Can You Fool All of the People, All of the Time?

The Rev. Edmund Robinson
Unitarian Universalist Meeting House
August 22, 2010

Once upon a time it is said that a large accounting firm was interviewing new CPAs for entry level positions. The first applicant was asked, "what is two plus two," and the applicant answered "four." "Thank you, next," came the reply. The next applicant was asked "what's two plus two," and answered "four." "Thank you; next." The third applicant was asked "what's two plus two." This applicant, who had heard the first two interviews, replied "what do you want it to be?" and the answer came back, "you're hired."

Now we laugh at this joke because we have faith that there are certain facts which are given in the nature of things, which no reasonable minds can dispute. The sum of two plus two would be one of them. It isn't even a fact, it's a relation between two numbers, which themselves are abstract symbols of one aspect of reality.

In December of 1770, the Boston lawyer John Adams, though a patriot sympathizer, was defending the British soldiers who were charged with firing on civilians in the Boston Massacre. In his closing arguments he said, "Facts are stubborn things; and whatever may be our wishes, our inclinations, or the dictates of our passion, they cannot alter the state of facts and evidence." This is familiar ground for a trial lawyer; I have used argument like this myself if the facts are what I want to hang on.

But every trial lawyer knows that between the facts of the case and the jury's vote there are the jurors' beliefs, attitudes and emotions to be won. Facts are only building blocks towards a belief that a particular verdict is just and fair.

Yet we persist in feeling that facts are stubborn things. We know that our beliefs can be wrong, but we have faith that beliefs based on erroneous facts can change if new facts come to light. Now some psychological research casts doubt on this faith. This research suggests that particularly as to conservative opinions, some beliefs based on erroneous facts only become stronger if the believer is confronted with the correct facts. This phenomenon is called backfire.

The article I just read from in the Boston Globe appeared in July, and about the same time there was a segment on NPR's "This American Life" about it. Some of the news reporting was based on a 2006 research article by a University of Michigan political scientist named Brendan Nyhan. An update of the research article was posted on the internet in May of 2010[1].

The first experiments in the backfire series were conducted in 2005, shortly after the presidential campaign of 2004. College students were asked to read a mock news article containing a claim made by President Bush that there was a real risk that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction immediately before the Iraq invasion, followed by a report of a government agency that there were no weapons of mass destruction. After hearing the claim and the correction, students who were on the more conservative end of the spectrum were more convinced that Hussein had WMD. This is the backfire effect.

Though this research is a half-decade old, it is particular bothersome today. We have a political landscape in which certain conservative institutions have demonstrated a willingness to go public with purely fabricated assertions. A good example is ACORN. Last year a conservative blogger and political consultant named Andrew Breitbart tried to set up ACORN,

[1] "When Corrections Fail: The Persistence of Political Misperceptions by Brendan Nyhan and Jason Reifler Polit Behavior (2010) 32:303-330
http://www.springerlink.com/content/064786861r21m257/fulltext.pdf

the nationwide liberal community organizing group, by sending actors posing as a prostitute and a pimp into an ACORN office to seek "business advice" for a business that was clearly illegal. A video of the encounter got wide distribution on Fox News and other conservative media outlets, and led to calls in Congress for an investigation. But it turned out that the actors did not actually make the proposition to the ACORN offices, the film was carefully edited to make it appear to be something it was not. By the time the sham was exposed, it was too late, ACORN had lost the public trust, and an effective liberal organization bit the dust.

A more recent Breitbart production was the hounding of Shirley Sherrod, a mid-level employee of the US Department of Agriculture. Breitbart carefully edited a speech Sherrod had given to the NAACP several years before to make it appear that she was treating a white farmer differently than she would have treated a black farmer. After Fox and other media outlets picked up the tape without critically examining it, a firestorm erupted on reverse racism that culminated in Sherrod's being fired. Only after she was fired did anyone look at the whole speech she gave, in which she said exactly the opposite if that the edited clip made it seem she was saying, and the White House had to apologize and rehire her.

Deliberate deception and distortion have always been a quality of politics in US history; the epochal contest between Thomas Jefferson and John Adams in 1800 was characterized by vicious mudslinging, innuendo, character assassination and rumor. However, we have entered an era where mistruths are deliberately fostered with a boldness that is breathtaking.

President Obama's stand in favor of allowing and Islamic cultural center in lower Manhattan has revived the percentage of people who think he is a Muslim.

The title of this sermon comes from a quote attributed to Abraham Lincoln, but there is an inconvenient fact that the full text of the 1858 speech in which the quote was said to occur does not contain the quote. Some people also attribute it to P.T. Barnum, who is of course one of the more prominent Universalists of the Nineteenth Century. Whatever its actual origin, the phrase has entered American political discourse and for some of us has become a mantra to live by: "You can fool all of the people some of the time, and you can fool some of the people all of the time, but you can't fool all of the people all of the time." This quote has been a source of great comfort to me when I have been on the losing side of a political issue, which is quite often in my lifetime. I like to think that mistakes in the political sphere are self-correcting and that a majority of "the People" will come to their sense eventually.

But suppose this faith is misplaced? Suppose that people who are mistaken never see the light but get deeper into their mistakes, hold more firmly to their erroneous opinions, and then vote. Yes, that's the scary thing. Vote.

This research challenges a bedrock belief of mine that an educated citizenry can make a democracy work. If our schools are doing their job, they are inculcating in the citizen a critical intelligence, an ability to examine skeptically every claim made in the public sphere and decide for him-or her-self what is true. What is the point of teaching critical intelligence if no one ever actually changes their minds?

Now at this point you may be saying, this is all very interesting, but what is it doing in a sermon on Sunday morning? This is about politics and psychology and civics; what does it have to do with religion?

The answer some of you may be tempted to give is, well Unitarian Universalism isn't really a religion anyway and if the minister wants to talk about politics, that's OK because we're all liberals here. As far as I'm concerned, that's the wrong answer. I draw a sharp distinction between political liberals and religious liberals, and part of our liberal religious faith is an inclusivity that embraces the political conservative. While this backfire effect is more pronounced on the right than the left, liberals have a milder version of it according to this research, and the reason we don't put the weight of religion behind any political solution, in my

opinion, is that we want to maintain our open minds; the problems facing us are too important for any one ideology to have all the answers, and if we grasp the scale of all that is and the tininess of our own corner of it and the short span of our own lives on the great scale of time, we cannot help being struck with a deep humility. Our petty political and culture wars shrink to insignificance in the face of ultimate reality. It is impossible to be dogmatic when we have an appreciation of the vastness of the universe.

No, what this has to do with our religion is this: classic Universalist ethics teaches that what people call evil is actually rooted in ignorance. This is why, after the first generation of Universalist ministers was self-taught, the Universalists did an about-face and embraced education at all levels, founding Tufts and St. Lawrence Universities and Meadville College. In Universalist thinking, education is the way to improve the world, to fight sin and evil on a practical level by fighting the ignorance that is at its root. If we can educate the populace, they will do the right thing. Education is the roadmap to the Beloved Community; universal education holds the promise to erase the barriers of race and class and entrenched privilege, to give everyone a seat at the table.

The great Universalist minister Griswold Williams wrote a covenant sometime in the 1920s which is the granddaddy of the affirmation we say in this church every Sunday. Williams' covenant is in your hymnal at #471, and it starts out with three simple propositions:
Love is the doctrine of this church,
The quest of truth is its sacrament,
And service is its prayer.
Focus with me for a moment on that second phrase. A sacrament is the action which makes holiness, and what this covenant is saying is that holiness for us is not in turning all souls to Christ, eating his body or drinking his blood, not in the last judgment, not in any particular creed, but in the quest of truth. Not the finding of truth, not the preaching of truth, not the enshrining of truth into any particular set of words, much less in claiming any exclusive truth, but in the pursuit itself. It is the beginning of wisdom, as Socrates so eloquently demonstrated in his death speech, to be aware of how partial is our wisdom.

I believe these things as strongly as I believe anything, and I bet a lot of you do too. Across the country, in UU church after church, the most popular profession is that of teacher.

So what does this new research do to this faith in learning? Does our faith shatter against the stone of hard reality? I think not.

I think rather what it does is challenge our notion of education. We tend to think of education as something acting on our reason and our logic, having nothing to do with the emotions and the spirit. This is incomplete. We have a philosophical tradition from Plato to Rene Descartes which says there is a faculty in the mind called Reason which is separate from emotion. But neuroscience in the last four decades has shown how intimately intertwined are our reasoning minds and our emotions. Descartes said, "I think, therefore I am." But a modern neuroscientist might reply, "I feel, therefore I am."

Incidentally, you've probably heard about Descartes on the airplane; when the flight attendance asked him if he wanted a cup of coffee, Descartes replied, "I think not" – and disappeared!

There was a great book about fifteen years ago called Descartes' Error by Antonio Damasio[2] exploring the connection between reason and emotion in the brain It started out with the story of Phineas Gage. Gage was a foreman of a railroad construction crew in New

[2]Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain, by Antonio Damasio, Harper Perennial 1995

Hampshire in the mid Nineteenth century who suffered a curious and remarkable brain injury. A cache of dynamite went off and it launched a prying bar into the air and the bar came down in Mr. Gage's head, severing the frontal lobe from the rest of his brain. The first remarkable thing was that this injury did not kill him outright. The second remarkable thing was that after this injury, Mr. Gage never experienced emotion. He could talk, he could reason, he could remember, but he never felt. He was a pure Cartesian specimen, a thinking machine.

And the third and most remarkable thing about Mr. Gage was that because of this separation of his reason from his emotion, he was utterly incapable of deciding anything. You could ask him if he was going to travel by coach or by train, and he could write out a list of the pros and cons of either approach, but could not make a decision.

What this shows, according to Antonio Damasio, is that our reason is not the decider. Our decisions stem from our emotions, and the reason supplies – well, reasons – for the decisions our emotions have already settled on. Facts are marshaled in support of courses of action that our hearts have already opted for.

The Boston Globe article on Nyhan's research put it this way:

> What's going on? How can we have things so wrong, and be so sure that we're right? Part of the answer lies in the way our brains are wired. Generally, people tend to seek consistency. There is a substantial body of psychological research showing that people tend to interpret information with an eye toward reinforcing their preexisting views. If we believe something about the world, we are more likely to passively accept as truth any information that confirms our beliefs, and actively dismiss information that doesn't. This is known as "motivated reasoning." Whether or not the consistent information is accurate, we might accept it as fact, as confirmation of our beliefs. This makes us more confident in said beliefs, and even less likely to entertain facts that contradict them.[3]"

Nyhan did a second experiment in 2006 with students about economic policy. The fake news article presented to students had President Bush urging Congress to make his 2001 tax cuts permanent and claiming that they had actually increased government revenues, the position known as supply-side economics. Then the students were exposed to the corrective: statistics from the Treasury showing that revenues actually decreased after the tax cuts. However, students who were more conservative tended to believe more strongly that tax cuts increased government revenues after seeing the correct information than they did before, indicating the backfire effect is alive on this issue.

However, a second round of experiment kin 2006 on weapons of mass destruction and Iraq did not show a back fire effect. The authors explain that by that time, the Bush administration and the conservative press had all distanced themselves from the presence of WMDs as a justification for the invasion of Iraq. It was no longer necessary for a conservative to cling to WMDs to support their worldview.

This raises for me the hope that the backfire effect is local and limited in time. It would be good to believe that people will only reject correct facts which clash with their worldview for a limited time. Against this, you have to admit that the idea that tax cuts for the wealthy generate more revenue for the government is one that seems to have a lot of staying power even though every time it has been tried from 1980 until 2008, it has resulted in declining revenues and greater deficits.

And the chances of people even learning of corrective facts are diminished when media

---

[3]How facts backfire: Researchers discover a surprising threat to democracy: our brains By Joe Keohane | Boston Globe July 11, 2010

outlets and political parties and politicians have vested interests in disinformation.

Can we, despite the presence of the backfire effect, continue to believe with Lincoln or P.T. Barnum or whoever said it that you can't fool all of the people all of the time? The question is ironic, because the presence of the backfire effect is itself a fact which calls into question this bedrock liberal belief. It would be a double standard to say that conservatives must examine their most cherished beliefs in light of the evidence if liberals were not willing to do the same thing. I do believe with John Adams that facts are stubborn things and that the half-life of a lie, while long, is not indefinite. But I also believe it behooves us all to reexamine our most cherished beliefs every day, including this one, and keep our minds open for those stubborn facts which may challenge those beliefs. Amen.

Reading:
How facts backfire Researchers discover a surprising threat to democracy: our brains By Joe Keohane |Boston Globe July 11, 2010

It's one of the great assumptions underlying modern democracy that an informed citizenry is preferable to an uninformed one. "Whenever the people are well-informed, they can be trusted with their own government," Thomas Jefferson wrote in 1789. This notion, carried down through the years, underlies everything from humble political pamphlets to presidential debates to the very notion of a free press. Mankind may be crooked timber, as Kant put it, uniquely susceptible to ignorance and misinformation, but it's an article of faith that knowledge is the best remedy. If people are furnished with the facts, they will be clearer thinkers and better citizens. If they are ignorant, facts will enlighten them. If they are mistaken, facts will set them straight.

In the end, truth will out. Won't it?

Maybe not. Recently, a few political scientists have begun to discover a human tendency deeply discouraging to anyone with faith in the power of information. It's this: Facts don't necessarily have the power to change our minds. In fact, quite the opposite. In a series of studies in 2005 and 2006, researchers at the University of Michigan found that when misinformed people, particularly political partisans, were exposed to corrected facts in news stories, they rarely changed their minds. In fact, they often became even more strongly set in their beliefs. Facts, they found, were not curing misinformation. Like an underpowered antibiotic, facts could actually make misinformation even stronger.

This bodes ill for a democracy, because most voters — the people making decisions about how the country runs — aren't blank slates. They already have beliefs, and a set of facts lodged in their minds. The problem is that sometimes the things they think they know are objectively, provably false. And in the presence of the correct information, such people react very, very differently than the merely uninformed. Instead of changing their minds to reflect the correct information, they can entrench themselves even deeper.

"The general idea is that it's absolutely threatening to admit you're wrong," says political scientist Brendan Nyhan, the lead researcher on the Michigan study. The phenomenon — known as "backfire" — is "a natural defense mechanism to avoid that cognitive dissonance."

These findings open a long-running argument about the political ignorance of American citizens to broader questions about the interplay between the nature of human intelligence and our

democratic ideals. Most of us like to believe that our opinions have been formed over time by careful, rational consideration of facts and ideas, and that the decisions based on those opinions, therefore, have the ring of soundness and intelligence. In reality, we often base our opinions on our beliefs, which can have an uneasy relationship with facts. And rather than facts driving beliefs, our beliefs can dictate the facts we chose to accept. They can cause us to twist facts so they fit better with our preconceived notions. Worst of all, they can lead us to uncritically accept bad information just because it reinforces our beliefs. This reinforcement makes us more confident we're right, and even less likely to listen to any new information. And then we vote.

This effect is only heightened by the information glut, which offers — alongside an unprecedented amount of good information — endless rumors, misinformation, and questionable variations on the truth. In other words, it's never been easier for people to be wrong, and at the same time feel more certain that they're right.