



Truth and Consequence: Alternative Facts and Discordant Realities

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The following is an essay in applied psychoanalysis delivered to the International Association of Relational Psychoanalysis and Psychotherapy in June 2018.* In this essay I attempt to apply what we know about the psychological sequelae of childhood abuse and what we know about the conditions necessary for secure attachment to our current political situation.

My favorite quotation from the psychoanalytic literature comes from Joyce McDougall (1993), who once wrote, “The babies first reality is the mother’s unconscious.” If we update this very important insight to reflect the primacy of both parents’ unconscious influence on the child’s growing mind, then we have the basis for considering the significance of truth as it impacts that capacity to perceive, judge, and rely upon reality testing skills. But here, “truth” takes on a deeper and more complex texture. What does the parent actually say? How is it said? What is the body language, affect, facial expression, and context in which it is communicated?

And perhaps most important, in terms of its long-term impact on the child’s developing psychic structure and reality testing skills, what is the felt resonance between what the child experiences herself and what the parent represents as reality? Does the parent’s perception of the world that she is interpreting for her growing child match emotionally, psychologically, and physically the child’s perceptions. And to what extent does that experienced difference between the parent’s words and the child’s experience represent the dissociated aspect of the parental unconscious that is nonetheless internalized by the child along with the more conscious dimensions?

In writing over the last 30 years about the long-term impact of psychological trauma, I have often focused on precisely this manifestation, that is, that parental childhood abuse—emotional, physical, and sexual—can have lasting effects on that child’s capacity to trust in his or her own perceptions, well into adulthood. “You know Daddy loves you.” “You know Daddy does this because you are special.” “How dare you say that Daddy (or Mommy) has done such a thing.

*This paper was presented during the midst of the Mueller investigation. At the time of publication a preliminary report has been very briefly summarized. The profound disappointment that many of us feel only highlights that the “fantasized rescuer” in the minds of abuse survivors is a compensatory and illusory fantasized object who will inevitably disappoint. (See Davies and Frawley, 1994)

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You are a bad girl.” “You know this feels good.” “You know you wanted this.” And on and on, distortion after distortion until the child no longer knows what is good and what is bad, what he wanted and what he dreaded, what feels good and what does not, who to trust and who to doubt. It is the dissociated parental unconscious transmitted unconsciously to the child, all that the parent cannot consciously accept about his or her own motivations and agendas that is nonetheless communicated by the parent and internalized by the child without any shared consensual agreement between the two. It is never spoken about; its reality is never confirmed. It is the “mind fuck” of parental abuse whose tentacles reach far into the future even, at times, long after the body has healed over.

It is about a month after Donald Trump’s election. I am in my office trying to make sense of my own deeply felt despair and of the particulars that I am hearing from my patients, supervisees, and study group members. There is no question that a generalized depression has fallen over my practice, and its form and presence are palpable. My first patient of the day, a successful attorney with no reality-testing problems whatsoever and someone who has never been prone to impulsive or thoughtless action, tells me that she is in the process of transferring a significant proportion of her rather sizeable wealth to a Canadian bank. She wants to have assets outside the country in case she needs to get away quickly. She recalls the many Holocaust survivors who had to leave Germany and all of their assets behind in order to get away with due speed. “I know it sounds crazy,” she tells me, “but I think maybe the world has gone crazy and so these actions are actually sound and sane.” I begin to wonder whether I should move some of my own funds. Would that be crazy? It feels crazy, but perhaps it is not. Perhaps it is crazy to passively do nothing and hope for the best.

My next patient was in the World Trade Center on 9/11 and escaped within minutes of the buildings falling. He is in a total panic. All of the posttraumatic stress disorder symptoms he had in the days after 9/11, symptoms that have not plagued him in years, are back in full measure. He, too, is not someone given to hyperbole or impulsivity. He has thoughts about selling his business and moving his family out of New York City. “If there is a nuclear war,” he tells me, “we are at ground zero. It’s crazy to stay here.” My anxiety is growing. A nuclear war, really? I remember myself as a first grader sitting under my wooden desk and knowing, even then, that if a bomb fell, that wooden desk would be of little use. Should I leave the city too? The world feels upside-down. I find that I am that little girl under the desk. I realize that I haven’t been listening. In the days following Trump’s insult exchange with Kim Jung Un, my patient does move his family, full-time, to their country home in the Berkshires. Another patient that day, a patient who actually was a hidden child during the Holocaust, tells me that she has begun to look for a house to buy in Australia. “I want a place out of this country, just in case,” she tells me. By now I am really feeling anxious and destabilized in a major way. Too many patients with sound judgment and reality-testing skills planning on doing things that seem out of proportion to the circumstances. Or, of course, am I in denial. I think of the wooden desk, of European Jews who stayed put assuming that Hitler was a passing thing, of those in the World Trade Center who listened to security guards and didn’t head for the exits. Truth and reality seem obfuscated. Truth and consequence become fungible.

My practice that day ends with Jenny. Jenny has suffered through what is probably the worst history of emotional abuse that I have ever heard. It is not an abuse that ever turned physical or sexual, but it was violent, relentless, and perpetrated by both parents with no one to accurately represent to her the reality of what was transpiring. Jenny’s abuse left no physical scars to

which she could point, and say to herself and to me, “See, it happened. It really occurred. I am not making this up.” Jenny is smart and perceptive, and she reads people’s unspoken meanings with exquisite nuance and accuracy. For Jenny the parental unconscious was her only reality, and the words her parents spoke were filled with their own self-deception and dangerous infiltration of Jenny’s mind. In such a way, the accuracy of Jenny’s perceptiveness became a danger to be avoided as she grew up. For Jenny to accurately perceive the alternating neglect and abusiveness of her parents’ behavior would have been intolerable for a growing child. She represents an iconic example of Fairbairn’s moral defense ... Better to live as a sinner in a world ruled by God than to be a child alone in a world ruled by the devil (Fairbairn, 1943). In essence, obfuscate your awareness of what is going on, because to see it clearly would threaten your ability to believe in those who are supposed to be caring for you ... it would threaten your attachment to your parents and as such, it would threaten your very survival. Believe in your own badness, your own unworthiness, rather than see that those who should be protecting you from danger are the worst kind of danger themselves.

In such situations, a child’s worldview often splits into dissociated and alternating perspectives. I have written about this in my paper “Whose Bad Objects Are We?” (Davies, 2004). In this paper I describe the child’s dilemma as having to choose constantly between feeling loved and feeling sane, the result being an endlessly dissociated and alternating vision of the world, each worldview belonging to a different self-state. To feel loved, the child must obfuscate her own reality testing and subordinate it to that of the parent upon whom she depends. She must see the world through the parent’s eyes in order not to threaten that fundamental bond. ... “I did want it, I did deserve it, it does feel good, I am truly the bad one here. ...” But, because we know, because even a child knows, that survival depends upon sanity, upon being able to view reality accurately, because the child senses a discordance between her parent’s words and her felt experience, another self state is born. This self state knows the truth, holds fast to a reality that seems in accord with her own felt experience. This self state, however, must risk sacrificing the parent’s love and protection to truly understand what is going on ... to shed its own experience of badness and blame and place that blame squarely where it belongs. The choice: to feel loved or to feel sane.

On this particular day, Jenny describes to me how difficult it is to hold on to her own sense of what is going on politically.

All these crazy old White men, who just stare into the camera, on TV and lie, they just lie, they keep telling lies and more lies, and for a few minutes I find myself believing them. They couldn’t just be lying like this, bald-faced, unadulterated lies. I must have misunderstood them. I want to believe them. ... It lasts for a few long minutes ... longer than it should. And then suddenly my vision clears and I see the truth. But it takes too long. I’m horrified with how for the moment, I become convinced that these evil people are telling us the truth.

Jenny and I work on how her view of the world can switch between one that is defined by an authority whom she is supposed to trust and her own sense of discordance and danger. She has come to understand how this worked for her as a child but is horrified that it still appears operative so many years later.

What is happening here? Twenty-five years ago, Mary-Gail Frawley and I wrote about what has now become an accepted object relational configuration of childhood abuse (Davies, 1994). The victim; the perpetrator; the idealized savior; and the denying, unseeing, blind-to-what-is-

going-on significant other. We wrote in great detail about the dissociated and alternating self-other paradigms that can occupy an abuse survivor's experiences in interpersonal relationships, particularly the relationship with an analyst with whom these self-other configurations occupy a maddeningly alternating position within transference-countertransference enactments.

So why am I repeating all of this today? How do all of these threads come together? Why is one of my patients moving money to Canada while another looks for property in Australia and another leaves Manhattan for the alleged safety of the Berkshires? Why does Jenny succumb to the outlandish lies of the "crazy old White men"? Why am I unsure about which reality is true? Are they overreacting? Am I underreacting? Should I move money, leave the country, hide under my desk, and hold my breath? And finally, one last question. Do you watch the news all night? Do your patients complain to you, as mine do to me, that they are addicted to watching the news, alternating between MSNBC and CNN, waiting for word of impending catastrophe or waiting for word of ultimate salvation? I know I do. I am bored with it, inured to it, depressed by it, and yet I watch. I cannot turn it off. I know it is crazy, but I can't turn it off.

My point today is, of course, that as a nation I believe we have come to occupy the position of the abused child; individuals victimized, lied to, and seriously endangered by our perpetrator-in-chief; he who is supposed to protect us. ... The Father of our country. You will forgive me the inherent sexism and essentialism of this formulation, for in the unconscious our politics are not always politically correct. The father of our country, often referred to in popular parlance as "the most powerful man in the world." In adult, shared, consensually validated psychoanalytic reality, it sounds silly, almost crazy. But in all of our younger self states, those who also watch the day-to-day unfolding of our national nightmare, we have a self state that knows. ... Our daddy is crazy ... or demented ... probably both. He is dangerous, we are in trouble, we are not safe. Day after day he gets crazier. We watch. Our anxiety builds.

Is this an extreme formulation? What of the unseeing other; the mother or father who must deny the abuse being perpetrated on the innocent child because her own self-interest and safety demands it. Are we not confronted with these others every day as well? The glazed-over faces of congressmen and senators who tell us that they believe our Daddy is sane, that we can rely on him to do the right thing—in Jenny's words, "the crazy old White men." Have you noticed their eyes as they say these things? Do they not bear a striking resemblance to the dissociated dead eyes of the parents of our most traumatized patients? Is there not a distinct similarity between the Speaker of the House, third in line to the presidency, who defends the sanity of a seriously impaired head of state, who dismisses the mortal danger we are in even though he has the power to stop it, and the mother who stares blankly at her child, eyes deadened, emotions vacated, and shouts, "How can you say such a thing about your poor father, he loves you, how dare you say such a thing, how dare you even think such a thing!" And she does nothing to stop the danger. And our Speaker of the House does nothing to stop the danger, and those under him do nothing to stop the danger. They are our elected officials, empowered by us to protect us. But they do not speak truth to us. They will not confront and try to stop Daddy. At best, they go away. They retire. They do not run for reelection. That is their response to the danger we all face. They leave home and leave us alone with our abuser. Am I being extreme here? I think not. Think only of the image of a Kellyanne Conway or Sarah Huckabee Sanders, staring blankly into the camera and telling us Daddy is good, Daddy is protecting us, we are the ones who are bad, those who doubt him. Something is wrong with us, they claim. Our vision of

reality is confused and twisted by the alternative facts being handed us as “fake news” by the media. It is they, Kellyanne and Sarah, who are telling us what is real, they claim.

So we have our abuser, and we have our unseeing and denying others; so what about our idealized rescuer? Are there really any doubts? Could anyone fill that role better than the utterly solid, imperturbable, doggedly persevering Robert Mueller? Are we not all waiting for Mueller to tell us the truth about what violence and reality-distorting lies have been perpetrated upon us? Are we not all waiting for him to swoop down and eliminate our abuser-in-chief and rescue us, validating our reality testing and assuring us all that what we have known to be the truth all along has, indeed, been accurate? Like an abused child who hides from her perpetrator and repeats like a mantra, “If only someone knew what was happening here, they would come and rescue me and make this all go away,” we wait for our rescuer, we wait for Mueller to resurrect our known truth and make all of this craziness go away. Perhaps it is why we watch the news so compulsively, hour after hour, despite the fact that we are hearing nothing new. Perhaps we are all waiting for some word, some word from the other side of all of this insanity, some word from someone sane and caring that we are not crazy, that the world has become stalled on a permanent tilt, and the destabilization we all feel is real and, most important, reversible.

So my point today, in this panel on truth, is that as a culture we have found ourselves in a place not dissimilar to that of an emotionally, physically, or sexually abused child—in particular, a place occupied by a child who has been abused by a parent or by someone who was supposed to protect that child. As a culture we have been and are continuing to be traumatized by the repeated horrors of what we see happening to our country and by the daily assault on our reality-testing skills by those who are supposed to represent and protect us. The only difference here is that we have one another to validate this craziness. The abused child has no one. And so her experience splits into alternating realities while we support one another in maintaining a psychic integrity ... At least most of the time.

So ... does truth matter? And why does it matter so profoundly? To my way of thinking, truth is the very lifeblood of trust, and as analysts we know that basic trust is the umbilical cord of attachment. We learn to trust the others in our world because what they tell us, and what they describe to us—events, actions, emotions—are felt to be concordant with our own felt experience. This concordance encourages the young child to surrender her well-being to the all-important other who will help her navigate the complex, overstimulating, oftentimes confusing world into which she has been thrust. This other will safeguard her physical survival and will foster her mental and emotional capacity to trust in her own perceptions and, ultimately, her own sanity. This felt concordance between what a parent says and what the child feels is an often overlooked aspect of secure attachment—the very security of that attachment growing out of the safety of surrendering to that all important significant other, and in so doing allowing for a sense of order, rightness, and psychic well-being to saturate that child’s experience. The felt concordance between the parents’ conscious and unconscious communication and the child’s conscious and unconscious processing of those communications becomes the very fiber of a holding environment into which the child’s independent mind is born and within which it develops and evolves.

Perhaps it is that very surrender to the overriding wisdom and good intent of those who look out for us that defines a secure-enough attachment and what we might think of as a good-enough childhood.

There are no such things as “alternative facts.” The very notion is a perversion of the postmodern perspectivalism that encourages an appreciation of multiple points of view. A fact, as representing a known truth, is still a fact. Your mother did or did not die when you were six. Jumping off that cliff is or is not dangerous. Mama is or is not crazy. You should or you should not believe in what she tells you. You will or you will not be safe if you listen to her. Each of these questions has an answer—one answer. The problem is an epistemological one, not whether truth exists but how we come to know and validate that truth. When truth collides with attachment—when attachment is subverted by a felt discordance between what we are told and what we experience in our own bodies and minds—the only psychological safeguard is dissociation. Reality splits and different truths become incorporated into different self–other configurations. Attachment becomes insecure or ambivalent because the self and object world are fragmented. We become locked into the paranoid-schizoid mode of relating because good and evil become bifurcated—each unmodulated by and unintegrated with the other.

As such we have become a country in which the majority of us are unattached to our leaders. We exist without a trusting bond to those who we have chosen to protect us and safeguard our well-being. Like a parentless child, we are existing in a state of chaos, locked into a paranoid/schizoid world where good and evil predominate and projective-introjective cycles have become the miasma in which we exist. No one is in charge. No one is protecting us. Terror predominates.

In the second paragraph of the Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson wrote, “We hold these truths to be self-evident ...” Although we may wince at these words being written by a man who was himself a slave holder, I quote them today because of another meaning they convey. That we as citizens of this country, as citizens of the world, must be united by certain truths that are shared among us. We may differ in our perspectives and promulgate different points of view, but as Jefferson somehow inherently knew, when our reality is shattered by lies and misrepresentations our basic trust in each other, our very attachments to each other, our sense of unity as a people, and our commitment to a shared purpose can be inalterably challenged.

And so we must reverse Fairbairn’s dictum. We must unite with one another to hold jointly the truths that we know, the truths that should be self-evident to all. ...

That the badness is out there, the news is not fake, we can tackle the devil, we *are* being abused and we must jointly bring our collective abuse to an end. Truth *does* matter, for without truth there is no union, not for children and parents, and not for a nation and its leaders.

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