

Propaganda, Brain-washing, Playing Dumb to Avoid the Truth

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Region: [USA](#)
Theme: [History](#)

"And we are all mortal" JFK – June 10, 1963 – American University

Not long after uttering those words in his startling and prophetic commencement address, President John F. Kennedy was publicly executed by terrorists operating from deep within the shadows of the secret state. A symbolic universe was shattered that day and a sense of fear and terror was unleashed into American society. The natural human fear of death was multiplied a thousand-fold as post-traumatic denial settled over the country and the Warren Commission released its fabrications fifty years ago this September 24th. (Did it win the Pulitzer Prize for fiction that year?)

That fear is the air we breathe today. We are choking on fear; trembling.

[In a previous article](#), I suggested that Americans are propagandized on two levels: culturally and politically. The elite work to scare and discombobulate regular people in various ways. Call it propaganda, brain-washing, mind-control, double-speak, etc. The result is to try and reduce people to muddled, frightened messes. These manipulative machinations generally work.

But there is a crucial flip side to this. Many, many people want to be deceived. They choose to play dumb, to avoid a confrontation with truth. They want to be nice (Latin, nescire, not to know, to be ignorant) and to be liked. They want to tuck themselves into a safe social and cultural framework where they imagine they will be safe. They choose to live in what Jean Paul Sartre called bad faith (mauvaise foi): He put it as follows:

"In bad faith it is from myself that I am hiding the truth." But with this "lie" to myself, "the one to whom the lie is told and the one who lies are one and the same person, which means that I must know in my capacity as deceiver the truth which is hidden from me in my capacity as the one deceived."

Such bad faith allows people to fabricate a second act of bad faith: that they are not responsible for their ignorance of the truths behind governments' and corporate media's lies and propaganda.

But why? Why this widespread flight from seeking truth? What is at the core of this denial?

For while the mainstream media does the bidding of the power elite, there is ample alternative news and analyses available on the internet from alternative sources. It doesn't take a genius to learn how to research important issues and to learn how to distinguish between bogus and genuine information. It takes a bit of effort, and, more importantly, the

desire to compare multiple opposing viewpoints and untangle the webs the Web weaves. We are awash in information and both good and bad reporting, but it is still available to the caring inquirer. The problem is the will to know. But why, why the refusal to investigate and question; why the indifference? Stupidity? Okay, there is that. Ignorance, there is that. Willful ignorance, ditto. But there are many very intelligent people who adamantly refuse to entertain alternative possibilities to the reigning orthodoxies.

I, as do many others, know many such people who will yes me to death and then never fully research issues. They will remain in limbo or else wink to themselves that what may be true couldn't be true. They close down. Why? To take one example of sound, rational advice usually dismissed, last year Professor James Galbraith of the University of Texas at Austin wrote, concerning the JFK assassination – and without foreclosing the issue – that one could readily arrive at a fair conclusion by a slow, careful study, including close attention to sources and footnotes. But few dare to follow such advice for an event that is paradigmatic for so much that has followed. Why this lack of will? Why the excuses?

This is a great dilemma and frustration faced by those who seek to convince people to take an active part in understanding what is really going on in the world today, especially as the United States wages war across the globe and the Obama administration expands and modernizes its nuclear weapons capabilities.

I believe there is a way to simplify the seeming complexity of this issue without being simplistic.

I think the answer was given forty years ago by Ernest Becker in his 1974 Pulitzer Prize winning (non-fiction) masterpiece, *The Denial of Death*. In that book Becker wanted to simplify a great deal of “needless intellectual complexity” about why people behave as they do. He felt we were “choking on truth” as a result of a plethora of brilliant writing and discoveries. He wanted to get to the heart of the matter, to cut through verbosity while “the mind is silent as the world spins on its age-old demonic career.” He wanted to simplify without being simplistic.

His book is far from simplistic. It is deep and complicated. His conclusion, however, is simple.

It is the terror of death and the consequential denial of that reality that motivates so much human behavior. People kill out of this fear, they shrink from life and truth because of it, and they live in bad faith because of it. Born dying and knowing it, humans devise a thousand and one ways to shield themselves from this truth. And in the forefront of this great fear lie so many smaller “deaths.” Becker uncovers them all. The fear of ultimate death generates many children: the fear of disease and health obsessions, of terrorists, of the powerful, of standing up for oneself without experts, of speaking out, of being an individual, of disagreeing emphatically with government propaganda about major events, etc. The person powerfully motivated by death fear refuses to seek truth; it's too overwhelming. Excuses are always at hand. Becker writes:

He accepts the cultural programming that turns his nose where he is supposed to look; he doesn't bite the world off in one piece as a giant would, but in small manageable pieces, as a beaver does. He uses all kinds of techniques, which we call the 'character defenses': he learns not to expose himself, not to stand out; he learns to embed himself in other-power, both of concrete persons and

of things and cultural commands; the result is that he comes to exist in the imagined infallibility of the world around him. He doesn't have to have fears when his feet are solidly mired and his life mapped out in a ready-made maze. All he has to do is plunge ahead in a compulsive style of drivenness in the 'ways of the world' that the child learns and in which he lives later as a kind of grim equanimity – the 'strange power of living in the moment and ignoring and forgetting' – as (William) James put it. This is the deeper reason that Montaigne's peasant isn't troubled until the very end, when the Angel of Death, who has always been sitting on his shoulder, extends his wing. Or at least until he is startled into dumb awareness.

In *The Denial of Death* Becker distills all manner of exculpatory reasoning to its essence: fear. Fear of death leads to cowardly submission to unjust authority and untruth. The modern person, he writes, "is drinking and drugging himself out of awareness, or he spends his time shopping, which is the same thing." We need, he concludes, the creation of new heroisms that affirm life. Drawing on Søren Kierkegaard, he suggests that we need to become "knights of faith." This is easier said than done. He doesn't say how to do so because he doesn't know how.

But there are people who do; who have. President John Kennedy was one of them, as James Douglass makes clear in his brilliant work, *JFK and the Unspeakable*.

"In his final months, the president spoke with his friends about his own death with a freedom and frequency that shocked them. Some found it abnormal. Senator George Smathers said, 'I don't know why it was, but death became kind of an obsession with Jack.' Yet if one understood the pressures for war and Kennedy's risks for peace, his awareness of his own death was realistic. He understood systemic power. He knew who his enemies were and what he was up against. He knew what he had to do, from the turn away from the Cold War in his American University address, to negotiating peace with Khrushchev and Castro and withdrawing troops from Vietnam. Conscious of the price of peace, he took the risk. Death did not surprise him."

It is a rare person who will say with JFK, "I have no fear of death." His favorite poem was, "Rendezvous," by Alan Seeger, whose first and last lines run as follows: "I have a rendezvous with Death....And to my pledged word am true, I shall not fail that rendezvous." Jackie memorized it and would recite it back to him over the years. Five year old Caroline once surprised him in the Rose Garden during a meeting with the National Security Council by reciting by heart the poem to him and a stunned group of advisers. Kennedy was a rare and very courageous individual, one of Kierkegaard's knights of faith. In his struggle against the forces of war and death, he adopted Lincoln's prayer as his own which he kept on a slip of paper, "I know there is a God – and I see a storm coming. If he has a place for me, I believe that I am ready."

Maybe those of us who flee from truth out of fear would do well to meditate on such a man's courage. And on the cowards who killed him. And on the Warren Commission, accomplices after-the-fact who wrote the fictional account of his murder.

Ernest Becker told us the truth: fear of death is for cowards. But even cowards are responsible. There is no escaping that.

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