

News to me: The truth is larger than any one telling of it

by [Barbara Brown Taylor](#) in the [March 9, 2004](#) issue

While I respect the age-old wisdom about steering clear of politics, sex and religion in polite conversation, those seem to be the only things that anyone wants to talk about these days. My line of work has something to do with it, I am sure. So does the fact that this is an election year. Lately I have had a hard time staying out of arguments that serve chiefly to increase my sense of my own righteousness, thereby decreasing my chances of drawing any closer to my neighbor.

The last time it happened, I did not even see it coming. Someone dropped by the house while I was cooking supper. We had both been listening to the news, about an 11-year-old girl who had been abducted and killed. That led us to debate the death penalty, which led to the use of deadly force to oppose evil, which led to the war in Iraq. With the speed of this transition still whistling in our ears, we began arguing about why the United States had failed to win the support of the United Nations in the first place.

It was because Kofi Annan had received kickbacks from the oil-for-food program, my neighbor said. It was because we wanted to attack a country that had not attacked us, I said. As we both crunched many more dry-roasted peanuts than were good for us, we dueled our way through the existence of weapons of mass destruction, the wisdom of U.S. relations with Saudi Arabia and the relationship of Osama bin Laden to all of the above. Along the way, each of us supported our cases with facts that the other had never heard before.

Finally, on the basis of an article that I read in this very magazine, I said, "What is your news source?"

"I don't know," he said, taken aback. "I listen to the radio all the time, all conservative stations. What about you?"

"I listen to NPR," I said.

“Well, see, that’s a liberal station,” he said.

But the question itself changed our whole conversation. We allowed that neither of us knew anything about Iraq except what we heard on the news. Neither of us had ever consulted each other’s news sources, nor did we want to. While we never admitted out loud that what each of us believed to be true might have something to do with the news source we had chosen, you could almost see that thought floating in cartoon fashion above both of our heads. Whatever else it did, it sucked the anger out of us. We slowed down on the peanuts. We agreed that there was a lot about the Middle East that we did not understand. When my neighbor rose to go, he laughed as we embraced.

“Next time we’ll talk about religion,” he said, “because I don’t have anything but *questions* about that.”

What I realized as I walked him to the door was that no matter what topic we chose, we would still have to deal with the question of our news sources. In the case of religion, my primary news source is Episcopal and his is Pentecostal. Those sources have fundamentally shaped our concepts of the truth about God, faith and human life on earth, to the point that their mediation may no longer be apparent to us. To become invisible was at least part of their intent, but if we lose all sight of them, then we are in danger of elevating our news sources to the throne of truth.

Not too long ago I was talking with a Presbyterian friend of mine, speaking with some assurance about the difference between Episcopal and Reformed understandings of Holy Communion. He looked quizzically at me and said, “Where did you get that idea?” I did not think it was an idea; I believed it was the truth, at least until he sent me a passage from Calvin’s *Institutes* that exposed the flaw in my news source.

Similarly, I look at sermons I wrote 15 years ago and I cannot believe some of the things I said about Pharisees, or about Judaism in general. My news source was the New Testament, which I accepted as the whole truth about “the Jews.” Since then, I have added enough Jewish news sources to my information bank to hear the gospel broadcast of the New Testament with far more attentive ears.

When I began teaching world religions, I discovered further problems with my news sources. Like most Christians, I had gotten my reports on Hindus, Buddhists, Sikhs and Muslims from other Christians, or at least from Westerners like myself, who so

took their own worldview for granted that it sat on their noses like a pair of forgotten glasses. As I began to read what some Hindus, Buddhists, Sikhs and Muslims had to say about themselves, I not only realized how wrong I had been but also how differently we conceive of the truth. In many cases I ran into misconceptions that they had about me, based on their own flawed news sources.

Whether the topic is politics, sex or religion, everyone has a news source. I am even prepared to say that everyone needs a news source, although one may no longer be enough. In a world flooded with information, it is important to change channels from time to time, if only to remember that the truth is larger than any one telling of it. Meanwhile, what happened in my kitchen confirmed at least one thing that I learned from my news source. At any given moment, what is most true for me is the person sitting right in front of me, and how I treat him is the best expression of all else that I believe.