

The nature of truth



in an age of perspectives

photo by Kaye Twining

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Introduction

This article offers my current understanding of the nature of truth within an age of perspectives. The topic had been rattling around in the recesses of my mind in response to a number of factors: Firstly, my ongoing work in the field of spiritual practice education. Secondly, the recent formation of an intentional community founded on an integral framework of understanding, i.e., taking into account human history as a whole. Thirdly, a post truth mindset which is now common place within western societies. Fourthly, conversations with young and old alike who are struggling to find their *ground of being* so to speak. The topic then became the focus of my attention after one conversation where it was stated, "I don't believe in truth, only in perspectives." Even though I wholehearted agreed with the sentiment of the statement, I also noticed an inner sensation of recoil in response to the term *perspective*.

I chose to reflect on the inner sensation of recoil, the outcome of which was the recognition of an inner contradiction. One side of the contradiction consisted of the exclamation, "I can't live authentically through a perspective! A perspective is simply an opinion *about* life!" The other side of the contradiction contained the knowledge that we all view ourselves-in-life through a particular interpretive framework. One part of me wanted to/needed to retain the term *truth*. Another part of me recognized my view of myself-in-the-world was simply a subjective interpretation of my lived experience, i.e., a perspective.



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Rather than be daunted by such a inner contradiction, I chose to engage in the spiritual practice of gently sifting through the many threads entwined within the contradiction, waiting for new insights and understandings to emerge. This article gives expression to a number of the insights and understandings which emerged.

The article will progress in the following manner: Firstly, I will outline some characteristics of our age of perspectives and the impact of such

on the individual and the wider community. Then I will describe an understanding of the discipline of spirituality grounded within an integral framework. From there I will offer my current understanding of the nature of truth within an age of perspectives.

Some characteristics of our age of perspectives

What is meant by the term perspective?

Bernard Lonerganⁱ claimed that we all view life through a particular lens, or interpretive framework which gives rise to a particular perspective on life. The lens filters all that we see, hear and know. The lens is both formed and limited by the norms and beliefs of our family of origin, our wider communities, our religious/philosophical tradition, our particular culture, and our ongoing life experience. Whilst we are not usually aware of our lens, it is operating within us constantly.



photo by Kaye Twining

Bearing in mind the above claim, our perspective on life involves both the preconceptual assumptions within our interpretative framework and our deliberate, intellectual assessments in response to our ongoing lived experience. Such a mix of preconceptual assumptions and intellectual assessment gives rise to opinions **about** matters of life and death, albeit "wise and reasonable. . . accurate and fairly judged"ⁱⁱ opinions. Although a perspective plainly involves a contextualized point of view, an individual may choose to passionately debate, dissect, analyze, or defend their own perspectives and/or those of other individuals.

Perspectives: a mix of preconceptual assumptions and intellectual assessments which give rise to opinions about matters of life and death.

The following is an example of how I currently understand the term *perspective*: Say I hold the opinion that war is now an outdated mode of responding to conflict. At the same time, I have not personally experienced war. Therefore although perhaps wise, reasonable, accurate and fairly judged, such an opinion is an abstract and intellectual assessment of war.

What factors contributed to our age of perspectives?

The following four factors contributed to the rise of an age of perspectives within western society: Firstly, the post-modern era which was characterized by its deconstruction of the grand narrative, or universal truth, from which we individuals drew our view of ourselves-in-our-world. Such a shift paved the way somewhat for decentering the Christian religious tradition as the basis for meaning making. Secondly, the multi-faith nature of contemporary western society which continues to bring individuals face to face with otherness: the otherness of individuals who live out their religious beliefs in what seems to be a different God. Thirdly, the new scientific understandings of the way the world came into being/continues to be, and our place within it.ⁱⁱⁱ Such new understandings have once again brought into question human identity, purpose and belonging. Fourthly, the flood of easily accessible, often contradictory information via the internet. Each of these factors have contributed to the emergence of our age of perspectives.

Post truth: a recent characteristic arising from our age of perspectives

The term *post truth* became part of public discourse in 2016. A definition of the term within the political arena is offered by Alison Flood:^{iv}

"post truth is the Oxford Dictionaries word of the year . . . relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal beliefs . . . rather than simply referring to the time after a specified situation or event . . ."



post truth within a political context: objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal beliefs

photo by Kaye Twining

Within such a context, the intention of post truth discourse would seem to be aimed at manipulating an individual's emotions so they will vote in

a particular way. Facts seem irrelevant and not even engaged with. The 2016 USA presidential election exemplifies such an understanding of the term *post truth*. Also the 2016 Australian federal election discourse was shrouded in such a post truth mindset.

Whilst bearing in mind the above definition of the term *post truth*, what possibilities could the term offer beyond a political context? What if the term allowed for the possibility of engaging with both the relevant facts and personal beliefs? What if a post truth mindset allowed for the posing of open ended questions in response to relevant facts, personal beliefs, and emotions? What if a post truth mindset allowed for each one of us take responsibility for our own beliefs and actions, while at the same time allowing each of us to be respectful for, and of, differing points of view?

What if a post truth mindset allowed for the possibility of engaging with both relevant facts and personal beliefs?

The impact of our age of perspectives on an individual

As mentioned previously, the post-modern era was one of the factors giving rise to our age of perspectives. The post-modern era also gave rise to a crisis of meaning for many individuals within western society. In response to the deconstruction of the grand narrative, many individuals struggled/are struggling to metaphorically *find their ground* from which to give meaning to their living. The following is an extract from a poem^y I wrote a number of years ago. The extract reveals something of the intensity of such a crisis of meaning in the life of one person.



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Another door opens and I step through
I feel myself fall . . .
 falling deeper, faster, down - down - down into darkness.
I land with a thud on the cold, damp, rocky floor
 of the dark abyss of meaningless.
I feel abandoned.

I lay alone, in foetal position, in the darkness.
Who am I, if not a child of the Father God?
Who am I, if not a part of the community of faith?

I cannot go back.
Yet, I have no way of moving on.
I am trapped in the abyss
Society is no help - they also are trapped,
trapped in post-modernity
There is no framework of formation from which to transform . . .
I am meant to be a social being
however, one needs a "self" to be social.

In this post-modern era
Who is anyone? What is anyone? Is there a God?
Is there an "I" to be represented?
Or, only a reflection, of a reflection, of a reflection.

Am I just a character in a play?
Today I will play a mother
or, perhaps a sister, a lover, a daughter, a student
So many perspectives - yet there is a hollowness to them.

Who will I choose to be today?
How will I decide ?
What criteria do I use?
How do I construct meaning
in a world that is simply a perspective?
How do I choose what I will live for, what I will die for?

How can I be part of a collective "we"?
What is truth? What is reality?
Is the communal quest irrelevant?

This loss of Self leaves a sense of annihilation.



photo by Kaye Twining

Whilst the above experience is a personal one, I continue to hear resonances of such experience within many individuals, young and old alike. Within our age of perspectives, how does an individual decide what is "good, true and of value?"^{vi} Perhaps this is why countless individuals are turning once again to the practice of spirituality, in all its many guises.

The discipline of spirituality within our age of perspectives

We humans are driven to learn about our world, hence the credence given to the scientific disciplines. At the same time, we also have an innate desire to give meaning to our living and our dying. Meaning in this context involves the experience of personal identity, purpose and

belonging in our world, and "reverence for the mystery of being."^{vii} Such an innate desire to give meaning stands within the discipline of spirituality.

Spirituality involves both intention and practice. The intention is to discover a coherent Story of meaning which offers personal wholeness, authentic communal participation, and belonging within a big-picture Story which responds to our existential questions. Intention is imperative because we do not "passively receive meaning"^{viii} from our lived experience. Rather we draw meaning from our lived experience. Hand in hand with intention are practices which allow us to discover, explore, integrate and celebrate our current Story of meaning. As a result, spiritual practice informs who we know ourselves to be, which in turn shapes the way we live within, and act upon, our world.

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Our Story of meaning comprises the responses we discover to the time honored spiritual questions we pose. Questions such as, "Where did we come from?" "What is our purpose?" "Where do we go when we die?" "Is there a God?" Such spiritual questions and the responses we discover are not divorced from everyday living, for we pose our spiritual questions within the limits of our current knowledge, beliefs, values and lived experience and discover responses within the same horizon. As our life

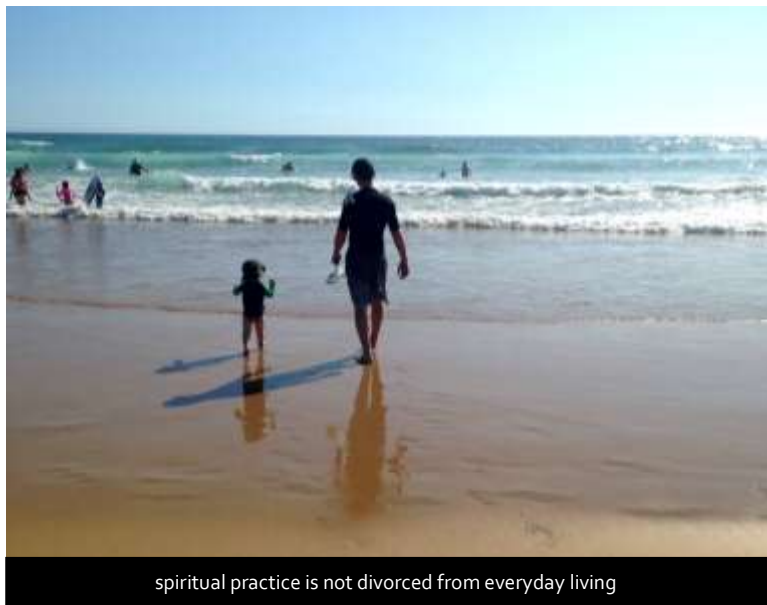


photo by Hayley Cornish

experience expands so does our knowledge base. In response to an ever expanding knowledge base, the responses to our spiritual questions may differ. Sometimes they may differ quite dramatically. For this reason there is no once-for-all-time response to our spiritual questions, which also means there is no once-for-all-time personal, cultural, or species Story of meaning. As a result our Story of meaning is not an end-in-itself, rather the means through which draw personal identity, purpose, belonging, and reverence, at any given time.

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The discipline of spirituality grounded within an integral framework

Our age of perspectives has begun to give way to the notion of an integral framework for understanding ourselves-in-our-world. An integral framework does not involve a grand narrative as such. Rather, an integral framework is one which both "transcends and includes"^{ix} all previous human experience. An integral framework breaks through and transcends the limitations of past knowledge, belief systems, and spiritual practices. At the same time it also includes that which continues to resound in our time and place in history.



photo by Kaye Twining

An integral framework is one which takes into account human history as a whole, within the awareness that the human community continues to participate in the evolutionary process of Life itself. Such an understanding gives rise to the term *the human tradition*.^x Therefore the discipline of spirituality which is grounded within an integral framework, draws from the enduring knowledge, beliefs, spiritual practices, and wisdom teachings which have emerged within the human community from ancient times until the present.

What is the nature of truth in our age of perspectives?

As previously stated, a perspective involves an opinion **about** a life or death matter. Truth on the other hand, involves a perspective which has been personally tried and tested **within** life and found to hold true . . . for

now. For example: going back to the example regarding war mentioned previously - If I was living, or, had lived through a war and I continued to hold the perspective that war is now an outdated mode of responding to conflict, then my perspective on war would become my personal inner truth.

Truth involves a perspective which has been personally tried and tested within life and found to hold true . . . for now.

I have found that personal inner truth seems to resonate within my whole being. It is experienced as a deep knowing; as a "choiceless acceptance out of understanding."^{xi} Such an experience differs from that of a perspective, which I experience within the region of my head. When my Story of meaning emerges from personal inner truth, "I live and move and have my being"^{xii} with inner freedom, compassion and communal responsibility. I am able to metaphorically *stand in my own ground*, where I experience personal authority.

How does personal inner truth shape our interactions with others, especially those who may hold conflicting personal truth? As we take the time to discern^{xiii} our personal inner truth we are able to move beyond the need to metaphorically *uphold our ground*. Rather, we are able to *stand in our own ground, openheartedly*. In turn, we are able to act in our world in accord with our values and beliefs, without assuming others will follow suit.

When in conversation with individuals who hold divergent personal inner truth, conversation will involve respect for, and of, each other and a willingness to metaphorically *see and hear one another*. Conversation in this manner will involve listening and responding without the need to defend our truth or acquiesce to the truth of the other.



photo by Kaye Twining

In summary

Since ancient times we humans have been Storytellers. We have posed our meaning giving questions and discovered responses which offered truth within a particular historical context. Such responses gave rise to a coherent Story of meaning. As we continued to pose our meaning giving questions within the light of current knowledge, beliefs and life experience, the responses we discovered differed. Sometimes the responses differed quite dramatically. Does this mean our Story is irrelevant fiction? No, it is possible for our Story to offer truth, as truth relates to meaning making.

I live in a cultural era which seeks meaning beyond a singular cultural Story of meaning; beyond a singular truth in the way we collectively give meaning to our living and our dying. Such a cultural shift has given rise to the notion that the term *truth* has been superseded by the term *perspective*. Within such a context, truth and perspective are viewed as two opposing concepts.

Through my reflection on both terms, I have discovered that truth and perspective are not two opposing concepts, neither are they one and the same. Rather, personal inner truth emerges from a perspective which has been lived from and into and found to hold true . . . for now.

Truth and perspective are not two opposing concepts, neither are they one and the same. Personal inner truth emerges from a perspective which has been lived from and into and found to hold true . . . for now.

ⁱ Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology*

ⁱⁱ The online English Dictionary

ⁱⁱⁱ Thomas Berry, www.thomasberry.org

^{iv} Alison Flood, The Guardian on 16/11/16

^v Kaye Twining, [www.treeoflife.org.au/resources/A contemporary experience of grace](http://www.treeoflife.org.au/resources/A%20contemporary%20experience%20of%20grace)

^{vi} Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology*

^{vii} James O'Dea, *Cultivating Peace*

^{viii} John Shea, *Stories of God*

^{ix} Ken Wilber et al, *Integral Life Practice*

^x Adams and McEntee, *A New Monasticism*

^{xi} This phrase comes from Vimala Thakar, *Glimpses of Raja Yoga*. Thakar employs this phrase in response to making a vow, however, for me the phrase also relates to my experience of personal truth.

^{xii} A phrase drawn from the Christian scriptures

^{xiii} Ann Hillman, *Awakening the Energies of Love*:

"Discernment is not figuring something out intellectually. It uses the powers of the body, heart and mind, together. It brings the whole body's wisdom to bear on a concern and the body as a whole resolves it. Joan Blackman . . . helped me to clarify the difference: 'Discernment is more contemplative than thinking. It is quiet, reflective. You allow whatever it is you're questioning to work itself through you. You wait . . . And you listen . . . And at some point you feel a sense of completion.' You can actually feel the resolution. There is a subtle shift inside as if something unsettling had settled down - like a billiard ball that had fallen into the right pocket."^{xiii}