

Not Seeing the Gorilla  
Ken Olson

Some years ago, a very interesting experiment in perception was conducted at the University of Illinois. It involved six people, three in white shirts and three in black, each just a few feet apart, moving around a circle while quickly passing a basketball back and forth. Audience members were to pay close attention and count how many times those with white shirts passed the ball. After just a little while, a man in a gorilla suit entered the circle, thumped his chest, and walked offstage. The astonishing result --half the audience did *not* see the gorilla! This test has been run many times and, with subjects who have not heard of it, the result is virtually always the same: about half the watchers completely miss seeing the gorilla. (“You can look it up.”)

John Steinbeck’s book, *Travels With Charley* (his dog), won the 1962 Nobel Prize for Literature. He writes, “It would be pleasant to be able to say, ‘I went out to find the truth about my country and I found it.’ ...I wish it were that easy. But what I carried in my head, and deeper in my perceptions, was a barrel of worms. I discovered long ago in collecting and classifying marine animals that what I found was closely intermeshed with what I felt at the moment. External reality has a way of not being so external after all.”

Perception is not a simple thing. We are influenced by all sorts of factors, from our mood to our upbringing, religion, politics, to our degree of selfishness, etc. If not careful, we often see simply what we expect or desire, which is the reason we can be racist without knowing it. (Many of our nation’s Founders surely had a huge blind spot concerning slavery.)

In the 1940s at his small oceanside farm in Maine, E. B. White wrote essays for *The New Yorker*. In one having mostly to do with buying a cow, he said, “There is nothing so expensive, really, as a big, well-developed, full-bodied preconception.” The unshakeable opinions that many people have concerning political issues are not just a matter of being uninformed; it’s also that their vision is selective; the blinders are on. Their subconscious or emotional mind is already made up. Thus, preposterous lies and conspiracy theories find fertile ground.

To create an alternative reality in which he and his followers can see what they wish, Trump spent the last decade promoting the idea that there’s no such thing as truth. Recall that he began his venture into politics with the blatant Birther Lie that Obama was not a citizen. This was the red warning flag that revealed Trump’s utterly corrupt character, but millions did not see it that way --because they did not want to. (See above.)

One of Trump’s biggest preconceived ideas is that he should be treated as being above the law. Therefore, the nation’s secrets can be taken and stored in a bathroom at his resort. And so, too, his fake electors’ attempt to overturn an entire election was just fine. As for the violent mob of Jan. 6<sup>th</sup> --so extreme are his delusions that, instead of seeing the insurrectionists for the criminals they are, he sees them as “patriots” and issued 1,500 pardons. The words of England’s Samuel Johnson apply: “Patriotism is the last refuge of the scoundrel.” (Does anyone think this man --so impatient that he skips most of the Presidential Daily Briefings-- signed all those pardons without the autopen?)

Major news networks of the free press broadcast an unfavorable but true story, and Trump rages, “They are scum! They should be illegal!” a sentiment that takes us another step closer to goose-stepping. No other American president has ever labeled judges and critics as having committed “treason,” a crime punishable by death (I would qualify). One thinks of the crazed tyrannical Roman Emperors, Claudius, Domitian, and Caligula, who did hold deadly “treason trials” for members of the Senate who voiced the slightest disagreement.

This is the bizarre and radical nature of Trumpworld, where “it’s a disgrace” that the Constitution is treating him so unfairly; where the preferred wrapping for a scam is the flag; where, if he loses a contest, he feels justified in tearing down the stadium; and, if he wins, it’s vengeance time, nonetheless. We now face the hugely expensive consequences of having a gorilla in the room trashing things, while nearly half the country either pretends that it doesn’t exist or doesn’t even see it.

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