

The Naked Emperor
Exposing Some Lies that are Taken as Truth
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By
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Everyone knows Hans Christian Anderson's timeless fairytale, *The Emperor's New Clothes*, about a conceited Emperor... I mean... Emperor, who doesn't care about anything but looking good. His vanity enables a couple of con men, promising to make his wardrobe great again, to sell him a suit of clothes they say are so amazing only an idiot wouldn't recognize it. The Emperor can't see anything, but, not wishing to look like an idiot, pretends to see the clothes and to put them on. He then parades down the streets completely naked. Nobody else wants to look idiotic either, so they all go along, pretending to ogle and awe, and boast about how fine and magnificent his new clothes look. Eventually, however, an innocent child, shouts, "The Emperor has no clothes!" The Emperor hears and realizes the kid is right, but doesn't want to appear even more idiotic than he already does, so he marches on, pretending he's the best suited Emperor ever.

This is my own summary of the tale and I'm probably overusing the word, *idiot*, which today is a grave insult. At the time Anderson first told this story nearly two centuries ago, however, the term simply referred to those considered unfit for office. It comes from a Latin word, *idiotia*, meaning something like, "lay person," or, "unskilled." An idiot in Anderson's time was someone who didn't have the credentials to hold their respective office, and since his tale is about a fabric only those suited for their positions can see, I'm taking the liberty of saying what I often only think, *idiot*.

Anderson's tale is timeless, but does seem especially poignant for today. In case you missed it, earlier this week Senate Majority Leader, Mitch McConnell came closer than ever to admitting his boss isn't suited for office. "Our new president," he said, "has not been in this line of work before." McConnell was responding to Trump's recent tweets saying he's disappointed the Senator hasn't repealed Obamacare. But it was the rest of what McConnell said that made me chuckle, just to keep from raging. "I think he had excessive expectations about how quickly things happen in the democratic process."

The *democratic process*! Is he kidding! This from the man who once said his job was to insure the democratically elected President of the United States, Barack Obama, didn't succeed, the man who refused to hold confirmations hearings for the Supreme Court nominee of the democratically elected President of the United States for over a year, the man who changed the democratically instituted Senate rules overnight, with the so-called nuclear option, so the GOP could then anoint their own nominee once they took control of the White House! Yet he criticizes someone else for not understanding how the democratic process works? Might I be the first in the crowd to shout, "The Senator has no clothes!"

But this isn't about the unfit Emperor, or even the child brave enough or naïve enough to tell the truth. It's about everyone else, the crowd going along with the crowd, those caught up in

the processional, in the processes, and systems, and beliefs they keep pretending are right even though, deep down, they know they are lies. Like the Emperor who knows the child is right but is too proud to admit he's not suited for his office because, in this case, he's not suited for anything at all—he's naked. His beliefs aren't based on empirical evidence but on pure imagination. His ideas aren't tied to sound premises, they're based on invisible threads tied to nothing factual. But the issue, again, isn't the naked Emperor, it's everyone who decides to go along with him, to keep pretending his lies are true even though they are entirely without substance.

Take the Global Warming crisis that is upon us. Again, I choose my words carefully, so I don't call it a *threat*, but a *crisis*, because all the things climatologists began warning us years ago were going to happen—rising temperatures, melting glaciers, severe droughts, famines, fires, mega-storms, higher sea levels—are happening. I'm also one of the few people who still mostly says *Global Warming* instead of *climate change*. Here's why; like many of you, I've been worried about the issue for decades, and have been preaching about it since I started preaching again in the 90s, back when the national media refused to even acknowledge it. Things were clearly warming up back then, and the glaciers were vanishing, but the most we'd hear is a happy forecaster say, "It's going to be another nice sunny day with temperatures well above average for this time of year." It wasn't until 2001 that I was astonished to see a *Time* magazine cover entitled, "Global Warming," showing a picture of an egg frying in a skillet, its yoke resembling the planet Earth. A short time later, *Newsweek* did something similar, but these were just token articles, as it would still be a few years before the media finally bucked the status quo and began regularly talking about it.

Also keep in mind that in 2000, when Al Gore was running for President, "Owl Man," as he'd been labeled by George Bush Sr., was widely lampooned for his belief in Global Warming. His conservative opponents called it a hoax and promoted the lie that scientists were largely divided on the subject. Just four years later, however, things had already grown so much worse that even George W. had to admit it was happening, or risk looking like Naked Emperor. So, his party tweaked the same lie, arguing, instead, that it's all part of a natural cycle and scientists disagree about its cause. Meanwhile, those still clinging to the impossible, "it's a hoax" fabrication, love to scoff every time it snows or rains. Back in 2010, for example, when a nationwide blizzard deemed, *Snowmageddon*, paralyzed much of the Northeast with record snowfall, Mitch McConnell looked out his D.C. office and asked, "Where's Al Gore now?"¹ and Senator Jim DeMint said, "It's going to keep snowing in DC until Al Gore cries 'uncle.'"² I'm not sure where Al Gore was at the time, but I do hope he was someplace warm enjoying his Grammy, his Oscar, and his Nobel Peace Prize. By the way, at the very same time McConnell and DeMint were making their quips, snow had to be trucked into Vancouver for the Winter Olympics.

¹ http://nymag.com/daily/intelligencer/2010/02/its_snowing_today_therefore_cl.html

² <http://www.nbcwashington.com/news/politics/Itll-Keep-Snowing-in-DC-Until-Al-Gore-Cries-Uncle-Sen-DeMint-84014232.html>

Nevertheless, a lot of us goodhearted liberals felt responsible for what we considered a genuine misunderstanding. “We never should have used the term Global Warming,” we said, “we should start saying, ‘Climate Change’ instead.” This term, some thought, would help explain excessive snow and rain even though the world is really warming up and drying up? My immediate reaction, however, was to ask *why*? Firstly, the problem *is* Global Warming. That’s what we’re talking about! Climate Change, with its freak blizzards and mega-rain storms, is the consequent of Global Warming, not the other way around. So why should we dumb down our language and waste valuable time, energy, and resources creating and promoting a new campaign for people intent on watching a naked Emperor proceed through the streets, pretending he’s well suited for the position? Why change our language for those who aren’t going to deal with the reality no matter what we call it, when what we need to be doing is dealing with the reality?

So that’s why I still call it Global Warming, because I’m not willing to go along with the crowd and seriously talk about the naked Emperor’s imaginary clothes. And that’s the point of the story, that everyone knows the Emperor has no clothes but nobody wants to look foolish by admitting it, so they just keep up the lie. The ridiculous claim that snow anywhere proves Global Warming is a hoax, even against all the empirical evidence and scientific agreement proving it’s not, can’t be taken any more seriously than Anderson’s fairytale characters pretending to see something they don’t. Yet how easy it is to get caught up in the story even when we know it isn’t true, and to continue using language that upholds the lie. So, I work hard not to get caught up in the narratives the perpetuate our collective delusions.

Today the loudest kid shouting, “The Emperor has no clothes,” might just be Attorney Bryan Stevenson, author of the bestseller, *Just Mercy*, and founder of the Equal Justice Initiative. Everywhere he speaks, Stevenson talks about the crucial importance of being honest by changing our misleading narratives; to stop talking about children as super-predators as an excuse to lock them up with adult criminals who immediately begin abusing them, and start talking about them as our kids again; to stop talking about drug addiction as a criminal matter, and start talking about it as a public health issue; to stop talking about making America great again, and start talking about it as a “post-genocidal nation” built on the eradication of millions of native peoples through famine, war, and disease; to stop talking about Blacks with a “presumption of dangerousness and guilt,”³ and start talking about them as a people who have been systematically victimized and terrorized throughout a brutal history of slavery, segregation, Jim Crow, lynching, police brutality, the era of mass incarceration, the racist Drug War, disenfranchisement, voter suppression, and poverty, all founded upon the lie that being white means being superior to everyone else.

Certainly, there have been some real gains since the Civil Rights Act was passed in 1964, including the election of our nation’s first African American President just a decade ago. Overcoming such momentous barriers, however, lead many white people to believe the significance of race has declined in the U.S., when what has mostly changed is the language we use about it. Except for those once cloistered white supremacists who, as we saw again just yesterday in Charlottesville, have recently been emboldened by Trump’s election and

³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jzPUmQfo3B8>

racist rhetoric, most whites no longer use overtly racist language, nor even hold overtly racist thoughts. Yet, when it comes to racialized outcomes, these gentler sentiments have translated into few real changes in our society. Sociologist, Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, another whistleblower who doesn't mind shouting, "the Emperor has no clothes," contends that, "since the 1960s a new racial structure—the *new racism* for short—has emerged that accounts for the persistence of racial inequality."⁴

In the new racism, racist discourse is covert, racist politics are covert, racist systems are covert, Jim Crow laws are covert, and the myth of reverse racism against whites has emerged. But since the 1960s the practical reality is that little has changed. "Today," Bonilla-Silva says, "blacks are more segregated than any other racial or ethnic group."⁵ The segregation of blacks in American neighborhoods, for instance, is 70 percent in the South, and 80 percent in the North.⁶ They are still denied available housing 35 to 75 percent of the time,⁷ are denied home loans twice as often as whites, and are systematically directed to black neighborhoods.⁸ In education, schools with high percentages of black students, are in insufficient buildings, are overcrowded, don't have enough textbooks or supplies, lack equipment and technology, and pay their teachers and staff less than other schools do.⁹ When it comes to higher education, far fewer black students attend or complete college, and, according to FBI statistics, "campuses are the third most common venue for hate crimes."¹⁰ African Americans have made significant gains in politics since the 1960s, including currently 46 members of congress and 3 senators, although, so far, it hasn't translated into meaningful changes in our schools, neighborhoods, or streets. Since the rise of the New Jim Crow in the 1970s, meaning the Drug War and era of mass incarceration, when, as Bonilla-Silva says, "the police became the primary agent of social control of blacks,"¹¹ half of those killed by on duty police officers are black, as are half of those lawfully imprisoned, and lawfully executed, though they represent only about 12 percent of the general population. I don't need to continue. You get the point. No matter how much our society has deracialized its language, our systemic racist structures remain in place. So, when it comes to racism, we can ggle and awe about all the progress that's been made, but the Emperor still has no clothes.

These are just two examples of what I'm trying to get at today; that it's not enough to shift our language a little to accommodate the same old lies. It's not enough to say, "climate change," instead of "Global Warming," or to rid ourselves of racist ideas and language if we don't also end our racist social structures and systems. This is what Dr. King was getting at when he said, "It may be true that the law cannot change the heart, but it can restrain the heartless." He wasn't involved in the Civil Rights movement to change racist minds, but to

⁴ Bonilla-Silva, Eduardo, *White Supremacy & Racism in the Post-Civil Rights Era*, Lynne Rienner Publisher, Boulder, CO, 2001, p. 90.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 94.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 95.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 96.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 97.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 98.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 106.

change racist systems. He wasn't trying to control what racists say, but to protect others from what racists do. This is why, today, I'm so troubled by the culture of political correctness coming from my own peeps on the left, because PC has no clothes. It promotes a culture of saying the right things, when what we need is a culture of doing the right things; when what we need is to establish new social structures and systems that allow others to hold racist opinions, even to express them if they must, but never to act upon them.

There are other imperial parades in our streets today too. The latest is based on the myth of the "good old days." Nostalgia, I'm afraid, paints a far better past than ever existed. Some want to make America great again, but when was it ever great to begin with? During the worst holocaust ever, leading to the genocide of 20 million indigenous people? During the 250 years of slavery, or the following century of segregation, Jim Crow, and racial terrorism? Was it during the period of hate and exploitation of immigrants, Chinese immigrants, Irish immigrants, Italian immigrants, Latino immigrants, and so on? Was it during the Japanese internment camps? During women's suffrage? During the great Depression? During the McCarthy era? Vietnam? The Cold War? Trickle-down-economics? The Drug War? During the concentration of wealth into the hands of few? When were the good old days? When was America great? The Emperor has no clothes.

Today the Emperor parades down our streets chanting, "Obamacare is a disaster." But the Emperor has no clothes. The Affordable Healthcare Act may not be perfect, mostly because its opponents have prevented it from being better, but it has still enabled millions who were once without it, to now have healthcare, and if it goes away, millions will lose it again.

Today the Emperor parades down our streets chanting, "Protecting the environment destroys jobs." But the Emperor has no clothes. Whether it's the mechanization of coal extraction that's made thousands of coal mining jobs obsolete, and ruined local communities and businesses by cutting the tops of their mountains; or destroying the natural environments of communities that once created hundreds of thousands of tourism related jobs, it has always been environmental degradation that costs jobs, and that shifts the expense of corporate irresponsibility onto the backs of those taxpayers lucky enough to have jobs. Today, as China and India are taking the lead on innovative green technology, and will benefit most from the emerging green economy, U.S. protectionism is vowing to prop up the dirty, carbon based economy for as long as possible, working against innovation, and against the booming green job market, all based on a lie that has never been true. The Emperor has no clothes.

Today the Emperor parades down our streets chanting, "The Government is the problem." But the Emperor has no clothes. Those chanting along with him, ogling and awing over his spectacle, say government is the problem when it comes to regulating industries that endanger us all and force taxpayers to pay the price of their irresponsibility; but when it comes to genuine freedom, to who you choose to love, or where you use the restroom, or what you smoke, or whether or not you can vote, or keep your drinking water safe, or what you can protest, or whether or not Florida has the right to recount its votes, then they are all about Big Government. The Emperor has no clothes.

Today the Emperor marches down our streets pompously chanting, “the sanctity of life,” but the Emperor has no clothes. For it’s one thing to grandstand about the unborn, but when these same voices are silent in the wake of war, and capital punishment, and the daily deaths of hundreds around the world because of our nation’s military actions, or the deaths of thousands because of floods and famines related to Global Warming, the Emperor simply has not clothes.

Today the Emperor parades down our streets chanting, “Ours is a Christian Nation.” But the Emperor has no clothes, unless being a Christian Nation means exploiting others, taking as much for yourself as possible, waging war, and demonizing those we disagree with. But if Christianity is about loving our neighbors, forgiving our enemies, welcoming strangers, caring for the poor, feeding the hungry, educating children, including the outcasts, freeing the captives, and healing the sick, then ours is most certainly not, nor ever has been, a Christian nation. The Emperor has no clothes.

These are just some of the lies we get caught up in. I’m sure there are others I’m so caught up in I don’t notice them myself. But the point here is that sometimes we make the mistake of joining the crowd by having serious conversations about such lies, when what the crowd really needs is for a prophetic voice that shouts, “the Emperor has no clothes.” The solution to problems like these, to Global Warming, racism, income inequality, war, and healthcare, aren’t rhetorical. It’s more than just changing our language. It’s more than learning the politically correct way of speaking, unless, as Stevenson says, we’re brave enough to change the entire narrative, to admit the stories we’ve been telling ourselves are complete fabrications, and that we all know the Emperor is really naked, that there’s no substance there, no facts supporting our collective delusions.

Talk is cheap. Saying the right things is easy. Having the right frames, the right faith makes us feel justified in what we say. But faith without works is still dead. Real change, real transformation, a genuine end to racism in our nation, stopping Global Warming, building an economy that works for everyone, and bringing an end to war, means changing what we do, it means changing the status quo, it means backing away from the crowd and finally admitting, “The Emperor has no clothes.”