

Fabricating Knowledge

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When I taught English Literature at a university and later at a community college, my students of course would ask me questions about the subject matter. Usually, I had learned enough about what I was teaching to make a valid reply. Sometimes, I hadn't. In these cases, the temptation was great for me to make up something that sounded reasonable, and that I could sell as defensible.

Sometimes, well, once in a while, I replied, "I don't know." It was the truth, but it was an insufficient answer. When students ask questions, they are not just seeking the truth; they are in fact seeking the truth which satisfies their curiosity about the topic at hand. And so, to pre-empt a repetition of the same question in different words, I often followed "I don't know" with a tidal surge of things that I claimed to know, leading to an answer to their question that I "suspected" was true.

In most of the cases, however, I yielded to the temptation and constructed a plausible answer. I didn't know whether the answer was correct or not (though I never deliberately taught anything I knew to be incorrect), but correct or not, I did know that I could deliver my response with authority, defend it, and provide the curious student with a satisfactory answer.

Do you know what I'm talking about? Or am I on a desert island here?

Am I the only teacher or writer who has ever invented knowledge? Every independent thinker invents knowledge, usually on the foundations of those knowledge-inventors who have gone before. That is the nature of the “progress” or the “refinement” of knowledge.

The assumption that I, and most writers, make when we write is that human beings have some shared pool of understanding or knowledge about human nature. If you and I do not share some common understanding of human nature, and therefore, of each other, why am I writing all this? Empty self-indulgence is the only reason I can think of. And you, why are you spending your time here? I have no answer for that one, if you and I are so radically different. I will continue, then, to assume that you and I share some understanding of what it is to be human.

And so, if you say that I’m not like you, that I fabricate and you don’t, then either I know nothing about human nature (which is entirely possible) or you are lying to yourself or to me or to both of us.

It *is* possible—likely, even—that I have no idea about the nature of human nature, if you will. Perhaps you do. Perhaps you don’t. On what grounds would you determine whether you actually *do* know human nature—to whatever extent you think you do? Is there a test for it? Is there some hidden explicit characterization of human nature that is provably or certainly true—against which you could measure your own knowledge?

Here’s what I “suspect.” Don’t ask the psychologists. They don’t know any more about human nature than any honest introspective person. What they *do* have is a set of models of human personality. The problem for them is that each model explains or predicts human behaviors of some sorts, but not all behaviors. And so, not only is there no agreement on the nature of human nature among psychologists. They also do not agree on

which model is the most productive way to explain most human behaviors and personality types.

How do I know all this about psychology? I don't. I fabricated it. It's an opinion. It's not Truth. But I made it up while drawing on a lifetime of keeping my ears open and of reflecting on my experiences, especially my experiences with psychologists. Am I correct? I don't know—except that I do know there is no agreement on a single model. If I'm wrong about that too, then go ask the psychologists to verify the truth of your understanding of human nature. Maybe they will share their *gnosis*, their secret knowledge, with you. Maybe they won't. If they do, and if you find it to be a genuine description of human nature that fits all cases, then please write a tell-all book for the rest of us, so that we too may understand. If on the other hand they don't share their knowledge with you, you'll never know whether it's because they truly have the *gnosis* and are greedy to keep it to themselves, in order to control other people's lives with it; or whether it's because they really don't have anything to give you and are pretending they do, in order to preserve what they think is their respected place in society.

Man! It's complex! But when all is said and done, that kind of search offers little promise of leading to any absolutely true knowledge about human nature. For as far as I can see, we humans unfortunately have no way at all of laying open the presumed treasure chest of absolutely true knowledge. And that's my point. Especially in our age of scientifically verifiable knowledge and of professional expertise in minute, arcane subjects of study, the pressure is on—especially on us intellectuals—to know stuff, to be able to answer questions, to make people feel comfortable or satisfied that even if *they* don't know the answer, thank God there's someone who *does*! In the end, though, it's all self-deception.

Here then is our first general point. Human beings *need* to know. There's security in knowledge. We *demand* of ourselves that we know what we feel we need to know. Imagine what our lives would be like if we felt (as we surely do) that we needed to know how the world worked, especially at night, but realized that we knew nothing. And so, we would have no way of evaluating any experience. It would be terrifying—the danger of each flying insect approaching, the horrifying scream of sea-birds, the paralyzing crash of sudden thunder, the entrapping touch of grass on your feet. We would all live in a paranoid, endlessly uncertain, eternal moment.

I have briefly experienced this sense of a chaotic world. In my “foolish” youth, as they call it (foolish, yes; exploratory and instructive, also yes), I was driving with my dog through the Olympia National Forest in the State of Washington when I saw a small wooden sign pointing up a hiking trail. On the sign was painted, “Happy Lake. 6 mi.” I thought, “Happy Lake! I’ll go and see whether I become happier at Happy Lake!” I packed a backpack for a quick overnight at the lake—plastic tube tent, propane stove, a rain poncho, down sleeping bag, some quick-cook food, and food for the dog. Then I set out, uphill. The walk was beautiful in the early autumn, yellow leaves, brisk air, and so on. Then the trail turned a little soggy, and the going was slow as we climbed the ridge—without map or compass or knowledge of the area. But the trail-markers were clear, high, and easy to locate.

As we climbed, the soggianness turned out to be snowmelt. And small clots of heavy snow drooped the branches of the pines and spruces. Nonetheless, I paid no heed as Happy Lake continued to sing to me its siren song.

We crested the ridge and a meadow opened before us—a wide, pleasant, slightly inclined area, through which the path cut forward before us. The forest had thinned, and I

found that we were walking in a large space of increasingly high grass. The path forged ahead into the grass, and we followed it, but now, there were no trail markers. The grass became patches of dense, thick reeds, 10 or 12 feet high in places. I skirted them for a bit. Then, as I continued along the path, it entered the reeds. The dog and I cautiously followed it.

In an instant, within the thick, dense reeds, hardly movable, which towered over me, the path disappeared. In fear, I looked up to see the location of the sun, knowing that it was late afternoon and the sun would be in the west, on my left at the “10 o’clock” location. But I couldn’t see the sun for the density of the reeds. I looked behind me for the path, but the reeds had closed in, and I could not see the path. I turned again. Which way was “ahead”? Which was the direction from which I had come? I thought: If I choose a direction to push my way out through the reeds, will I simply be entering them more deeply? How large is this reed patch? Would I be going in circles if I walked from where I was? How could I know? And if I walked, would I find that I had walked into a bog or a natural trap of some kind from which I could not free myself?

My head began to swim. I had walked blindly into a danger I could not evaluate, nor was I prepared to respond to it. I looked at the dog. My fear had spread to her. She was shaking from the wet cold and from her fear. She was useless for nosing her way back out of the thicket. I knew that this thicket wasn’t the place I wanted to spend the night, so I abruptly turned to my left 90 degrees, thinking that any direction is better than standing in the thicket, paralyzed. I bent and broke and muscled my way through the reeds—though careful where I set my feet. The dog followed me, and after some time of thrashing, we came into the light. In the distance ahead, I could see the path, on my right, entering the woods.

I'll stop this story here —which, by the way, I did not fabricate in any way, as I remember it. [If you want to know whether we ever saw Happy Lake, we did not. We continued to follow the trail until late in the afternoon, when the snow had become a foot deep or more, and the trail markers led us into a small, level meadow amid snow-laden blue spruces. We spent an uncomfortable night there. In the morning, after I had unfrozen my blue-jeans and my boots and socks (by cracking into them and wearing them!), I could not locate any trail markers, except those heading back down the ridge, which we followed back to our car.]

My point is that without familiarity, without guidance, without belief (such as my belief that this trail actually led to someplace named Happy Lake), without knowledge, we human beings have no certainty. We are powerless, confused, vulnerable, and terribly afraid. There are few admissions more stunning and disintegrating than the admission of a solitary person, “I’m lost here. What do I do next? How do I get back home?”

Knowledge gives us the comfort of certainty and the consolation of sensing that we are correctly located, even if the knowledge is only tenuous or is unverifiable. When this happens to us, when we find that we lack verifiable knowledge (which turns out always to be the case), we fabricate stories and explanations for ourselves, simply because these stories provide us with comfort, giving us the reasons or causes for things, or explaining to us where we are, how we got here, and what our purpose is. Because we accept them as depictions of the way things really are, they satisfy our need for the comfort and consolation that knowledge brings us.

Sometimes, these stories are crude mythic explanations of important aspects of human awareness—such as the Genesis story of the origin of human beings and of the human condition, with its forbidden trees and remarkably stupid people and talking snakes

and a mercilessly severe God. Sometimes they are “once upon a time” nursery tales, intended to highlight virtues of various sorts and to discourage the self-granted license to be unwise. And sometimes, especially in our “sophisticated” culture, they are cosmological fabrications which describe the structure and process of the universe. These days, we call these cosmological fabrications “scientific models” or “mathematical models” or “weather forecasts.” Some of these fabrications are relatively simple—simple enough that the talking heads on television can convince us they know what an “upper-level low” really is and what it really does to our lives. Other mythic fabrications in our cultural collection are extremely complex, like the mathematics that supports the research at the CERN particle collider in Switzerland, and like the *Summa Theologica* of Thomas Aquinas, and like the Federal Budget of the United States. But simple or complex, they all have the same intent, and they all accomplish this purpose in the same way. The intent is to provide an orderly and satisfactory explanation of things. And the method is to construct a network of symbols which appears to the human intellect to be organized, coherent, and meaningful.

But when we’re honest about what all these networks of symbols truly “mean,” we find ourselves unable to uncover or detect that actual meaning. Really, I’ll ask, what is *zero*? Is it a meaningful number?

The discovery of *zero* sometime in the first millennium CE, separately by Indian and Babylonian mathematicians, simplified arithmetic immensely. You can’t easily compute arithmetically with the Roman numeral system, for example, because it has no zero, among other reasons. But you can easily do so with the Arabic numeral system, which we use to this day, because zero exists in it.

Yet, the question remains: Is zero a number, that is, a symbolic representation of real meaning in a counting system? Or is it simply a digit, a place-holder, empty of meaning, like the 0 in 10, which simply moves the 1 to the second place to the left, because the first (rightmost) place had run out of countable numbers when 9 was reached?

Surely zero is a place-holder. So, I presume that everyone can agree that zero is a tool, a useful device. The question is: Is it also a number? Does it have any meaning? *Five* is a number with meaning. If you have a normal hand, hold it before you and count the fingers. When you consider those fingers on that hand as a group, that's the meaning of *five*.

Does zero have such a meaning? If so, what is it? Is it “none,” “nothing that exists,” “non-existence”? Think about that. Is “non-existence” a real meaning? True, it's a logical construct of valid English word-components. English allows me to say, “My left earlobe exists,” and this sentence seems to meaningfully identify a quality (existence) of one element (earlobe) of that part of my head.

The rules of English grammar likewise allow me to make that statement negative by saying, “My left earlobe does not exist.” That is surely a possible statement in English. But here's my naïve question: If the flesh at the bottom of my left ear rounds along the curve of the cartilage of the ear, what does it mean to name the emptiness immediately below my ear “non-existent earlobe”? Is the absence of something also a “thing” which can carry a name?

And what could it mean to say that this “non-existent earlobe” is in some way “mine”? Our sentence says that the flesh at the bottom of my left ear is not something. So how could I *possess* something which is not? Something which does not exist?

Similarly, think about these sentences: “There is a vacuum in that lightbulb.” “He has an amputated leg.”

We return to the question: Does zero represent the meaning “nothing”? If that’s the case, is it meaningful to say that “nothing” exists? The word *exist* means “to be,” or in the material world, “to occupy space or time.” To exist, the existing entity must be *something*, like a “horse,” for example. Or the existing “thing” must be an occurrence to or a behavior of (a characteristic or evanescence of) an existing thing. For example, in the sentence, “The horse coughed”, the coughing is an act or behavior of the horse, or to say it more precisely, a certain way in which the horse manifests as existing. The coughing is not itself an existing thing. Rather, it is the way in which the horse’s existence is experienced at that moment.

Is it the case then that *zero* is not an existing thing but rather a characteristic or manifestation of the existence of something else, just as the coughing is a manifestation of the horse’s existence? If that’s so, then what other thing is *zero*, meaning “nothing,” a characteristic of? Another number? What could that mean? Likewise, is the vacuum a characteristic of the lightbulb or of its interior or of some other feature of the bulb? The bulb *isn’t* a vacuum. The vacuum must be a characteristic of some other part or aspect of the bulb. What might that be?

Ditto with the amputated leg. If the leg is amputated, is it a leg anymore? And if it is, in what sense does the man “have” it?

At any rate, existence demands that there be *something* which manifests itself as existing. Since *nothing* does not manifest itself as existing because it is not *something*, it is meaningless to say the sentence, “Nothing” exists. So, to conclude, if zero is a symbol for

the meaning “nothing,” then zero has no meaning, for it is meaningless to say that “nothing” is the meaning of the symbol, zero.

So, we’ve come to see that at least some statements, including some mathematical statements, regularly include meaningless components, like zero.

“But,” you might respond, “this conclusion doesn’t destroy the meaning of all mathematical statements. Surely, $2 + 2 = 4!$ ”

To this I respond: To you and me, $2 + 2 = 4$, indeed. To the central processing unit (CPU) of a computer, however, the statement $2 + 2 = 4$ is meaningless, because to it, those symbols are meaningless. When a computer’s CPU counts, it only uses the numbers 0 and 1. Those are the only symbols that have meaning to it. (The meaning is the possible states which a switch may be in: 1 means “ON” and 0 means “OFF.”) And so, the meaning which you and I find in $2 + 2 = 4$, the computer’s CPU finds in $10 + 10 = 100$. But if the computer were to present this calculation to us as correct, we would—in our own counting system—reject it as incorrect. For us, $10 + 10 = 20$.

I hope the point is beginning to be clear. Whether or not a statement is meaningful to an individual depends on whether the individual finds the symbols used to represent the meaning of the statement to be meaningful to him or her, as an individual. That’s why people smile politely or shake their heads when someone speaks to them in a language they do not understand.

Let me ask here another naïve question: How do you know that the statement $2 + 2 = 4$ is true in our general culture? You might answer this is one of three significant ways:

1. “Everyone knows that $2 + 2 = 4$.” That’s not quite true. Better if you had said, “Everyone who knows the meanings of the symbols 2 and 4 knows that $2 + 2 = 4$.” That is, a statement, as we said above, is meaningful only to those who share the symbol system in which the meaning is expressed. We might call this the *culture-based* response. It implies that there is a certain body of knowledge and understanding—a body of meaning—which all the members of a given culture share with one another. Those who are outside the culture (as the CPUs of computers are outside non-participants in our western culture) cannot understand the meanings of the symbols which those embedded in the culture share.
2. “My third grade teacher taught me that the problem $2 + 2 = ?$ is answered by the number 4.” Pretty good. Actually, you might have said more fully, “My third grade teacher taught me that the problem $2 + 2 = ?$ is answered by the number 4, and I believed her, and I conduct my life based on this belief. Whenever I have to add 2 and 2, I habitually write the number 4. And if I have two one-dollar bills in my purse and I find two other one-dollar bills in my coat pocket, and I collect them all together in my purse, I know that I have four dollars to spend.”

We might call this the *belief* response. In the third grade, you accepted from your trusted teacher the truth of the statement $2 + 2 = 4$. You did not say that you understood the meaning of the numbers 2 and 4 yourself. In fact, that is not necessary. It was not necessary for you ever to reflect on the meanings of these symbols. It was only necessary for you to memorize this “math fact” in order to score well on your third-grade tests and to win your teacher’s approval. Moreover, this belief has sustained you well throughout your life. Your life-experience has validated for you the believability of your third-grade teacher’s instruction of you. And so, you could own the slogan: My third-grade teacher said it. I believe it. That’s all there is to it.

From this, we can define *belief* as “accepting a statement as true solely on the authority of a teacher whom you trust.” More generally, we can define *belief* as **“accepting a statement as true solely on the trustworthiness of its source.”** Here we’ve broadened the definition so that it includes not only human teachers, but also logical or authoritative arguments in which the believer can find no fault. (“Logical arguments” here means assertions which in themselves cannot be shown to be flawed, and which are arranged according to the accepted rules of logical presentation in the culture. “Authoritative arguments” here means assertions based in or inferred from the assertions of a mutually respected source, such as a U.S. Supreme Court ruling or the inspired words of the scriptures held by the disputants to be sacred.)

3. “When I hook two fingers of my left hand onto two fingers of my right hand, I’ve shown that $2 + 2 = 4$. Two fingers join with two other fingers and become an individual group of 4 fingers.” We might call this the *experiential* response. In order to learn the real meaning of the statement $2 + 2 = 4$, you have somehow found a way to *realize* the meaning—that is, to “make it real” to yourself. Since you have personally experienced the meaning of the statement $2 + 2 = 4$, you can claim that you individually *know* the truth of the statement $2 + 2 = 4$. You have internalized the meaning. It is yours, now and forever, and no one can take it from you.

Moreover, whenever anyone says in a knowing way, “Two plus two equals four,” you realize that you’ve found a companion, a fellow-knower of the meaning of this statement. You hear in your companion’s words the echo of the truth you have experienced for yourself.

What can we conclude from this response? Here’s what I see: One has knowledge of the truth only when one *experiences* that truth for himself. Experiencing is the only

way to obtain knowledge of the truth because the truth has been made real to the person experiencing it. And such a person will cling to that truth for life. No one can take that truth from him, nor can he be convinced that the truth he knows from his own experience is not true.

In addition, since the knowledge of truth derives from personal experience, the knower's vivid, perhaps, startling realization of the truth is deeply personal, beyond the realm of interpersonal communication. That is, the truth which one has experienced can never be communicated by the knower to another person. Each person must individually undergo the vivid realization of the truth for themselves. This is true of every person—of those classified “sane” or “normal” or “alert and oriented,” as well as of those classified “crazy” or “on another planet” or “demented.” Each person has his or her own unique set of realized truths. These are a person's deepest possessions, what they hold to be meaningful, what they build memories around, what they try to communicate symbolically (in words or gestures or by example) to others around them whom they care for and who they see desire to teach the truth, as they have found it.

And so, the fact that a knower of the truth cannot directly communicate to another their own understanding of the truth does not stop the knower from attempting to portray, or to “point to,” the truth that they know by constructing symbolic representations of that truth, or even by constructing exercises or disciplines which are intended to help the students prepare to experience the truth for themselves. These statements and disciplines which the knower constructs we might call *truth representations*. These statements cannot themselves be understood as the truth, since the truth they point to is an un-representable personal experience. Rather, they are attempts to symbolize, as well as the knower can, and thus to suggest to the hearer, the truth which is being represented.

From this discussion, then, we might draw the following conclusion. There are two ways in which truth is transmitted to a student of the truth. The first way is by the *way of belief*. The student accepts the truth as it is represented in its symbolic formulation as made by the student's teachers. These teachers always include all students' informal teacher—their culture, with all its sayings and observances and customs and myths and unexpressed, unrealized meanings and expectations. And the students' set of teachers may also include parents, formal instructors, mentors, gurus, priests, and other authorities.

The *way of belief* means that the students accept as true the symbolic representations of the truth which these authorities provide to the students and which the students welcome into their minds on the authority of their teachers, without reflecting very deeply on the meaning of what they have learned. In the way of belief, authority outranks understanding. The students may, as some point, develop their own individual opinions about the truths which they had accepted as credal. But they are always ready to become more deeply informed and to yield to authority in their interpretations of the truth.

Thus, just as school students memorize “math facts,” neophyte believers commit creeds to heart and learn prayers which express the teachings of their religion, and junior salespeople learn “the ropes” of their businesses from their superiors. The students rarely ask why a truth is true and rarely question the validity of the acquired truths. Rather, they are satisfied that they see themselves growing better at math, or deepening their faith, or making more sales, as they apply without question the beliefs they have learned.

The students value the beliefs they have acquired for the functionality of these beliefs. They say, “I believe it because it helps me to pass my math tests,” and “I believe it

because it makes me more acceptable to God,” and “I believe it because it helps me to make more sales.”

Never mind that they do not know the meaning of what they believe, or indeed whether what they believe has any meaning at all. I remember from sixty-plus years ago a Sunday sermon during an old, Latin, look-at-the-back-of-the-priest mass. Aging Monsignor O’Hern told a joke from the pulpit that made the people laugh—in church! I was scandalized as a second-grader. The joke went something like this: A little girl came home from eating dinner at a friend’s house and asked her mother why her meatloaves were so short and stubby and high. Her mother said, “Because that’s the way my mother taught me to do it.” So the little girl went to her grandmother and asked the same question. Her grandmother made the same reply. So, when they visited great-grandma in the old folks’ home, the little girl asked her great-grandma the same question. “Oh, my Dear!” said her great-grandma with affection. “There’s no secret to it. It was the war, and all I had was a short, stubby baking dish!”

I’m amazed that after more than sixty years the memory of that joke arose in my mind for the first time, just as I am writing this essay. And it’s right to the point. Both the girl’s mom and her grandma made their meatloaves in the way that they had learned from their mothers, without knowing why their meatloaves were made so short and stubby. They made them according to that design simply because they learned from a respected teacher—their mother—that that’s the way it is done. – **That** is an example of the *way of belief*. – The punch line comes when great-grandma finally reveals that she began to make her meatloaves in that style out of necessity at the time. By the third generation, there was no need to continue to shape the meatloaves in that form. Bigger baking dishes had been available since the end of the war.

In general, then, we can say that in a time which has passed, there was a reason for believing what our culture believed in the old days. Now, perhaps, that reason has disappeared, and so our culture could be open to changing to something better. But we become enslaved to our old heritage, never questioning it, just continuing it and passing it down to the next generation.

In ordinary life, the process of hardening one's heart around, and shoring up, a fixed belief is called *calcification*, and it is called *bigotry*. In the Catholic Church (and surely in other denominations and religions), it is called *The Faith*, and it is called *orthodoxy*. And as I discuss in the book, *The Only Christian Century* (found also on this website), there is quite a valuable reason for defending this orthodoxy, to the exclusion of truth.

The second way in which truth is transmitted is by the *way of realization*, that is, by being guided to *personally experiencing* it. That is, the knower/teacher creates a symbolic representation which suggests the goal of the student's inquiry. The teacher may also create a formal discipline of exercises by which the students become ready and open to experiencing the truth. This process is a process of "pointing toward" and of encouraging. It is not direct transmission of what is known, because the truth that the master knows is experiential and can only be recognized after it has been experienced. But at some point, some or all of the students will, by accepting their master's advice, experience for themselves the truth which their master also knows and toward which he has been pointing them.

This is, in effect, what a good teacher of graduate students does. The teacher sets out for the students a way by which they might come to understand for themselves the nature of the subject they are studying. This understanding must come as a personal

realization for each student. The teacher's job is to try to symbolize the understanding in a way which is clear enough that it draws the student into the experience of understanding. Some of the students "get it," and their personal understanding of the subject leads to increasingly more profound understanding. Other students try to understand the subject by learning *about* it. Without realizing it, they have missed the point entirely. They don't get to co-sign published papers along with their teacher, nor do they get the glowing job or fellowship recommendations which the teacher writes for the students who do "get it."

And surely enough, if the departmental appointments committees of the universities are doing their jobs, only those students who genuinely understand their subjects will become teachers of the next generation of graduate students. Thus is the experience of the truth passed on from one generation to the next.

[I might also add from personal experience that the way of *learning about* has to suffice for inept college students of statistics and calculus, among whom I have been included. For to us, the way of *understanding* is the way into a cognitive morass. I finally *realized* what a standard deviation was as I was climbing a set of stairs in the college I taught in, thinking about something else, years after I had taken the statistics course!]

The main point, then, is this. The fabricated representations of truth (which may correctly be called "myths") which a culture or a religion or a teacher or a CEO or a government offers its adherents are of no meaning or value in themselves. They are only valuable as guides, signposts, guard-rails, and so on, as seekers-after-truth stumble along on their unique journeys to discover for themselves the experience of the truth which the myths represent. As long as the culture or religion uses its mythic structures for the purpose of leading its people to realize experientially the truths it teaches, the myths are of

value. But when the myths themselves become the object of instruction—when the myths exist for themselves—and the culture or religion ceases to lead the people to realization, but rather, pronounces the myths to be valuable in themselves and to be accepted without question, and the leaders cause the people to swear allegiance to the myths rather than to their meaning, truth dies and with it, freedom and individual self-respect and then human kindness and then social peace.

For example, we Americans claim that we value freedom and that “we are free.” But how can “freedom” be anything more meaningful than a slogan when candidates for major office are selected and presented to voters through the two-party system by unknown persons of wealth and power, and when the people cannot “call forth” leaders of their own choice to govern them? The selection or approval of candidates by the wealthy and powerful shackles the freedoms of the common people since the common people are not permitted to call forth the candidates which they might otherwise have chosen.

The initial selection process, having been done secretly by the wealthy and powerful, makes elections simply a gambling match between two sides. The winner of an election is the one whose financial supporters and promoters and strategists have been most successful. But that person may not have been the first choice of the people. (Witness H. Clinton vs. D. Trump. Trump won the election as President of the United States in 2016 because he won the majority of Electoral College votes, although Clinton had won three million more votes of the people than Trump.) In such ways as this, the Truth of democratic government is co-opted and overwhelmed by the Power of the rich and influential. The actual “grass-roots” voice of the people (John Paul II’s *subsidiarity*) falls into useless silence. Freedom withers. The winners win elections, and the people who vote for them believe they have demonstrated that they live in a democracy. But true democratic electoral freedom has died to them, even without their knowledge and consent.

It is similar with the Roman Catholic Church's method of choosing bishops, who are the sources of orthodox teaching and of orderly conduct in the local areas (dioceses) into which the Church leaders in Rome divide the nations and territories in which Catholics reside. Bishops, even of dioceses thousands of miles from the Vatican in both physical distance and cultural differences, are selected by the wealthy and powerful Church leaders in the "capital" of the worldwide Roman Catholic Church—Vatican City. The world leaders have taken to themselves the authority to appoint all bishops, regardless of the desires of the local people whom the bishop will govern. The principle of subsidiarity (grass-roots participation in the making of decisions that affect the local people), highly touted by Pope John Paul II in important teaching documents, is routinely ignored by the very church whose leader proclaimed the principle.

In each case, the common people believe the fabrication, the myth, that the leaders present them with, and accept what transpires as the right way. In voting, Americans are participating in a charade of planet-wide importance, but a charade nonetheless. Although we leave the polling places thinking that by voting, we have done our part to preserve our freedom, the simple truth is that few or none of the candidates which we have been given to vote for may be palatable to us. We often vote for the lesser-of-two-evils, believing that in doing so, we are protecting our freedom.

Similarly, Catholics yielded their ancient right to choose their own bishop from among the people in their local area early in Church history, surrendering that right to the leaders in the Vatican, who use their appointment power to guarantee that local bishops are "followers of the Tradition" (read, "orthodox, and obedient to the Pope").

In both cases, the wolf of power politics clothes itself for the common people in the sheepskin of the accepted mythology. And the fabrications themselves are empty, whether

it be “We are Americans and we are free!” or “We are Roman Catholics, and we are obedient to the Divinely-appointed representatives of Jesus Christ on earth.”

Meanwhile, no one ever asks why we wait to see who the candidates are from whom we will choose our leader. No one asks why we can’t nominate candidates locally for national office, even without the approval of “the parties.” (Sure, we can. But they’ll never be elected, because the approved candidates will have financial resources at their disposal that will be used to crush the independent candidates. Money and power always get the upper hand.)

Likewise, no one ever asks why the local Roman Catholics cannot call forth their own bishops. They simply accept that that’s the way it is done—like mother’s meatloaves.

Often, we defend our fabrications and myths by showing that their predictions are verifiable, that is, reproducible, or that “they work.” This is the “defense from technological outcome.” What this defense amounts to is this: If you can get your parrot to say, “I want a cracker,” you have demonstrated that it actually understands what the word “I” means. In other words, the fact that a system of symbols predicts a certain outcome is offered as proof that the system “is true,” that it has real, verifiable meaning. But that is a baseless conclusion. Just as coincidence (two events happening simultaneously) does not demonstrate causality (that one event “made” the second event occur), so it is that if a scientific model successfully predicts an event, we cannot assume that the factors which the model says are responsible for bringing about the event are truly the causative factors.

It *is* the case that verifiability has its place in scientific research. The verifiability test eliminates prank or deceitful experimental findings, such as it did some years ago with the “cold-fusion” fiasco.

But verifiability does not by itself demonstrate that a model is meaningful or explanatory. Verifiability can only ferret out the mistaken and the liars. There is in fact no way to demonstrate conclusively that the results which a model predicts are actually brought about by the factors which the model identifies.

In fact, (which means, “In my opinion,”) there is no way to verify absolutely the truth of any intellectual construct of any sort, from scientific “laws” to haiku poems. What all the books, poems, mathematical formulae, stories, indeed, everything ever *thought* by any human being, essentially mean, if they mean anything at all, cannot be conclusively demonstrated. Every thought is an interpretation. Every interpretation is simply a mental construct made entirely of thoughts, not Truth. The Truth lies beyond, in the Silence. In the world of words, every interpretation is essentially a guess. This is inevitable, because it is words themselves which are the hollow deceivers.

What Is never changes. It is always itself. The explanations of *What Is* pile upon one another like the dead and buried cities in the Middle East, like ancient Jerusalem and ancient Jericho.

[I don’t mean that you or I should stop thinking. It’s fun. And it’s good mental exercise—prevents dementia, they say, though they speak in fancier terms, like “scientific studies report. . . “]

Consider these two models of human disease, as demonstrative of the significant intellectual progress our culture has made. The first is an ancient model, a myth, in which

disease was thought to be the result of the adherence of a demon to a human being. Here are verses 8 and 9 from the Jewish Psalm 41, in the Globe translation used in the Catholic *Liturgy of the Hours*:

My enemies whisper together against me.
They all weigh up the evil which is on me:
“Some deadly thing has fastened upon him,
he will not rise again from where he lies.”

These enemies don't know what the deadly thing is, but they do know it will kill him.

Now consider the same man lying in a modern hospital bed, surrounded by such false friends as the Psalm describes. The afflicted man says to them, “The doc says I have a primary glioblastoma in my brain, and that I have less than a year to live.” Wow! A primary glioblastoma! “That's a killer,” his so-called friends think. “He'll be dead in a few months for sure.” And they're right. Read some literature on primary glioblastomas. They're tenacious, highly aggressive, and incurable. Researchers know the cell types involved in the tumor, the availability of nutrients for it, even the chromosomal set-up of a person with the affliction. That's impressive.

In both cases, however, the guy ends up dead pretty quickly. No one can do anything about it. In the old days, they didn't know what the cause of his death was, so they called it a demon. Modern science has gone far beyond that. We've given the demon a fancy name, and we've found out—perhaps—how he gets the job done.

All words. It's still the nurses and the aides who make the patient as comfortable as they can while he dies. God bless them.

We conclude, then, that cultural fabrications are unrelated to the Truth of Reality. They are useful lenses through which we can understand the reality in which we are experientially immersed. But that is all they are. They are not Truth; they are aids to satisfying our need to understand “what’s happening.”

If any myth or fabrication or explanation were indeed true, it would withstand every scrutiny and endure unchanged through the ages. But consider that every explanation or theory or fabrication is eventually replaced, usually by a new fabrication invented by “outside the box” thinkers, like Copernicus and Galileo.

And so, in the final analysis, we must admit that our models and myths give us much comfort but no meaning.

If we know what they are saying, these myths give us the security of certitude and of predictability. They give order and context to what happens around us and to what happens to us. And we are so much in need of these life-stabilizers that we are willing to pay a very high price for them. The price is “actual meaninglessness.”

And there’s power in fabricated knowledge, as well. If you can convince someone that you have the knowledge that they need and don’t have, you have the power of expertise over that person. They will find comfort in your words, even pay you money for your explanations, whether you’re telling them truth or just making it up as you go along—whether you’re their auto mechanic, or their surgeon, or their president, or their pope.

