

Alberta Doctors' Digest

When truth is arbitrary

Years ago – in a previous century, in fact – I was a schoolboy and remember that coming home by bus, I'd often see a dishevelled old man who muttered to himself and toted a placard nailed to a piece of wood. In thick crayon, his sign announced that "The End of the World" was at hand and offered up a date that was usually a week or two in the future. In the fullness of time, as they say, the date of note would come and go, without incident as far as I was concerned, but the fellow was undeterred, and at my next sighting, I'd note he'd put a new piece of cardboard and a new date into circulation.

I was curious, but only mildly. The subsequent years came and went; my schedule and my bus route changed, and I thought no more about it. Not until a couple of decades later – I was early in clinical practice by then – when I heard news of the mass casualties in Jonestown, Guyana. Over 900 died, a third of them children, by gunshot or drinking cyanide-laced fruit juice at the hands of Jim Jones, a charismatic cult leader originally from Indianapolis. It was a horrific tragedy that defied explanation, and no one knew what to do about it. I thought about "End Times" more seriously for a time, but this horror, too, fell away with time.

Jonestown was nearly 50 years ago, but I recall feeling that something darkly sinister had happened, a misstep in the order of things. Of course, many more terrible things have happened in the interim, but they've passed over me, not registering deeply. Such is memory: the old man with his sign and the massacre in Guyana persist for me as precursors to the current grim state of affairs I find most everywhere.



Elaborate conspiracy theories abound that offer impossibly oblique explanations reminiscent of bad dreams, and worse, science fiction. (Banner image credit: Gerd Altmann Pixabay.com)

Our present world seems fraught with danger and disorder: another Jonestown or worse wouldn't be out of keeping in lives gone topsy-turvy, lacking much needed moorings. This could represent a confluence of many things gone wrong, I reason. Thousands have perished in a coronavirus plague that stubbornly refuses to leave. Authoritarian regimes most everywhere threaten democratic government. Our population continues to

grow – we're up a couple of billion since Jonestown. We're stuck in endless digitization of our lives that has made much work-life balance superfluous. We're awash in extreme weather that we knew would attend our plunder of the environment. Local wars persist, of course, along with periodic killings by those bearing grudges and assault weapons. We're in another major war again, too – ours whether we want it or not – numbed to hear of tens of thousands dead in Eastern Europe.

Want to know the prevailing mood? Think “mean.”

I'm nostalgic for times past, I realize, but know things never were that orderly or sanguine. I look for differences to help in explanation. There are shysters about, but then again there have always been grifters, con men and purveyors of snake-oil. As well, I note that elaborate conspiracy theories abound that offer impossibly oblique explanations reminiscent of bad dreams, and worse, science fiction.

The recent one – referred to at times as QAnon – is a mélange of beliefs in lizard people, satanic worshippers and pedophiles who aim for world dominance. This may or may not involve criminal manipulation of the coronavirus but then again may be a function of autism-promoting vaccines or other dirty work either involving transmissions from phone towers or nefarious microchips attributed to Bill Gates.

The peculiar thing about QAnon theory is that “it has legs,” as they say in the news business, and has become part of the political discourse. QAnon is said to be responsible for nefarious activity through “deep state” manoeuvres which can be countered only by persons with special awareness and abilities.

The matter – the whole ball of wax, as one might say – would be ridiculous and even amusing save for the fact that, for large swaths of the populace, it has become deadly serious as the best explanation for things and further, a guide to conduct and political support.

Eureka moments still happen. Mine came courtesy of Kellyanne Conway, aide to former President Trump, who, some years ago disputing the size of crowds, argued for the existence of “alternate facts” and drove home to me the unspoken agreement in this new world that reality is arbitrary, a matter of choice, agreement or negotiation. It's an alien idea that reminds me of lines from Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass* (1871).

“When I use a word, it means just what I choose it to mean – neither more nor less.”
(This is Humpty speaking.)

“‘The question is,’ said Alice, ‘whether you can make words mean so many different things.’”

“‘The question is,’ said Humpty Dumpty, ‘which is to be master, that's all.’”

Perhaps author Lewis Carroll – as Humpty Dumpty – was right all along. But I think not. I expect that Carroll knew we'd still be looking for truth, that apart from science and its demands for evidence, that it's in short supply.

Our attention is wanting as well. In a world beset with problems, the stories we tell each other rely on hearsay, rumour and fear. Though specious reasoning is as old as time, our penchant for nonsense has been jet fuelled through our various social media that remain unregulated, yet sing to our darkest, worst selves and our appetites for outlandish fiction.

The most regrettable effects of our mass delusions have been the needless and near countless deaths of people who haven't gone for vaccines, who haven't sent their children for them, or who've announced they'll rely on health store nostrums or worse. As various wags have said, Liquid Plumber could work or foamy cleanser or perhaps some of the strange muck that grew near the garbage bins last summer.

It gets worse in that too many of our politicians have responded to the belligerent nonsense of some citizens, and they side with folk who think their rights have been trampled on. Incredibly, some of these misguided but vote-seeking leaders perpetuate further injury by decreeing that there'll be no more masks and no more closures. Not on their watch!

Alas, this dishonesty, this abrogation of the search for truth, affects us all and we'll soon be as dumb as a bag of hammers.

What to do? What to do?

I don't know ...

But I'm much encouraged by the work of [Philippine journalist Maria Ressa, awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2021](#). She has focused on the dark aspects of the social media – Facebook gets special mention – which have come to dominate and incrementally corrupt our lives. Truth is the casualty here since unregulated social media provide an information ecosystem that commonly rewards falsehood. Simply put, lies are more interesting than facts.

Authoritarian leaders and would-be leaders have seized on the possibilities with “fake news.” Disinformation, on a continuing, sometimes subtle, but pervasive basis threatens our belief systems.

Democracy is thus imperilled.

I hope we wake before we drown.

Editor's note:

The views, perspectives and opinions in this article are solely the author's and do not necessarily represent those of the AMA.

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