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“Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor.”

During this election I find myself thinking frequently about the Ninth Commandment, about lying. Lying is of course a misrepresentation of fact. While sometimes this will make someone sad feel better, most commonly people misrepresent for their own gain. As a child, lying starts as a way to get out of trouble, but we soon learn misrepresentations also can get us something we would like.

In that regard, misrepresenting is stealing. Misrepresenting involves our intellect, our ability to reason and contemplate outcomes. It is aided greatly by sophistry (deceptive reasoning) which is rampant today in society.

Sophistry comes from the ancient Greek intellectual class, the Sophists, who trained people in how to win debates. Indeed, Greeks would pour in to listen to legal actions, not so much to see who won or lost, but, to determine who had the best presentation. One's ability to turn words on their heads became a badge of honor.

In our lives we no doubt have witnessed or personally turned words on their heads to get what we want. We might rationalize, “well, he never specifically asked me THAT”. Or we might use a now infamous technique and say, “well, it really depends upon what 'X' means”. We may “excuse” our deceit by thinking that the end justifies the means: “Hey! I NEED this job” or “we NEED this law”.

When deceit is part of our everyday life it should surprise no one that it turns up in politics too where there is far more to gain than as a child. “We really need this candidate to win!” or “we really need this bill to pass”, just like crossing one's fingers, are supposed to excuse misrepresentations of facts. We want to put our opponents in the worst possible light and our champion in the best possible light. After all, we rationalize, is it not the other guy's job to bring out his best points, just like in a courtroom? We assume that the adversarial setting will bring out the truth.

Yet, casting anyone in a false light accomplishes the same as flat out lying about the person. Just because the adversarial setting works in a courtroom does not justify its use elsewhere. Courts have impartial officials, judges and jurors. People are fined or imprisoned for distorting the truth. There is no such guarantee or punishment in politics, nor for us in everyday life outside the migraine and cost of suing for defamation of character.

Sophistry is a catastrophic problem in America today. Students are taught it in debate class (forget law school!); media stories are replete with it. It is commonplace for folks to justify misrepresenting the truth of a situation or of a person because “that's the way of the world.” Yet, the world can and has changed

throughout history. Until Judaism, polytheism was just seen as “the way of the world”. Until America, monarchy was just seen as “the way of the world”. Until the early 1800s, slavery was still seen as the “way of the world”. If we want cleaner politicians and cleaner politics, we each need to look into a mirror and clean our own faces first.

[You may print this Soapbox if you like.]

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