

Unicorns and Fairies
Exposing the Myths of Our Times
By
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Many years ago, shortly after leaving the Christian faith, I disagreed with one my Southern Baptist friends about some minor theological issue I no longer recall. What I do remember is, in a moment of frustration, he said, "Well that's what the Bible says. Don't you believe the Bible?" I'd only admitted my answer aloud once before, upon which I was told I could no longer be a Southern Baptist minister, but the second time it came with ease. "No, I don't," I said. The space between his lower lip and teeth immediately filled with air, reflexively expelling the "wh" sound three or four times in a row—wh... wh... wh...—the beginning of a *what*, *well*, or *why*, perhaps, that his confused mind couldn't decide upon because none of them made any sense in light of my response. It was as if I'd said, "No English," that his words held no meaning for me because I didn't accept his definition of the one word central to everything he said, "Bible." He was left dumbfounded, silenced, unable to respond because the underlying reason for everything he said and believed no longer held any authority in the conversation.

Our debate abruptly ended, as did any further interactions between us. Still, I wondered, by his reaction, having lived and grown up in the Bible belt, if it had been the first time he'd ever met anyone who didn't believe in it. How many conversations had he engaged in, how many times had he won or lost an argument because of the phrase, "Well, that's what the Bible says. Don't you believe the Bible?" Although I'm sure he recovered from our encounter, eventually dismissing me as a dangerous apostate, it seemed apparent his loss of words was the result of a shock to his system. It was like watching a computer program lock up, requiring a reboot of the entire system. In his world, in his mind, the Bible, or at least his interpretation of it, had become the central authority for everything he believed, the premise for all his arguments, the force that shaped his worldview. Without it, he was lost.

I think beliefs based merely upon authoritarian premises reflect an unhealthy mind, a mind unable to think things through, to think on its own, to reason. *Ad verecundiam*, the appeal to authority, is one of the classic logical fallacies people frequently commit. As children, most of us heard a parent, teacher, or other authority in our lives respond to our requests for an explanation, to our question, *why*, with the phrase, "Because I said so." For some this authoritarian response eventually becomes reason enough to believe whatever they're told, as does the phrase, "just because." They become satisfied with having no reasons for their reasons, no sound evidence or explanation for their beliefs. They believe simply because someone said so, just because.

This is not to suggest an expert opinion isn't sound reason to accept something might be true, that one's accomplishments and research in a certain field doesn't make them a reliable authority. In this case, however, there are reasons behind their authority, reasons for trusting what they say bears some weight. We trust a doctor, not because they are in

authority, but because their authority is based upon science, experience, and practice. Though, even then, it is often wise to get a second opinion. I'm speaking, rather, of trusting and believing something for no reason other than because an authority "says so." I *would* trust what someone says just because they're the President of the United States. (I'm sorry, did I say "would," I meant to say, "wouldn't." I *wouldn't* trust somebody just because they're President of the United States.)

For many of us the Bible is an obvious example of *ad verecundiam*, an appeal to inappropriate authority. But how many, like my friend in the Bible Belt, have grown up believing in fictions we don't notice anymore than a fish notices the water surrounding it? The fish doesn't know it's even swimming. It feels as if it's flying above the surface of the Earth, unless it gets yanked out of the ocean and is left floundering on shore. That's the difference between a belief and a paradigm. Our beliefs are the ideas we can articulate, the things we say we believe. Paradigms are like water to a fish, or the air we breathe, something we don't think about, or know is present unless something or someone takes it away from us and we find ourselves floundering and gasping, like my confounded friend struggling to speak in a moment without "The Bible" to rely on.

We see the missing paradigm, the exposed pattern of thinking, in a floundering fish, someone gasping for air, or an ideologue's loss for words, but how many of us are moving about the world surrounded by our own sea of invisible paradigms—underlying patterns of thinking we accept "just because" an authority "said so" long ago, that we grew up with, that we are moving inside of, without even knowing it because we've learned not to question them, to stop asking, "why?" How much of what we take for granted is founded on reasons no more sound than beliefs in unicorns and fairies?

I'm always working to discover the paradigmatic ocean I swim in, the ideological and emotional biases enveloping my own life. I do this because, for me, reality is the Holy Grail, that which I seek above all else. I want to know what *is*, not just intellectually, but to know reality, to be part of it, one with it. Reality, to me, is what most mean by "God." Reality is all that exists. Everything that is, is real. Reality is everywhere, yet reality is also the rarest gem in the Universe because we are so finitely limited in our ability to perceive it. Our world is but a pinprick, in a pinprick, in a pinprick, in a pinprick, *ad infinitum*, compared to the entire Universe, and what we know of it is equally as miniscule. We are, like Moses tucked in the cleft of the rock trying to catch a brief glimpse of something we can never fully comprehend. Yet I pursue it, like a moth driven to the flame, for its sometimes sweet, mostly bitter morsels.

In psychology, most our problems are dissociative in nature, preventing us from being in touch with reality. Some dissociation reflects normal coping mechanisms all of us rely upon to get by, while others can be more severe. But whether we are just in denial, ignorant, or enjoy a little confirmation bias from time to time, or suffer from schizophrenia, PTSD, bipolar disorder, or some other more challenging condition, dealing with reality can be hard. Not only because, as the *Tao te Ching* says, "Looked for, it can be seen; listened for, it can't be heard; reached for, it can't be grasped," but because reality can be painful and unpleasant and frightening. Just think about the political reality we're in today, and you'll understand how hard it is to cope with and the desire to be distracted from it. "The truth hurts," as we

sometimes say, as Jacob learned the hard way when he wrestled with God and ended up with a limp the rest of his life, or Odin, who had to give his right eye to know a little truth.

So it's hard to find the truth and hard to deal with it when we do. For many, it's easier to go on pretending we already know all that's necessary and can rely on what we think we know "just because" some authority "said so" long ago. And that's the deeper issue isn't it, that being out of touch with reality isn't merely an individual problem, but a cultural and social problem. Most of what we believe, true or false, is what we're taught to believe. We believe it because it's common sense. We believe it because "any fool knows that" because everyone believes it.

In 1955, social psychologist, Erich Fromm asked a radical question, "Can a society be sick?" To prove the possibility, he looked at global statistics regarding alcoholism, homicide, and suicide rates. He reasoned that if these were strictly individual problems they should be equally present in any society. As it turns out, however, this was not the case in 1955, nor is it today. According to World Health Organization statistics at the time, homicide rates per 100,000 thousand, ranged lower than a percentage point in some countries, and as high as 8.5 percent in others, the highest being in the U.S. The same was true for suicide rates, which ranged anywhere from 3.7 to almost 36 percent. The highest rate of alcoholism, 3.9 percent, was also in the U.S., compared to the lowest rate of only half a percentage point in Italy, the country most known for its wines.¹ "We find that the countries in Europe which are among the most democratic, peaceful and prosperous ones, and the United States, the most prosperous country in the world, show the most severe symptoms of mental disturbance."²

Although he admitted that "many psychiatrists and psychologists refuse to entertain the idea that a society as a whole may be lacking in sanity," Fromm wasn't the first to suggest this is precisely the case. As he points out, this is the explicit point of Sigmund Freud's classic work, *Civilization and its Discontents*, in which he uses terms like, "social neurosis," comparing the "evolution of civilization" with "the development of an individual," stating that "many systems of civilization—or epochs of it—possibly even the whole of humanity—have become 'neurotic'..."³ Freud hoped that one day someone might "venture upon this *research into the pathology of civilized communities*."⁴

If Fromm and Freud are correct, and we can gage a country's sanity by certain indicators like its rates of addiction, homicide, and suicide, then our own country isn't doing as bad as some, but no so well as others. According to the last WHO numbers, our suicide rate is the 4th highest on the continent, out of 34 countries, and one of the highest in the world. Although we don't have the highest rates of alcoholism in the world anymore, it's still bad enough, and we do have the 5th highest rate of drug related deaths⁵ and the 3rd highest rate of opiate use in the world.⁶ Fortunately the homicide rate in the U.S. isn't bad, comparatively speaking, to

¹ Fromm, Erich, *The Sane Society*, Henry Holt & Company, New York, NY, 1955, p. 7-11.

² Ibid., p. 10.

³ Ibid., p. 19.

⁴ Ibid., p. 20.

⁵ <http://www.worldlifeexpectancy.com/cause-of-death/drug-use/by-country/>

⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_countries_by_prevalence_of_opiates_use

many other nations around the world, at only 5.3 murders out of 100,000 people, compared to places like Pakistan that has almost 10 per 100k, or Zimbabwe that has 28.6, or Honduras that has 86 murders per 100,000. So, suffice it to say, there are a lot of crazy places in the world.

When an entire society is sick, Fromm says it doesn't know it because it suffers from the "pathology of normalcy," meaning its members don't realize there's anything wrong because most everyone is doing and thinking the same thing. It all seems perfectly normal. Just as, if you live in the Bible Belt, believing an ancient collection of writings authored and redacted by hundreds of people over the span of a thousand years is the inerrant, authoritative word of God, seems perfectly normal, and, thus, perfectly sane, even though it's an irrational idea. Fromm called this "consensual validation," the assumption, "the fact that the majority of people share certain ideas and feelings proves the validity of these ideas and feelings."⁷

Today, in our society, we would find it odd for a grown person to insist in the real existence of mythical beings like unicorns and fairies. (I don't mean to offend anyone who does, but now you know what the rest of us are really thinking.) But simply believing in such things is not the problem. It's only a problem if it prevents us or others from developing our full potential, of becoming all we can become. I would much prefer more of us believe in unicorns and fairies than some of the other imaginary beasts our society collectively validates. I wish I could name them all, but, being part of society, means I'm swimming in the same paradigms as everyone else and am, thus, unaware of most the falsities surrounding me and that I've come to take for granted.

Still, as an amateur excavator of the mind, I've managed to dig up a few of the false paradigms, the unfounded beliefs most of us assume are real, even though there's no objective basis for them. Some of these may be liberating to hear, and some unnerving because of the shock of suddenly taking them away, finding ourselves like a fish out of water. The first of these is one I have mentioned often in the past, and shall continue to speak of in the future, the myth of Nations. It's part of the larger myth of separation, that there are different kinds of peoples, different races, and that we are not all related, not part of one family.

In his famous vision, Black Elk said, "I was standing on the highest mountain of them all, and round about beneath me was the whole hoop of the world." And as he stood there, looking at the world, like the first man on the moon, seeing everything at once, he saw, "in the center one mighty flowering tree sheltering all the children of one mother and one father. And I saw that it was holy." That's what the word "holy" means, *wholeness, oneness*. "Until recently," philosopher Peter Singer says, "such thoughts have been the dreams of idealists, devoid of practical impact on the hard realities of a world of nation-states. But now we are beginning to live in a global community."⁸ Or, as historian Yuval Harari says in his book, *Sapiens*, "Today, almost all humans share the same geopolitical system... the same economic system...

⁷ Ibid., p. 14.

⁸ Singer, Peter, *One World: The Ethics of Globalization*, 2nd ed., Yale University Press, U.S. 2004, p. 196.

the same legal system; and the same scientific system...⁹ From such a vantage point," he says, like looking from the highest mountain or the moon, "it becomes crystal clear that history is moving relentlessly towards unity."¹⁰ Or, as Dr. King said before anyone ever stepped on the moon, "all life is interrelated, and we are all caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny."

Our greatest leaders and reformers have been reminding us of this truth since humanity first opened its eyes, yet the myth of nations, of special people, chosen people, people with a manifest destiny, has been the tool of tyrants to control people and motivate us to hate and oppress our own brothers and sisters. And that's what makes it a sick myth, unlike the gentle belief in unicorns and fairies, because it leads to the suppression of others, to the lie they are our enemies, they are dangerous, and they must not be allowed to flourish, or simply, that they—their wellbeing and happiness—is not our problem. Erich Fromm, who said, "Nationalism is our form of incest, is our idolatry, is our insanity," also wrote, "The person who has not freed [oneself] from the ties to blood and soil is not yet fully born as a human being."¹¹

Similar to this is the myth of race, the idea there are different species of human beings and that some are more evolved than others. When the idea of different races, different families, different clans, became almost exclusively tied to skin color, it created a theological debate among Christians, especially those seeking to justify slavery. They wondered, if the *Genesis* account is true, if God created humanity all at once, how can there be different races? This led some to invent and adopt the theory of *polygenesis*, the notion humans must have developed independently from each other in different times and places. Most Christians vehemently rejected the idea in favor of traditional *monogenesis*, and instead justified slavery as means of saving the souls of uncivilized heathens, of lifting them up by exposing them to white Christian society.

The horrors of this twisted myth continue to this day, especially in the U.S. where nonwhites lag behind whites in every social indicator, are incarcerated at disproportionate rates by our racist criminal justice system, and are considered dangerous outsiders if they are Muslim or Mexican. This is so, yet we continue to use the word "race" as if it has objective meaning, even though we know our origins are monogenetic, not because a fictional god fashioned us in a fictional garden, but because we first emerged in the African cradle and spread outward, and maintain a bloodline so thin that today there is more genetic difference between two chimpanzees living in the same troop than there is between any two human beings on Earth.

This leads to another cultural myth surrounding us all, the myth of *original sin*. Even if we aren't Christian and think we don't subscribe to its doctrine, the notion there's something fundamentally wrong with being human, that human nature is evil, greedy, selfish, and destructive, and, thus, needs authoritarian, punitive powers to prevent it from fully

⁹ Harari, Yuval Noah, *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*, Harper Collins Publishers, New York, NY, 2015, (Kindle version), loc., 2607.

¹⁰ Ibid., loc. 2562.

¹¹ Fromm, *ibid.*, p. 58.

expressing itself, is a paradigm that encompasses most everything. I even see it in well meaning New Age and New Thought thinkers wanting to transcend these very trappings, yet claim there is nothing real about the Earth, that all its suffering is made up in our own minds, and that we must transcend our physical reality, transcend of our own bodies and desires toward something spiritual. Just look up that word *spiritual* sometime and you'll see one of its primary definitions means, "disembodied."

I prefer to not only remain embodied, but to become fully embodied in this world, to achieve my full humanity. The only thing I want to transcend is the doctrine of original sin, the belief we are born fundamentally flawed, that our desires cause us to suffer, that we should be ashamed of ourselves. There are no congenital conditions, no accidents of birth, that make any of us less than human. We are not born cursed because we have darker skin than others. There's not something wrong with us because we're attracted to members of our own sex. We are not weaker because we are girls. We are not terrorists because we are Arabs or Muslims. We are not racists because we are white, or rapists because we are Mexican. We are all brothers and sisters, from one mother, the Earth, as Chief Joseph said, "and should have equal rights upon it."

Another myth is the myth of gender. Certainly, there's a physical distinction between the males and females of our species, as there is in most species, but these physical characteristics are not packaged with the traditional male/female stereotypes expected of us by our culture. Although different societies make up different fictions to justify hierarchies, most in our world have accepted the myth of gender differences, even though they are unfounded. As Yuval Harari says, "Societies associate a host of attributes with masculinity and femininity that, for the most part, lack a firm biological basis."¹² Rather, we all have what we have segregated in our minds as masculine and feminine qualities, though our culture has pushed us to express only those most attributed to our physical gender. It's better to stop struggling so hard to be what we aren't, to stop suppressing the full expression of ourselves, and be who we are, whatever our biological makeup. Like the two sides of the Yin/Yang mandala, let us be fluid, let our opposites flow into each other, and always contain a spot of the other at their core.

There are so many other myths in our society worth exploring, the myth of Democracy, the myth of Truth, the myth of Freedom, the myth of money, the myth of a Personnel God, but for time's sake, let me close by giving you a tool for exposing all these false paradigms and more—love. That's it. Do our stories enable us to love one another, by which I mean to respect others, care for others, and to take responsibility for their welfare, happiness, and growth? Erich Fromm said, "In loving I experience 'I am you,' you—the loved person, you—the stranger, you—everything alive. In the experience of love lies the only answer to being human, lies sanity."¹³ Or, in short, wh... wh... wh...

¹² Harari, Ibid.

¹³ Fromm, *ibid.*, p. 33.