

Gadflyism
Let Me Define it For You
By
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Just a few days ago, Faux News settled a lawsuit by paying nearly a billion dollars to Dominion Voting Systems for intentionally spreading lies about the reliability of the company's voting machines. That's an enormous amount, but I would consider this a rare outcome, not a cautionary tale, at least not in a Democratic nation. In the U.S., for example, we have freedom of speech, including the freedom to knowingly defame others. The miniscule number of libel and defamation lawsuits compared to the number of those who are libeled and defamed in the U.S. makes such suits appear almost nonexistent. In our legal system, it is not enough to merely be lied about for such a matter to go to court. A would-be plaintiff must prove financial damages, which is hard to do in most cases even if one is lucky enough to find an attorney willing to do so. Most are reluctant to even consider defamation, libel, or slander cases.

This is a terrible predicament for those who have been defamed and would like justice, but for those of us wishing to remain part of a free country in which freedom of speech remains sacrosanct, I consider it a price worth paying. Although "bearing false witness" has been considered a sin since ancient times, and lying about others should be considered morally wrong, I'm glad we live in a country that is so committed to protecting the right to speak the truth that it cannot help but also allow us to tell lies. When it comes to freedom of speech, we must, as Jesus said, "let the wheat and the tares grow together."

By comparison, also this past week, Russian dissident Vladimir Kara-Murza, an independent reporter and political activist, was sentenced to 25-years in prison by a Russian court for publicly speaking against his nation's war in Ukraine. Kara-Murza, who has run in opposition to Vladimir Putin, was formally convicted of treason for what he said, not in Russia, but while speaking before the Arizona House of Representatives last year. He has already survived two poisoning attempts against his life that are suspected to have been ordered by the Kremlin. And just last month a Russian court sentenced another man to two-years in prison for criticizing the war on social media and sent his teenage daughter to an orphanage for drawing an antiwar sketch. This occurred about the same time they arrested a Wall Street Journal reporter on charges of espionage.

So, I think I'd rather live in a land where people can get away with lying about each other than someplace where we could go to prison for speaking our minds. Unfortunately, the masses in any society, democratic or dictatorial, tend to fear and disdain those who tell the truth more than those who tell them lies. And, worse, they seek to make examples of them by whatever means of mob justice are legally at their disposal, including lying about them on Faux News and ruining their reputations on social media.

These days the citizens of free countries don't have to worry much about the government coming down on them for expressing dissenting voices, but about digital mobs coming after them with wildly unsubstantiated claims in order to silence them by disparaging their character and ruining

their careers, which also serves as warning to anyone else who might consider saying something that those with mad-crowd disease might disagree with. If we want to continue guaranteeing freedom of speech, we're going to have to do something about these rampant extrajudicial character assassinations. It is one thing for our laws to take extreme measures to protect free speech, including the right to tell lies, but it is another to stand aside while mobs are using such freedom to suppress the same right for others. Otherwise, our free speech will be no better here than in Russia and other totalitarian societies.

Today, even in democratic countries like ours, it takes more courage than ever to say something others may disagree with. But it is also true that today we need those who have the courage to do so more than ever, because there is increasing pressure, due to defamatory media corporations like Faux News, and extremists of both the Left and Right on social media, to simply go along with the crowd lest we end up blacklisted. In journalist Bari Weiss's public letter of resignation from the *New York Times* three years ago, she explained that she'd been routinely bullied, harassed, and publicly smeared by her coworkers for writing things they disagree with. "Showing up for work as a centrist at an American newspaper should not require bravery,"¹ Weiss said.

But these days it does take bravery to disagree with the status quo almost everywhere in the world, in democracies and dictatorships alike. In response to her husband's 25-year sentence, Evgenia Kara-Murza, who lives here in the U.S., tweeted, "A quarter of a century is an 'A+' for your courage, consistency, and honesty in your years-long work. I am infinitely proud of you, my love, and I'm always by your side."² Her courage, resilience, and steadfast defiance is matched by her husband's. "My self-esteem has risen," he told his attorney. "Twenty-five years is the highest appraisal that I could get for doing what I did and what I believed in, as a citizen, a patriot and a politician."³

The Kara-Murza's stoicism in the face of suffering is akin to that of Socrates, the ancient philosopher who was the inspiration for the emergence of Stoic philosophy. Socrates also accepted his sentencing—a death sentence in his case—with courage and a refusal to recant or to plead for mercy. He was charged with offending the gods and corrupting the youth for his unpopular teachings, or, more likely, for his incessant questioning of the status quo, the dialectic method he is known for to this day. When asked how he thought he should be punished, Socrates replied, "I am that gadfly which God has attached to the state, and all day long and in all places am always fastening upon you, arousing and persuading and reproaching you. You will not easily find another like me, and therefore I would advise you to spare me."⁴ The defiant philosopher considered himself a gift to the State, which he compared to "a great and noble steed who is tardy in his motions owing to his very size, and requires to be stirred into life."⁵ Killing him would, thus, be a grave mistake, according to Socrates, because gadflies are rare and the welfare and progress of every society is dependent upon its pesky gadflies.

Socrates was the original gadfly, but there have been many since and there are many today, including Vladimir Kara-Murza, who should be considered an example of courage and integrity to

the entire world. Yet, for the most part, people don't like gadflies pestering them, upsetting their slow and lazy thinking. Sadly, tragically, gadflies are no more welcome in most democracies today than they are in Russia. And, as we well know, gadflies are particularly disdained within Unitarian Universalism, once the world's most liberal religion, which was founded upon the belief that people should be free of all dogma, religious and secular, in order to speak and think for ourselves.

As you know, I used the term as the title of my 2019 book, *The Gadfly Papers*, for which I was immediately—before anyone had a chance to read it, let alone consider it—condemned as a racist, homophobic, transphobic, ableist, classist, kitchen sink. Since then, I've noticed a tendency for my critics to call anyone who agrees with me a "gadfly" and to collectively refer to us as "gadflies." Just this week I received an email regarding an online conversation among members of the Canadian Unitarian Council, in which it was falsely stated that I "used to be a Unitarian minister," and that those who share my concerns "call themselves gadflies." This is simply untrue. I'm still a Unitarian minister and it is our detractors who attempt to diminish, dehumanize, and dismiss us by lumping us all together in this way. "Gadfly" was the title of my book. I am, firstly, a human being and, as such, have inherent worth and dignity. And secondly, I am a Unitarian speaking in defense of Unitarianism. Those who share my concerns are also individual human beings who should be treated and spoken of with reverence and respect. And they too are Unitarians and Unitarian Universalists concerned about our liberal religion. Those who treat us otherwise are also human beings worthy of respect, but they are not, by definition, Unitarians, because silencing the voices of others by dehumanizing and dismissing them is the very antithesis of our what our liberal religion is about.

Nevertheless, since I announced the formation of the North American Unitarian Association in December, these kinds of efforts have only intensified. I received an email in February from a UU Minister letting me know he's writing a book entitled, "The Gadfly Controversy: Exploring Unitarian Universalism's Reactionary Fringe." I immediately thought I could write a book myself using the very same title. But the person writing it considers me and those who share my concerns the "reactionary fringe," not those who are responsible for the institutional capture and hostile takeover of our liberal religion. Additionally, this month two other UU ministers began soliciting chapters for a book they're writing entitled, "Hate Disguised as Love: The Rise of the Gadfly Movement in Unitarian Universalism." Again, if I were to write a book about those responsible for the hostile takeover and occupation of our liberal religion, I think this would be a great title! Its authors go on to say, "We welcome submissions from a diverse range of stakeholders, including all kinds of religious professionals (not just ministers), denominational and institutional staff, lay leaders and volunteers. We also welcome submissions from people with a diverse range of identities." That sounds pretty openminded until you get to the paragraph's conclusion; "We are not accepting proposals from people aligned with the Gadfly movement, or proposals which promote Gadflyism." Sounds like it will be the kind of fair and balanced book Faux News would be proud of.

But the point here is that there is no such thing as Gadflyism. "Gadfly" was just a word in the title of my book that was clearly about Unitarian Universalism, not a new ideological movement. It was a

word that playfully pointed back to a revered wiseman who long ago referred to himself as such because he questioned the status quo. It is a metaphor. In reality, what they are defaming is not Gadflyism but Unitarianism. And those they are disparaging and dismissing are not gadflies but other Unitarian Universalists, other human beings, who have legitimate concerns about the direction the Unitarian Universalist Association is taking our liberal religion. They are people who have a right to expect they can express their concerns among other Unitarian Universalists without being diminished, dehumanized, and dismissed.

We are not Unitarian Universalism's problem. We are Unitarian Universalism! We do not exist on the fringe. We are mainstream UUs. So, when it comes to defining *Gadflyism*, let me reiterate, there is no such thing. Those using this term will be its inventors, not me, and not those who share my concerns. We are but Unitarian Universalists that other Unitarian Universalists may disagree with. And if we're not allowed to exist as such without being condemned, silenced, and exiled by the "Church" authorities, then there is something terribly wrong with our religion. And that is what *The Gadfly Papers* is about.

So, what some are calling *Gadflyism* is nothing other than Unitarianism Universalism. And the world needs Unitarian Universalism for the same reason it needs its gadflies. We need gadflies who will question us as much as we need to be questioned. We need gadflies like Socrates who will keep prodding us to reexamine the many assumptions we take for granted. We need gadflies like Rosa Parks, who was arrested in 1955 for refusing to give up her bus seat to a white man, which launched the Civil Rights Movement. We need gadflies like the courageous, larger than life, Black singer, actor, civil rights, and labor rights activist, American, and Communist Paul Robeson, who stood up and defied Joseph McCarthy in 1956. When a member of the House Un-American Activities Committee asked why he didn't just go to Russia, Robeson stood up and resoundingly said, with the powerful and intimidating baritone voice he was famous for, "Because my father was a slave, and my people died to build this country, and I am going to stay here, and have a part of it just like you. And no Fascist-minded people will drive me from it. Is that clear?"⁶ ... you are the nonpatriots, and you are the un-Americans, and you ought to be ashamed of yourselves."⁷

The world needs gadflies like Frank Serpico, who in 1970 became the first police officer in America history to testify against corruption in his own New York Police Department, resulting in a gunshot that nearly took his life a few months later. We need gadflies like Karen Silkwood, the 28-year-old Union Activist who probably lost her life in 1974 in a car "accident" for uncovering and testifying against the Kerr-McGee Nuclear Plant for negligently and knowingly exposing its workers and nearby residents to nuclear contamination. We need gadflies like Daniel Ellsberg the former military analyst who dared to leak *The Pentagon Papers* to the *New York Times* in 1971. We need gadflies like Unitarianism's Beacon Press was at the time, that proved brave enough to defy the U.S. government by publishing *The Pentagon Papers* that same year, for all to read. This is why the cover of my book, *The Gadfly Papers* is a replica of the cover of *The Pentagon Papers*, to remind us that being gadflies is part of our great Unitarian tradition. Unitarians are gadflies.

But to be true Unitarian Universalists, if we aren't ourselves gadflies, we need to at least tolerate the gadflies among us. And to be gadflies, we must have what author and activist Irshad Manji calls

moral courage, “doing the right things despite your fears.”⁸ Like all those gadflies I’ve mentioned—Socrates, Rosa Parks, Paul Robeson, Frank Serpico, Karen Silkwood, Daniel Ellsberg, the 1971 incarnation of the one noble Beacon Press, Vladimir and Evgenia Kara-Murza, the Russian man who went to jail for criticizing the Ukraine war and his 13-year-old daughter who was sent to an orphanage mere for drawing a sketch—we must remember Manji’s counsel, “it’s human to care about your reputation. What’s paralyzing is to care too much.”⁹ There are more important things in this world that cannot be had if we are afraid of making waves, of criticizing the status quo, of getting arrested, of going to prison, of drawing sketches, of speaking what we believe it right and true.

Some men and women, gadflies all of them, once believed in this so much that it became their religion, a religion they named Unitarianism, and later, Unitarian Universalism. So, if you want to know what Gadflyism is, you need go no further than your local Unitarian Universalist church to find out. At least that’s the way it used to be. At least that’s the way it should be.

¹ <https://www.bariweiss.com/resignation-letter>

² <https://apnews.com/article/russia-kara-murza-sentence-b9d389feeb468ca3d19171d0440faa7d>

³ Ibid.

⁴ Apology (pp. 11-12). Kindle Edition.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/6440/>

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Manji, Irshad, *Don’t Label Me*, St. Martin’s Press, New York, NY, 2019, p.64.

⁹ Ibid.