

Do you hear what I hear?



Highland Views

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Guest columnist

We have a serious communication problem. Maybe not you and I, but the human community. Information, misinformation, disinformation—formation, or deformation, of knowledge. All easily passed from eye to eye, ear to ear, mind to mind, screen to screen. And it shapes what we think, believe, and how we act. How we receive and respond to the wild horses of stampeding views and opinions, makes all the difference—you'll have to excuse me, while writing this I was listening to The Rolling Stones "Wild Horses." That's another, perhaps more powerful, mode of communication: music, art, poetry. We crave the visual, the auditory, the emotional inspiration that not only can shape but determine precisely what we think and believe about anything, including religious beliefs.

Someone makes a statement, shares an opinion, passes along some tidbit of information as "gospel truth," and perhaps even claims it is actual "Gospel," the Word from the mouth of God. Do we immediately accept it, believe it as "God's truth"? Some simply claim: "The Bible says so," expecting others will accept it as true. What this actually means is: "Believe my interpretation of what the Bible says." A thinking, skeptical, person won't be so accepting. Unless a person desires to believe what they hear, questions must be raised beginning with: Why? Why should I, or we, believe you? The issue of authority is critical.

You may recall the Christmas carol, "Do You Hear What I Hear?" One of my favorites as a child. The night wind speaks to the little lamb who speaks to the shepherd boy who speaks to the king who declares to his subjects a child is born who will "bring us goodness and light." Not exactly a telephone game, but a musical example of how a message, information, is conveyed from person to person, even through nature. No one questions what they hear, they simply pass it on. It's too good to keep to yourself, too wonderful not to share. These are "good tidings of great joy." Yet, the song asks "do you hear what I hear?" The reality is that the lamb, shepherd and king didn't hear what each of them heard. The king didn't hear what the night wind said, he wasn't there.

Nearly every religion invites us to hear what they hear; to experience what they have experienced. Ultimately, to believe what they believe. The origin of this intention is the very first voice in that faith—indeed, the Founder of that religion. Moses descends from a mountain, Jesus from a desert, Muhammad from a cave, Joseph Smith from a field in New York. Each appears with a message which essentially announces: "Believe me. Believe what I say. Believe what I have heard. Believe as I believe." Though this is both "hearsay" and heresy, one person, then two, then a crowd, then millions, believe. And the wind keeps whispering.

The testimony of Muhammad when he emerged from an Arabian cave was that he'd heard an angel instructing him to "Recite" (qur'an) what he heard. Like Jesus, and perhaps Moses, Muhammad was illiterate, so he couldn't write the angelic words; he could only repeat them, recite them. Over time, a growing number of his community believed that he heard, and accepted what they heard from him as words coming directly from the mouth of God (Allah). Each religious tradition rests its authority on the authority of one person's word. As Jesus put it: "those with ears to hear let them hear." If a listener chooses not to hear—fully receive and accept—an instruction as divine, they are deaf or have no ears. Esoteric traditions (only heard by an inner circle) are based on this view: if you truly hear our truth, you are one of us.

We might generally accept the information we hear as accurate, but a wise consumer will pause and think.

An illustration: a stranger arrives in a village saying he came to a river dipping his glass in the water. He says the water he carries is the purest in the world. People gather, thirsty for the story. Villagers sip from the glass telling others the water is the best they've ever tasted. One wise woman in the village steps up to ask where the river is. She would like to see it for herself, and see if the water is truly clean. Making the journey, she finds the river passes through polluted areas. She returns, holds the visitor's glass up to the light and shows villagers the impurities. Hold the glass up to the light. Consider the source. Encourage others to do the same. Before taking a gulp, or passing the glass, be sure to ask: Where did you dip that glass, in which stream, and why?

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