

BLOWING SUNSHINE #2: TRANSFORMING INCONVENIENT TRUTHS INTO CONVENIENT TRUTHS

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Often it does seem a pity that Noah and his party did not miss the boat.

Mark Twain

A comedian has a hard time making a living when Congress is in session.

Will Rogers

So many opportunities exist to “blow sunshine” these days, that I could not resist another try.

1. The inconvenient truth is that the US Congress is pushing new legislation that could, if passed, eliminate the ability of California and other US states to ban or strictly limit the use of pesticides and toxic industrial chemicals that can jeopardize human health (Coile 2006). The convenient truth is that it will make the United States more egalitarian – all citizens will share the same health risks. How much more democratic can it get?

2. The inconvenient truth is that Governor Ernie Fletcher, US State of Kentucky, uses a Lincoln town car, driven by a state trooper, to go to and from his government office across the street from his residence. The governor, a physician by training, has been urging his constituents to walk for their health (Associated Press 2006). In my home state of Virginia, and in West Virginia, the governors walk the short distance from residence to office daily. However, Governor Chris Gregoire (Washington), Governor Rick Perry (Texas), and Governor Harley Barbour (Mississippi) routinely ride to work from their homes next door. Security is the reason given for avoiding a walk across the street; however, walking across the street could give the non-walking governors some sense of the risks that American service people face in Iraq. The governors might even be given token hazardous duty pay for walking across the street, which would save taxpayers money, release the state trooper or other driver for other duties, and even make a tiny reduction in greenhouse gas emission. The convenient truth is that most citizens walk to their offices if they are near their residence.

3. The inconvenient truth is that “Deliberate obsolescence in all its forms – technological, psychological, or planned – is a uniquely American invention. Not only did we invent disposable products, ranging from diapers to cameras to contact lenses, but we invented the very concept of disposability itself” (Giles Slade, author of *Made to Break* as quoted by Grossman 2006). However, even proponents of planned obsolescence (i.e., throwing things away) are beginning to be concerned that humankind is running out of “away.” Perhaps the era of the “throwing” culture is ending. The convenient truth is that people are beginning to realize this is not a sustainable lifestyle and are slowly moving toward a sustainable lifestyle.

4. Cigarette smokers rejoice! Smoking is not bad for human health (or at least not as bad as everyone states). For example, smoking need not damage fertility (Goodchild and Hodgson 2006). In fact, some World War II era movies depict every alluring female and virile male star smoking cigarettes. Since they were rarely married, too much fertility was doubtless a major concern. So, ignore those health nuts and light up, folks!

5. People living near proposed nuclear plants and wind farms in Britain will lose their rights to question the necessity of these developments or their own general safety (Henderson and Smith 2006). Get with it folks, democracy is just too indecisive and time consuming! Power to the people (nuclear power, that is)!

6. Theoretical physicist Stephen Hawking asked: "In a world that is in chaos politically, socially, and environmentally, how can the human race survive the next hundred years?" (Sample 2006). The inconvenient truth is (as Professor Hawking hinted in his seminar in Hong Kong recently) to leave Earth and occupy another planet. The convenient truth for the 30+ million other species with which humans share the planet is: "hey, we don't have to put up with these humans much longer; then we can get to work restoring our planet."

7. The 178-nation "Happy Planet Index" confirms that people can live long, happy lives without consuming large amounts of Earth's resources (BBC News 2006). The index, developed by the New Economics Foundation, is based on consumption levels, life expectancy, and happiness rather than national economic wealth measurements such as GDP. The inconvenient truth is that, among the world's largest economies, Germany is ranked 81st, Japan 95th, and the United States 150th (out of 178). Despite many material possessions, the United States ranks low in the happiness index. The convenient truth is that one need not "shop until you drop," especially if material possessions do not ensure happiness but do impoverish future generations. The highest ranked country (Vanuatu) has far fewer material possessions than the United States.

8. The inconvenient truth is that "spin doctors" are altering the interpretation of scientific evidence that offends special interest groups. The "pocketbook nerve" is the most sensitive in the human body (my undergraduate advisor Professor Robert Enders of Swarthmore College used to say). These tactics are used to imply that a statement is absurd without actually stating that it is untrue. In the United States, many people use "spin" as a pejorative term, indicating a heavily biased viewpoint. All too often, the spin doctor's professional credentials do not accompany the statements. The credentials, if any, can easily be found, however, through any Internet search engine for scholars. People point out to me articles in magazines and newspapers that have contrary viewpoints to mine. My usual answer is to ask about the evidence for the contrary viewpoint and about the author's scientific credentials. Gullible humans may fall for spin, but the convenient truth is that it has no impact on natural laws.

9. The inconvenient truth is that the scenic Eiger Mountain in Switzerland is crumbling because the Grindelwald Glacier, which used to support the rockface, is melting (Swinford 2006, Bott 2006). The convenient truth is that the Swiss are flocking to the area while they can still view this disappearing national treasure – thus, boosting the local economy.

10. The inconvenient truth is that the world is experiencing a major demographic shift as populations of many countries age. In 2020, about one-third of Shanghai China's present 13.6 million will consist of people over the age of 59 – a profound demographic shift (French 2006). In China, this change will result in a shortage of cheap labor and emerging problems, such as health care, that are associated with a large group of elderly citizens. Most mammalian species do not have such

problems because starvation, disease, and predators eliminate any aging population. However, at age 83, this “solution” lacks appeal, even though the process is part of nature’s laws, which humankind proclaims as part of the interdependent web of life. Another solution would be to cease using the cheap labor that results from exponential population growth for the purpose of making more “stuff” (material goods). With a 24% ecological overshoot, Earth cannot afford to have natural resources used at a rate far greater than the replacement rate. The convenient truth is that the time saved by not “shopping until you drop” can be used to watch sunsets and even talk to other people.

11. A major issue at stake in the United States and elsewhere is whether policy decisions should be based on evidence or on ideology (Editorial 2006). For example, National Aeronautics and Space Administration scientist James Hansen stated: “In my more than three decades in government, I have never seen anything approaching the degree to which information flow from scientists to the public has been screened and controlled as it is now” (Editorial 2006). The inconvenient truth is that governments and corporate funded “think tanks” are distorting scientific evidence and denigrating the scientists who published the evidence in peer-reviewed professional journals. The convenient truth is that scientists are speaking up about this tragic situation and, perhaps, the public will respond.

12. The inconvenient truth is that women outnumber men by a substantial margin in most US colleges and universities. The convenient truth is that, in a type of reverse affirmative action, small colleges and universities are establishing football teams to increase male enrollment, and the plan is working (Pennington 2006). Since this new gender divide will have females in laboratories and males on the football fields, the plan may also help stabilize the human population.

13. The inconvenient truth is that Britain’s frogs and toads face the threat of extinction (Roberts 2006). What effect will this situation have on all the children’s books produced in Britain? Mr. Toad – never heard of him. The convenient truth is that this extinction provides a dazzling array of opportunities for writers of children’s books. Writers can use species with which today’s children are acquainted – Mrs. Cockroach, Mr. Housefly, Childe Ant, etc.

14. The inconvenient truth is that scientists testing the deep geologic disposal of the greenhouse gas carbon dioxide find that, although it seems to be staying where it is put, it is chewing up minerals (Kerr 2006). However, carbon dioxide might possibly reach an overlying aquifer. The possible convenient truth would be carbonated well water.

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