

REFLECTIONS ON BLEATHERING

Flirting with the Truth

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For a couple of years in my business career I was a professional bletherer. Blether is a good honest Scottish word, roughly meaning nonsense; I grew up with it. It was often used in my presence, and that may be partly why it came naturally to me. In the mid 80s I was engaged by Xerox and Volt Engineering as a proposal manager for some large and complex government contracts to convert massive amounts of Defense Department text and graphics documents from paper into digital files. We won \$1.4 Billion worth of contracts. I/we must have been good at it. But what was “it”? I concede it was largely blether – making persuasive presentations and proposals about things we, nor anybody else, could possibly know much about. We were forecasting the future and putting a wonderfully positive spin on it. In other words, we were engaging in blether. At about this time I came across a lovely essay on the topic by a philosopher at Yale, and realized he had put his finger on a lot of what blether is, and what it isn’t. My presentation here is based on what Harry Frankfurt wrote then. Just a couple of months ago he brought out the article as a hard-cover book offering much the same thesis; I duly and gratefully acknowledge that some chunks of my remarks today are derivative. I’ll note of course that Frankfurt used a more common and expressive word, but this being a churchy service, and out of my deep respect for your delicate sensibilities, I won’t use it today – much, anyway.

I hope you think it’s a suitable subject for a summer UU service, which I think allows an off-beat tack or two. The topic is directly related to truth, and that surely is a crucial component of the First UU principle of respecting the worth and dignity of each person. If you persistently flirt much with the truth in your interactions with others, especially if you do so knowingly, or even carelessly, you can’t either be showing them respect or honoring their dignity. You owe it to them and to yourself to aim for the truth. But it’s astonishingly hard to be pure about it. We let the truth slip and slither away, and we replace it with approximations – in other words, we flirt with the truth. We blether.

Prevalence of Blether.

This goes on all the time, from all kinds of sources. I'm pretty sure you all agree that current politics is pretty well completely blether. In fact, as I think about it, so is much else, even including religion, provided we accept the general definition of speaking confidently about things we can't possibly know much about, or making wild predictions. The world is afloat, awash in making wild and self-serving promises! It's good and instructive to examine your version of your truth from time to time. We all know there are at least three versions of an incident: what you say it is, what I say it is, and what it really is. As you all know, UUs have no capital-T truth; each of us seeks his or her own. Many churches, as part of their BYOT courses, ask that a member revisits her Credo – what she believes to be her truth - every couple of years. I've even heard it said that if it's the same this time as last time, you'll be investigated by the UUA. So one spiritual message today is to keep your Credo, your current version of your spiritual truth, fresh. Write it out. Examine it critically and often. Be your chief skeptic and try to be objective; as I note when it's my turn to be lay leader, we seek to have a belief system that is intellectually honest and personally meaningful. That at least has us aiming for truth. And be true to your own truth, a topic I'll return to later on.

Just what is blether then? As I noted, one of the most salient features of our culture and society is that there is so much blether. Everyone knows this. Each of us contributes his share. But we tend to take the situation for granted. Most people are rather confident of their ability to recognize blether and to avoid being taken in by it. We accept it as part of modern life, which, when you think of it, is a shame. We have become inured to it. There should be much more outrage at blether, particularly by politicians. The phenomenon has not aroused much deliberate concern, nor attracted much sustained inquiry. In consequence, we have no clear understanding of what blether is, why there is so much of it, or what functions it serves. Here's a start. I won't consider the rhetorical uses and misuses of blether; there are of course many legitimate and acceptable uses of flirting with the truth, but that's another topic, best assigned a separate talk. You'll have noted the quotation on our Order of Service from the ever-perceptive Jane Austen: "Seldom, very seldom, does complete truth belong to any human disclosure; seldom can it happen that something is not a little disguised, or a little mistaken." My goal today is to look at what some

variations of the truth are, either deliberate or covert, rather than the difficulties of ascertaining it absolutely.

Politicians and religious leaders, as I expect we all agree, are well versed in blethering, and its power, particularly if repeated frequently and with an air of confidence. Note that an absolute commitment and resolve to telling the truth at all times is not by any means a good thing; we all shade the truth in various and acceptable ways. “What do you think of my new hair style?” may well generate a response that is not wholly truthful, but is entirely accepted under the rules of society. My aim is simply to give a rough account of what blether is and how it differs from what it is not.

Blether’s relationship to truth

Blether involves a kind of bluff. It is closer to bluffing, surely, than to telling a lie. But what is implied concerning its nature by the fact that it is more like bluffing than it is like lying? Just what is the relevant difference between a bluff and a lie? Lying and bluffing are both modes of misrepresentation or deception. Now, the concept most central to the distinctive nature of a lie is that of falsity: the liar is essentially someone who deliberately promulgates a falsehood. Bluffing too is typically devoted to conveying something false. Unlike plain lying, however, it is more especially a matter not of falsity but of fakery. This is what accounts for bluffing’s closeness to blether. For the essence of blether is not that it is false but that it is phony. In order to appreciate this distinction, one must recognize that a fake or a phony need not be in any respect (apart from authenticity itself) inferior to the real thing. What is not genuine need not also be defective in some other way. It may be, after all, an exact copy. What is wrong with a counterfeit is not what it is like, but how it was made. This points to a similar and fundamental aspect of the essential nature of blether: although it is produced without concern for the truth, it need not necessarily be false. In my prime of writing proposals, I sometimes thought the fanciful outcomes I put forward might actually work out that way; as a blether specialist, I sometimes would get it right. The bletherer is faking things. But this does not mean that he necessarily gets them wrong. A liar has clearer standards than a bletherer, who has essentially no standards at all except his own conceived for the occasion.

In Eric Ambler’s novel *Dirty Story*, a character named Arthur Abdel Simpson recalls advice

that he received as a child from his father:

Although I was only seven when my father died, I still remember him very well and some of the things he used to say. One of the first things he taught me was, 'Never tell a lie when you can – (I must honor the exact quotation) - bullshit your way through.'

This presumes not only that there is an important difference between lying and blethering, but that honorable father thought the latter is preferable to the former.

In trying to understand why our attitude toward blether might generally be more benign and relaxed than our attitude toward lying, however, the pertinent comparison is not between telling just one lie and producing just one particular instance of blether. The elder Simpson identifies the alternative to telling a lie as “bullshitting one’s way through.” This involves not merely producing one instance of blether; it involves a program of producing blether to whatever extent the circumstances require. That is, I think, what I and my fellow proposal guys were doing. This is a key, perhaps, to any preference for blether over direct lying. Telling a lie is an act with a sharp focus. It is designed to insert a particular falsehood at a specific point in a set or system of beliefs, in order to avoid the consequences of having that point occupied by the truth. Lying requires a degree of craftsmanship, even honesty, in which the teller of the lie submits to objective constraints imposed by what he takes to be the truth. The liar is inescapably concerned with truth-values. In order to invent a lie at all, he must think he knows what is true. And in order to invent an effective lie, he must design his falsehood under the guidance of that truth.

More insidious than lying!

A person who undertakes to blether his way through has much more freedom. His focus is panoramic rather than particular. He does not limit himself to inserting a particular falsehood at a specific point, and thus he is not constrained by the truths surrounding that point or intersecting with it. I ask you to think again of our political leaders, from both sides of the aisle. The bletherer is prepared to fake the context as well, so far as need requires. This freedom from the constraints to which the liar must submit does not necessarily mean, of course, that the bletherer’s task is easier than that of the liar. He feels free to go wherever he pleases without any limits imposed by the truth. But the mode of creativity upon which it relies is less analytical and less deliberative than that which is mobilized in lying. It is more expansive and independent, with more spacious,

and specious, opportunities for improvisation, color, and imaginative play. In a weird sense it's more fun – until you realize others may be taken it by it, and respond to it. Blether has no standards – or at least any standards it has are so broad as to be meaningless. It is less a matter of craft than of art. Hence the notion of the “blether artist.”

As I noted, blethering is everywhere in society. Just think of the synonyms: balderdash, claptrap, drivel, hogwash, humbug, gibberish, doublespeak, poppycock, tommyrot, malarkey, flimflam – and of course, supremely the most common word, which I am restrained from using today. One more, another Scottish word: haver. I was often told when a boy: “Laddie you're havoring again.” The concept must have firm roots in modern life for there to be so many synonyms for it. Indeed blethering – shading the truth - is endemic in all its variants. Two I'll touch on later are hypocrisy and insincerity.

.. Flirting with the truth, today's title, has a wonderful scope and range. Despite Nobel Prize-winning Jose's Saramago's assertion that Language was not given to man to conceal his thoughts, I think we often act as though the opposite were true: Language IS a means of concealing out thoughts and intentions. We are all prone to the temptation to be thinking one thing and then saying another. That brings me to another related word, Hypocrisy. It surely too is a feature of modern life. It often contains the component of action – saying one thing and doing another. It is most famously represented in politics, where it seems perfectly acceptable – required even – to make grandiose promises that nobody believes you have any intention of carrying out. We would indeed be astonished if ever a politician did what he said. But we have learned to live with that: we can generally rely upon a politician doing exactly the opposite of what he promises. While we are at other forms of blether, here's one more. We are awash in an epidemic of phony euphemisms generally called doublespeak; it's standard from the Pentagon. The War department gave way many years ago to the Department of Defense; civilian casualties = collateral damage; area-denial munitions = land mines; friendly fire = killed by your own troops. I came across a new one the other day: Pupils no longer “fail” in school; they are declared to be postponing success!

You know the truth – don't you?

But back to blether; we'll now get into some more subtle stuff. The distinction of misrepresenting what he is up to is the crux of the distinction between the bletherer and the liar. Both represent themselves falsely as endeavoring to communicate the truth. The success of each depends upon deceiving us about that. But the fact about himself that the liar hides is that he is attempting to lead us away from a correct apprehension of reality; we are not to know that he wants us to believe something he supposes to be false. The fact about himself that the bletherer hides, on the other hand, is that the truth-values of his statements are of no interest to him at all; what we are not to understand is that his intention is neither to report the truth nor to conceal it. This does not mean that his speech is anarchically impulsive, but that the motive guiding and controlling it is unconcerned with how the things about which he speaks truly are. (It all gets complicated, does it not! – and brings to mind the admonitory couplet we probably all were told as children: “O what a tangled web we weave/ When first we practice to deceive”)

It is impossible for someone to lie unless he thinks he knows the truth. Producing blether requires no such conviction. A person who lies is thereby responding to the truth, and he is to that extent respectful of it. For the bletherer, however, all these bets are off: he is neither on the side of the true nor on the side of the false. He has few, or no, standards whatsoever. His eye is not on the facts at all, except insofar as they may be pertinent to his interest in getting away with what he says.

For this reason, telling lies does not tend to unfit a person for telling the truth in the same way that blethering tends to. Through excessive indulgence in the latter activity, which involves making assertions without paying attention to anything except what it suits one to say, a person's normal habit of attending to the ways things are may become attenuated or lost. Someone who lies and someone who tells the truth are playing on opposite sides, so to speak, in the same game. Each responds to the facts as he understands them, although the response of the one is guided by the authority of the truth, while the response of the other defies that authority and refuses to meet its demands. The blether specialist ignores these demands altogether. He does not reject the authority of the truth, as the liar does. He pays no attention to it at all. By virtue of this, blether is a greater enemy of the truth than lies are.

One who is concerned to report or to conceal the facts assumes that there are indeed facts that are in some way both determinate and knowable. His interest in telling the truth or in lying presupposes that there is a difference between getting things wrong and getting them right, and that it is at least occasionally possible to tell the difference. Someone who ceases to believe in the possibility of identifying certain statements as true and others as false can have only two alternatives. The first is to desist both from efforts to tell the truth and from efforts to deceive. This would mean refraining from making any assertion whatever about the facts. The second alternative is to continue making assertions that purport to describe the way things are but that cannot be anything except blether.

Most people engage in blethering

Why is there so much blether? Well, blether is unavoidable whenever circumstances require someone to talk without knowing what he is talking about, which turns out to be much of the time. And that can be past, present or future events. Thus the production of blether is stimulated whenever a person's obligations or opportunities to speak about some topic are more extensive than his knowledge of the facts that are relevant to that topic. This discrepancy is common in public life, where people are frequently impelled, whether by their own propensities or by the demands of others, to speak extensively about matters of which they are to some degree ignorant. (Does anybody here recognize him self or herself here? I dare say I am demonstrating it.) Blether also arises from the widespread conviction that it is the responsibility of a citizen in a democracy to have opinions about everything, or at least everything that pertains to the conduct of his country's affairs. It's not all that often that someone will come out and say she has little idea on a topic; she'll just blether her way through. I'm reminded of Pooh Bah in *The Mikado* who, when challenged about his exaggerations declared he "was merely adding artistic verisimilitude to an otherwise bald and uninteresting narrative." Hands up any of you who think I might ever have engaged in this sort of behavior. Now keep your hands up if you yourself ever have! Yes we all have these tendencies. It gets really tricky because even the most preposterous of stories or exaggerations usually start out with some relationship to veracity

Sincerity?

The contemporary proliferation of blether also has deeper sources, in various forms of skepticism which deny that we can have any reliable access to an objective reality at all, and which therefore reject the possibility of knowing how things truly are. (Some more heavy stuff here – beware.)

These “anti-realist” doctrines undermine confidence in the value of disinterested efforts to determine what is true and what is false, and even in the intelligibility of the notion of objective inquiry. One response to this loss of confidence has been a retreat from the discipline required by dedication to the ideal of correctness to a quite different sort of discipline, which is imposed by pursuit of an alternative ideal, that of *sincerity*. Rather than seeking primarily to arrive at accurate representations of a common world, the individual turns toward trying to provide honest representations of himself. Convinced that reality has no inherent nature, which he might hope to identify as the truth about things, he devotes himself to being true to his own nature. It is as though he decided that since it makes no sense to try to be true to the facts, he must therefore try instead to be true to himself.

But it is preposterous to imagine that we ourselves are determinate, and hence susceptible both to correct and to incorrect descriptions, while supposing that ascribing determinacy to anything else has been exposed as a mistake. As conscious beings, we exist only in response to other things, and we cannot know ourselves at all without knowing them. Moreover, there is nothing in theory, and certainly nothing in experience, to support the extraordinary judgment that it is the truth about himself that is the easiest for a person to know. Facts about ourselves are not peculiarly solid and resistant to skeptical dissolution. Our natures are, indeed, elusively insubstantial—notoriously less stable and less inherent than the natures of other things. We do, inevitably, change as we go along. And insofar as this is the case, sincerity to oneself itself is blether. As Groucho Marx famously remarked. “The secret of success is sincerity; once you can fake that, you’ve got it made”

Cynical – or realistic?

Perhaps you think I’m a bit cynical in my views. Maybe – but do reflect how hard it is to be really truly sure about something, and how often therefore we resort to blether. Generally we do it subconsciously and are barely aware of it. I don’t mean that all technical proposals, religion

and politics, the main examples I've been using today, are fraught with blether. But I admonish all of us to be constantly wary of the possibility. I acknowledge that all too often I exaggerate for the sake of effect, but I'm trying to moderate that tendency. Pick your way carefully through the minefield. Try to ascertain whether your interlocutor is likely to be taken in by what you say. Treat what others say with a good degree of skepticism. Above all, examine what you are about to say, and have said, to check its blether content. Of course try to avoid it; you won't be able to banish it altogether, but it's surely good to try. Remember too that it's OK to challenge a bletherer, and get him to defend his stories or why she takes that particular stance; make her go down a level or two deeper. Being a skeptic is consistent with UU values – most of us got here because of our skepticism. Be as honest as possible with each other. That should help us to be more resolute in living up to our first UU Principle of honoring the respect and dignity of each person. Thank you, fellow bletherers!

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