

Leader's Message

Deception

--Richard L. Kiniry

The Society's Worldly Wisdom discussion group just read Dante's *Inferno* and I could not help wondering where, given the chance, we in the twenty-first century might place certain sinners in the descending circles of hell. Dante has a degree of sympathy for average human faults and saves the especially cruel punishments of hell for those who betray others or who are disloyal. Although he was speaking as an angry politician who was actually betrayed, I appreciated his perceptiveness; he finds the worst sins on the relational side of behavior. Dante has sympathy for those of us who have trouble controlling our urges (we don't have evil intentions), but he has no sympathy for those who consciously work at exploiting others. The deceivers, the betrayers and the fraudulent consciously use their minds (for Dante their God-given minds) to damage the fabric of community. They destroy the trust that should be the birthright of all of us.

From that perspective, where would I place ex-vice presidents who refuse to admit their mistakes, who in fact continue to square the circle? (Denying wrongs was for Dante especially evil.) Without specifying a particular ex-official, it does seem we need a new circle of hell for those who not only deceive and deny the deception but then convince a large percentage of the community that the deception is actually reality.

Dante's circles of hell were full of historic characters of his time; 14th century Florence was ripe with deception. With all that deceiving there was plenty of blood on the streets of Florence and opposing families or groups would be killed or exiled.

When it comes to deception the world hasn't changed that much since the 14th century, but our era has refined and dressed up deception; we live within a virtual reality of subtle deception and it is more difficult to find the actual deceiver. Who is the deceiver when large organizations in the interest of the bottom line create shiny realities without substance? We can find evidence of deception in hospital wards with individuals dying of cigarette- or asbestos-caused cancer, or in the same hospital's emergency room with people hurt in accidents caused by the faulty engineering of their cars, but the deceiver is lost in the haze of corporate culture. A scapegoat might be found, but with thousands of small decisions that cut corners or were "good enough," casual deception becomes standard practice.

So, consumer beware is good advice but what concerns me is the expansion in acceptance of deception as a political and social tool. When people stop believing that facts and truth ought to be the bases of our shared reality and accept that a relativistic opinion approach to reality will do, then the cohesiveness of community is in great danger. Religion can take some of the blame for this confusion. Since so many of its truths turned out to be empirically untrue, religion encourages the idea of special truth which accustoms people to the idea that true is what you want it to be.

Religion's role in making truth relative may be in its self-interest but that does not annul its responsibility to stand against deception in our public life. Besides religion there are other cultural institutions that supposedly serve the interest of the people and they also ought to point out deception. The press is given specific protection in the constitution and that should translate into responsibility to distinguishing between facts and blatant if colorful deception. Obscuring the facts

of global warming and avoiding the full presentation of the human cost, both military and civilian, of two unnecessary wars in Iraq and Afghanistan is evidence that the deceivers among us are winning.

Dante's special dislike of deception was, as I mentioned earlier, his concern for the trustworthiness of the fiber of community life. People who purposely distort reality pull the rug out from under the relationships of everyone in the community. You don't know what to believe. Any sense of unity and community is distorted.

Dante had special circles of hell for such people. We ought to find our own version of hell for today's deceivers.