

You Shall Know the Truth . . .

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“You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free”--words from the Gospel of John--are engraved on college campus buildings throughout the land. They reflect the conviction of their Christian founders that the pursuit of truth is not only a worthy endeavor, but a liberating one. Of course, truth was then understood to encompass more than knowledge of empirical facts. It meant deep and theologically informed understanding of the nature of our human existence as well as the world we inhabit.

Nowadays, the idea that education is in the service of truth has been severely compromised. Higher education seems to be geared primarily to socio-economic priorities. Postmodern deconstructionists question whether one can even know the truth. The idea that truth is relative is widespread, and often invoked to dismiss or shortchange serious intellectual inquiry that aims to address and challenge us with basic questions about “the way things really are.”

I cannot escape the conviction, however, that it really matters whether we have a fundamentally sound, accurate, and truthful understanding of “the way things really are,” including the ultimate nature of things. It matters whether we live lives that are truthful, in accord with what is real.

Thus, it is profoundly disturbing to witness the disregard for truth in our national life. After Watergate, Jimmy Carter campaigned, saying, “I will never lie to you.” The lies are now worse than ever. So long as we allow ourselves to be deceived and mollified by dishonest rhetoric and glib reassurances, avoiding inconvenient truths, we Americans will fail to grasp the perilousness of our current course. We have been blessed in many ways, but we are squandering political good will and the world’s resources in the arrogant pursuit of power and economic hegemony. The events of 9/11, defined for us by the same administration that has practiced deceit regarding Saddam and al Qaeda, WMDs, torture, national security, the environment, Social Security, and taxes, have become the pretext for a bogus “war on terror” that has led to all sorts of degradations in our national and international political life. “The first casualty when war comes is truth.”

“The truth shall make you free.” Captive to political rhetoric of fear and self-righteousness, we have lost sight of the truth and are losing our freedom. It takes courage to pursue the truth (witness Socrates as well as Jesus). Gird up your loins!

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