



# Purposeful Wanderings

A Monthly Newsletter for Clients and Friends of **The Road Not Taken**

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## Separating Fact from Fiction

*"It is no use walking anywhere to preach unless our walking is our preaching." – St. Francis of Assisi*

2020 has been a year like no other. Much of what we rely on has changed. Much of what we've come to trust has changed. As I write these words, I'm (coincidentally) hearing the same message in a "video rant" sent to me by a client, asking for my thoughts. As you'll see, my message has little in common with the rant, which went on: "So how can we expect anything we hear to be true? You know in your gut something isn't right." With this *emotional* plea, he unveils a plethora of ideas, all unsubstantiated, yet all carrying the hidden insinuation that the events of 2020 support his case. They don't; they're just events. (Note: my interpretation is based on my viewpoint of "curiosity combined with rational rigor.") The issue, though, is that he's already hooked many viewers, because 2020 *has* been a year like no other, and what we've come to trust *has* changed – leaving us **unconsciously** inclined to believe whatever follows. But *he's* using it as evidence for why we should trust **him!** We may well be hooked – but it's by the *emotion* of the matter, not the *fact* of the matter. Yet *we miss that!* And he doesn't!

The content of his message is of little interest here. What I'm curious about is how to separate fact from fiction. It's no small problem; we're deluged with stuff like this every day – on social media, YouTube, and even network news, all "reporting" often-conflicting things we "need to know." This, notwithstanding the fact that our world is far too complex for us to conclusively "know" much of anything. This, compounded by the fact that *anyone* has easy and instant access to millions of viewers, no matter the content of their message. The result: a lot of nonsense out there, and precious few tools for us to separate truth from falsehood. Worse, fiction goes viral even more quickly and powerfully than fact, simply because drama is often more "interesting" than truth. Drama sells. A whole new language has sprouted up from the roots of this divisiveness, terms such as "post-truth world," "alternative facts" and "fake news." A whole new paradigm has sprouted from these same roots, too, new uses for terms such as "fact checked" and "evidence." *How can we know? Can we know at all?*

I've grown interested in how we assess truth vs. falsehood, how messengers ply their trade, how they can leave us doubting our own rational thought, where their "power" comes from. Here are a few notes from my inquiry:

- Messages like these are "one-way conversations." A video leaves no option for question, response or feedback from viewers. In addition, with no break in the message, the listener has little space for "think time." Politicians use this as a tactic, so as to deny the inquiry and feedback on which dialogue and learning depend.
- Most are based on a premise that can neither be substantiated nor be proven. Clue: if you start with a flimsy premise, call it evidence, then generalize it to make it huge, sensationalize it to create emotional impact, and claim no one else except yourself seems to see this, you may get people jazzed up, but you've *proven* nothing.
- Most dwell in that gray area between true and false, a place with just enough information, just enough doubt, just enough drama and just enough intrigue to hook us ... emotionally, but not rationally. But we miss this.
- Most are "slick presentations" – good video, voice, language, "structure." Easy to hear as believable, especially when our lives are too busy and chaotic to see these things as *tactics* rather than *truth*.

A problem here is that we generally lack the level of conscious awareness needed to **notice these distinctions as we listen**. As a result, we do a poor job of distinguishing fact from fiction, leaving us easy prey. Yet all the while, we hate to admit we've been fooled, so we pretend we're sure, leaving us to defend what may be pure madness. They count on this lack of awareness, and systematically avoid the issue by "leaving the proof in our laps," fully aware there is none, fully aware we'll find it easier to believe them than to conduct our own investigation.

The antidote: critical thinking and inquiry ... not to deny new ideas, but to distinguish possibility from bullshit. The one enemy of falsehood, conspiracy and opinion-mongering is the light of rational thought. Question: can you put what you *think* you know on hold long enough to learn to shine your light? It's a matter of perspective.

**Exercise: Separating Fact from Fiction:** Let's face it: life is too complex for us to be sure of everything, to know everything, to have incontrovertible evidence for all that happens. Yet let's face this, too, then: we *hate* that this is so; we want to know, to be sure, to feel safe. In many ways, we find even a false sense of safety more soothing than an uncomfortable, chaotic and incomplete picture rooted in truth. (See, even our own sense of safety is not all that safe!) Although you may not always be able to distinguish fact from fiction, you can become more adept at sniffing out nonsense before you run down a dead-end street behind it. In my own experience, a path to this place is paved with *questions*. Fact: the questions may not have easy answers. Fact: some questions may have no answers. Fact: to simply ask them, with curiosity and openness to new learning, changes your perspective in a way that can let most of life's nonsense fall to the floor, and stay there. Self-trust is an amazingly powerful force.

You don't have to know head of time where the questions will lead you. (That's another trick the mind plays on us.) But next time you're confronted with a new idea, a pushy video rant, an outlandish claim, or even a new business possibility, try out a few questions. Don't worry to answer them. Just listen to how the questions impact your thinking and your approach to what comes next. Notice as well how uneasy you may feel in this space without "one right answer." Despite uncertainty, great questions take you places better than dead-end streets.

When presented with a new idea or claim, you might start by asking: Does it make sense? Whether it makes sense or not, is it plausible? If I already believe/know it, *how* do I know? If it's about an idea that would raise havoc in our lives, who might be the perpetrator? What might he or she stand to gain? Who might the victim be? What might he or she stand to lose? Who might intervene to stop them? What might he or she stand to gain, or lose? What do *other sources* say (or not) about this same topic? Does it make sense *now*? This is not about agree/disagree, but about gaining a broader perspective. With more room to move around, clarity is enhanced.

**Life lessons from nature:** One reason silence creates nature's backdrop is that truth doesn't need to yell. Truth simply *is*. Nature doesn't need to defend, convince or argue. This is true throughout the cosmos. When a volcanic eruption or storm destroys a forest, or even a town, it's a consequence, not an act of terrorism. We may *interpret* such things as judgment, but that's *our* story, not nature's. Hers is a continual process of creation, re-creation, renewal and refreshing ... always becoming. When we struggle with the impact of nature's way, we know (intellectually) that it's just the way the world works, yet our emotions and our rational thoughts don't always get along with each other. I think it's much that same phenomenon that holds us back from effective response to the nonsense in the world, and why that same nonsense persists. We can make a translation to non-judgment when it's in nature, yet when the issue is human-induced, our emotions "have their way" with us instead.



***MY NEW BOOK, [A Field Guide to Life: Navigating the Challenges of Our Lives and Times](#)*** will be available in January. (I'll send an email link for purchase then.) If your life is a struggle, there's a reason for it – and it's not the reason you may think. This book explores 11 common sources of struggle we experience today, and through ideas, perspectives, examples, personal reflection and exercises, helps you trace them back to their causes (most often thoughts from the ancient past, lessons of others, and your unquestioning willingness to see them as "truth"). Topics include our relationships with Silence, Not Knowing, Reality, Critical Thinking, Conscious Awareness, Communication, Conflict, Self-Care, Nature's Wisdom, Living Authentically and Living Sustainably. Much of the book would be of great help in addressing issues in this month's article. If you have the courage and openness to allow new ways of seeing to change you, this book may be an option you didn't know you had, one that will open pathways never imagined possible – back to dreams you may long ago have abandoned as hopeless.

**My (first) book:** *[Living Authentically ... in a World That Would Rather You Didn't](#)*. Its *premise* is simple: in the midst of a world that has lost its way, you need never lose your own. Get to know, then honor, your unique truth; the self-trust that emerges will light your way forever. Insights, perspectives, personal reflections and exercises ... so you can make your life your own, not someone else's. It's all right [HERE](#) – intro, samples, purchase link – [for you or as a gift](#).

**Book of the month:** *[The Power of Kindness](#)*, by [Piero Ferrucci](#). In a world that seemingly grows less kind by the month, Piero offers an antidote, supported by his work, experience and research. Although easily shunned as *weak* in this "post-truth" world, kindness has the power to sustain us as individuals, to heal us as a society and to bring us back from the edge of divisiveness so destructive to us all. And if you're on Cape Cod, you'll find this book at the Market Street Bookshop in Mashpee Commons; 508-539-6985.