despite guaranteed protection from retaliation under the Whistleblower Protection Act, whistleblowers in this hyper-partisan climate are taking on significant risk. More on that in a minute.

The second irony is more public: despite the federal government's history of lying to the public without accountability, if any of us lies to the federal government, it's a felony under the False Statements Accountability Act. So why do we continue to accept this double standard? Lies interfere with a listener's understanding of things as they truly are, and they do bad things to the integrity and dignity of the people who tell them. The power of lying has rewritten history. Take this actual statement: quote, "Cigarette smoking is no more addictive than coffee, tea, or Twinkies." That was the tobacco industry under oath in April 1994. Or think about the lie that got us into the Iraq war, or more recently, the White House's rewriting of the events of January 6. Or, Kristi Noem telling us this week that ICE agents are not using show-me-your-papers tactics in Minnesota, when hundreds of videos prove otherwise.

Trump's energy secretary, an oil CEO, is rewriting history by altering a quarter century's worth of climate change reports—on which U.S. policy has been based—and that were authored and peer-reviewed by hundreds of scientists, including Nobel laureates—another irony. Lies create a substitute world in which the truth is just one more opinion. Far too often, officials who refine and repeat the lies eventually come to believe them.

Whether you're a corporate person or a president or a legislator speaking for your organization, state, or country, or just a civil servant in some government office speaking for your agency, if you lie, then what is your contribution to destabilizing whatever public goodwill and trust remain toward our government? Does not a public lie from such a height amplify its ethical and moral consequence?

The U.S. spends a lot of time on First Amendment rights and the power of the government (or its lack thereof) to regulate the speech of its citizens, but very little attention is paid to the constitutional implications of intentional falsehoods, omissions, or distortions from the government itself. Of course, there are justifiable reasons why they might lie, such as for the sake of legitimate national security. But the most troubling thing is when the government abuses its own power in order to avoid legal, ethical and political accountability for its misconduct, despite knowing how dire the consequences could be.

In the Trump administration, truth is the needle in a haystack the size of Mount Everest.

But back to whistleblowing. Last year, Attorney General Pam Bondi revoked the rules that were in place to protect journalists from being asked about their sources, and she announced a crackdown on any leaks by federal employees. Last week under highly questionable legality, the FBI raided the home of a *Washington Post* reporter who had committed no crime or given them any probable cause. What she did was to widely distribute her contact information and develop 1,169 contacts inside the federal government who were sharing what's really going on. The FBI seized all of her devices, which shut down her reporting and probably gave the FBI access to all 1,169 of those sources. I would be terrified if I was one of them. It also sent a chilling message to other journalists that they could be next.

When I whistleblow for three years to the *New York Times* back in the George W. Bush administration, the technology wasn't like what we have today, but I still used an intermediary who passed my stories on to them without identifying me. This was because Bush had jailed a reporter for 85 days for not revealing her sources. As a result, although there were multiple front-page stories in the *New York Times* from what I leaked, I was never interviewed by the *Times*. My intermediary had been a senior official in the Clinton administration, but being a private citizen then, was not obligated to turn over her sources to the government.

I tell you all this because everyone who cares has a job to do. Whether you're inside government trying to hold the line, or in what President Obama called the most important job in America—citizen—there are hundreds of large or small things you can do that can match your ability to tolerate stress.

This week as events in Minneapolis dominated the news, White House border czar Tom Homan announced, "I'm coming to Boston and I'm bringing Hell with me." They want us to be afraid. They want us to feel overwhelmed, and to submit to this unconscionable bullying. They are counting on one outrage after another to numb and immobilize us. They want us to follow illegal or unethical orders, or look the other way. Anyone who knows about the 1930s knows where that led.

If we submit to authoritarianism, we will, as Martin Luther King said, enter that long night of injustice. That's why no one can afford to sit this one out. Everyone needs to do whatever your abilities—and yes, your fear—will allow. Because we all need to know that we've got each other's backs. So, here's something: if you've never sworn an oath to the Constitution, now might be a good time to look up how to do it, because once you've done that, something changes inside you. It is a solemn and emotional event that shifts the focus from your personal interests to

a higher duty of public service. It's a profound and often humbling experience that leaves a lasting, quiet, and steadfast commitment to the rule of law.

I like to think about that line in a poem by a Greek poet who was shunned in the 1970s for being gay. He wrote: "They tried to bury us, but they didn't know we were seeds." I think being a seed is a good thing. A seed can never know how much sunlight and water it will receive, or who it might nourish in the future, or when, but it does know how to persist. What if we could all be seeds?

Thank you.

Post-reading discussion on what you can do right now:

The Department of Homeland Security appropriations bill that funds ICE does not yet have 60 votes—it must pass by January 30. Currently it does not have a no mask requirement or provisions saying ICE may not target people on the basis of race, ethnicity, or accent. Nor does it say that ICE agents do not have total immunity from civil or criminal prosecution if they harm people. Senators need *Democrats* to vote for it. Don't let that happen unless these provisions are in it. My [article in the latest Rainshadow Journal](#) lists these provisions, so just call the Capitol Switchboard and ask the operator to connect you to a specific Senator. That number is (202) 224-3121.