



## What is truth?

Did you hear that Madalyn Murray O'Hare—the notorious atheist who got the Lord's Prayer out of the schools—has conspired with the FCC to ban all religious broadcasting?!

That "news" that showed up in my e-mail sometime this summer. Not long before, I had been told (again) that the president of Proctor & Gamble appeared on the Sally Jesse Raphael show to declare that he was a Satanist. And other friends of mine helped spread the word that Attorney-General Janet Reno had appeared on 60 Minutes and defined "cultist" as "one who has a strong belief in the Bible and the Second Coming of Christ."

These reports are all patently and demonstrably false. But every once in a while they, or reports like them, spread like wildfire over the Internet, and get millions of people angry or anxious or titillated. Because of their power and persistence they have now been dubbed "urban myths."

Urban myths grow like cancer. A recent addition is the word that the Harry Potter books are a plot to initiate defenseless young children into demonism. Another new one—coming at a time when we're already worried about gas prices—says "some person or persons have been affixing hypodermic needles to the underside of gas pump handles. These needles appear to be infected with HIV positive blood. In the Jacksonville area

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alone there have been 17 cases of people being stuck by these needles over the past five months.”

Why do we fall for these stories? Good question. Maybe some psychologists out there could help us with an answer. For my part, I’m troubled by the way it shows so many of us Christians to be gullible. Gullibility is a moral weakness. Christians are supposed to be people of the truth. Jesus warned his first disciples about the great deceiver who was the father of lies (John 8). Now, as then, not everything that presents itself as true, really is. If we aren’t careful about checking the facts, we can get out of touch with reality. Even more important from an ethical standpoint is that gullibility gets in the way of Christian caring. When we unhesitatingly forward the e-mail about Janet Reno or Madalyn O’Hare, we show a willingness to believe the worst about them.

My tendency, by contrast, is to err on the other extreme. I tend to be overly suspicious. To avoid being gullible, I question. Not only the fabulous e-mail, but newspapers and mainstream magazines too. Not only “secular” media, but Christian TV and news reports in Salvation Army publications. Looking for the “sub-text.” Looking for the bias. Looking for the exaggeration. This too, I’ve found, is a moral weakness. Suspicion, just like gullibility, gets in the way of Christian caring. Human community is impossible without trust.

Getting at the real truth is often hard work. We need strength of character to do it. And we need a community around us that helps us avoid the pitfalls of gullibility and suspicion, and evasion and platitude, and other ways of failing to come to grips with reality.

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My father died this summer. In the face of that hard fact, I have needed such a community. And, thank God, it has been there. It is true, and I believe it with all my heart, that my father has been “Promoted to Glory.” And yet, at the same time, that’s not the only sentiment in my heart. There is also the conviction that death—his death—is an offense. As I looked into Dad’s freshly-dead face, I knew that this is not the way it was meant to be. People were not created to die. Even if the heavenly “cloud of witnesses” is enriched by Dad’s presence now, there’s a huge vacant hole left in my part of the universe.

A friend encouraged me to read Nicholas Wolterstorff’s *Lament for a Son* for its refreshing honesty. Writing of the death of his 24-year old son, Wolterstorff says, “Elements of the gospel that I had always thought would console did not....It did not console me to be reminded of the hope of resurrection....Eric is gone; *here* and *now* he is gone; *now* I cannot talk with him, *now* I cannot see him, *now* I cannot hug him, *now* I cannot hear of his plans for the future. *That* is my sorrow....That’s my grief. For that grief, what consolation can there be other than having him back?”

Like Wolterstorff, I have discovered a rawness and chaos to grief that I did not know of before. Those who have been willing to listen to me express that somewhat uncomfortable discovery have shown a very special, an essentially Christian, kind of love.

For true Christian friends strong enough for our truth, let us give thanks.

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