

The truth will set you free

Lyn Bender

The truth, it is said, will set you free, but Julian Assange might question the veracity of this homily following his solitary confinement. Even now he remains under house arrest in Britain, and at the time of writing this, was awaiting a decision regarding his extradition to Sweden. Should this occur, his defence team fears that it is likely that the US will seek extradition. Assange might then find himself detained in Guantanamo, a recipient of the very abuses that he has exposed through Wikileaks (http://www.nytimes.com/2011/01/30/magazine/30Wikileaks-t.html?_r+1).

Bradley Manning, the 23 year old US Army Private accused of leaking classified documents to Wikileaks, is now being held in dehumanising solitary confinement for 23 hours a day. He may be said to be another truth-telling casualty. He has been the agent of revelations of atrocity and corruption in Iraq, but is himself at risk of the death penalty (http://www.salon.com/news/opinion/glenn_greenwald/2010/12/14/manning). The 'freedom' brought by truth has rarely been straight-forward, and many who have fought for it and its companion 'justice' may have experienced a liberation of soul and conscience but not of body. In fact fighting for and telling the truth often earns the labourer a heap of trouble and calamity.

There is a long list of those who have suffered imprisonment and sometimes violent death for advocating for truth and its exposition. These include:

Nelson Mandela, who served 27 years in prison in his fight for an end to apartheid in South Africa.

Martin Luther King who was jailed and later assassinated for enunciating his dream of a racially integrated America (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Assassination_of_Martin_Luther_King,_Jr).

Dietrich Bonhoeffer who denounced and resisted Hitler and was jailed and brutally hanged 23 days before the Nazi surrender (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dietrich_Bonhoeffer)

Catholic nun Mary Mackillop, declared a saint in 2010, who was excommunicated by the Catholic Church for five months after reporting child abuse by a priest (<http://australiaincognita.blogspot.com/2010/09/blessed-mary-mckillop-excommunicated.html>).

Galileo, who, forced to recant his support of the Copernican Theory of the Universe, spent the rest of his life under house arrest. The Heliocentric view was seen as contravening the understood earth-centric world order (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Galileo_Galilei).

And of course Jesus Christ was crucified for speaking God's truth.

These courageous people were all perceived as threatening the current (corrupt) order. They were seen as a threat to the powerful. But if the truth can imprison, knowledge is both powerful and dangerous. Sometimes it is seen by the 'self' as a threat to emotional security, even when this security is constructed on an emotional fault line. For example the denial of illness or of a partner's infidelity may be precariously maintained requiring extreme vigilance. Certain conversations may never be embarked upon. So many thoughts, feelings and ideas can never be reflected upon or understood. At any time disclosure could destabilise the thinly held false 'truth'. Therefore it is understandable that false reassurance may be aggressively maintained even in the face of clear evidence. The messages that we shoot down may be in our own minds. Another example of this is climate change denial, that has slowed down constructive responding to this enormous threat to us all (<http://newmatilda.com/2009/11/12/what-makes-climate-sceptics-tick>).

As Al Gore has revealed, the truth may be very inconvenient and will be resisted by powerful vested interests as well as those who may feel powerless to effect change. Those who oppose these truths and have lobbied to restrain action such as carbon pricing have held sway, while the first victims are often the poorer nations and the poorer people such as Tuvalu, the Maldives and Bangladesh.

Shakespeare in the 16th century wrote of Cleopatra attacking the messenger who brings the news of her lover Antony's marriage to Octavia in Rome. Denying unpalatable truth and shooting the messenger, seems to be a very old mechanism that we may all summon to avoid unwelcome knowledge. So the denunciation of Assange as a high tech terrorist by Vice President Joe Biden, and calls for him to be hunted down like Al Queda and the Taliban for his execution, can be seen as cries to literally shoot the messenger (<http://www.eurekastreet.com.au/article.aspx?aeid=244468>).

In my work as a therapist there is an assumption of the value of the search for truth. But when people seek therapy they often bargain with the truth. Having resisted the need for change, they come to therapy when this stance has become untenable. But the alcoholic may fight against accepting that his addiction to alcohol had lead to chaos and loss. Until this recognition happens, progress is unlikely. Much of therapy is the struggle to understand one's own truth and to 'know thyself'. Therapy usually progresses from empathy for the pain, to the need ultimately to confront one's own demons. The therapist may fall victim to blame and rejection (negative transference) for the message that she is now delivering. There are pleas for her to become, or return, as the benign therapist (positive transference) who soothed rather than revealed the need for change. At this point some leave therapy or go in search of a 'kinder' therapist who makes them 'feel' better. However if they can continue past this point of 'resistance', they find that there are chances for transformation. Lives can change. Those who come ready to know themselves and with some awareness of their own limits, flaws and agency may experience therapy with relief. At last they no longer have to pretend or defend. It is a place where truth can be sought, found and be made welcome. It can lead to greater intimacy with family and friends and greater belief in oneself. For while the false self as the impostor is operating in the world, it receives little of true value and may be starved for intimacy and connection. The false self may deny its own vulnerability and therefore be blind to the vulnerability of others. The false self remains a wooden protective caricature of the person within, and may become entranced with this public persona, thereby losing track of the true 'self'.

This leads to a sense of emptiness, despite all outer achievement. The connection between our reluctance to accept personal truth and Wikileaks expose may not seem obvious to many. Is not the issue with Assange that of the security of nations and what occurs in therapy secretive and subject to confidentiality? In both, human common dynamics are the key to understanding the vociferous denouncing of Assange on the one hand and our fear and denial of unpalatable truth. Those in therapy may want an acceptable universe and authorities that operate in that often spouted cliché, 'the national interest'. Like children who need to trust their parents, we want to believe that governments are basically benign or at least will act in our national interest. Perhaps we wish to tacitly hand the reins to them as caretakers of our wellbeing. We give tacit permission to them to 'do what you need to do on our behalf.' Like the law passed during Bill Clinton's presidency regarding gays serving in the army – 'don't ask, don't tell' meant that being gay had become a problem in the Armed Forces when it ceased to be a secret. This secrecy has now been challenged as promoting discrimination.

Julian Assange has crossed both these lines. He has asked and he has told. He has revealed and facilitated the questioning. The original biblical version of this was "And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free". Like an 'accidental' therapist for the corrupted aspects of the global community, Julian Assange is a messenger to the global citizen who is intent on 'trying to keep the bastards honest'. Many may seek to repress and to discredit his message but like most truth-sayers Assange's intent will be vindicated by time. Many 'prophets' whom we now venerate were denounced or persecuted in their own time.

How is this relevant to social justice issues and human rights? To my mind it impacts on all fringe dwellers in our society. Consider the lies promulgated about particular groups that have remained unchallenged for centuries. Being gay was promulgated as an aberration thereby setting back the attainment of equal rights, in fact allowing persecution and imprisonment and denying legitimacy or the right to marry. This allows a whole raft of discriminatory practices that are psychological, social and most obviously legal. Similar issues have an impact on the lives of indigenous people. Classified as 'Fauna', they were denied the right to vote until 1967 (<http://www.smh.com.au/news/national/when-i-was-fauna-citizens-rallying-call/2007/05/22/1179601412706.html>).

If old lies and prejudices remain, stigma is promoted. The exposure of poor practice and cover ups (such as what occurred with the stolen generations), can pave the way for attitudes, practices and legislation that will work for people who have been disadvantaged by the prevailing system. Marginalised people and the populace that are kept in the dark have impaired vision. Some esteemed commentators have argued that Wikileaks will only encourage greater cover-ups and lies. As an argument against the publishing of secret documents, it is ironic. The charge is, after all, about the public denial of important facts and truths about operations, which allow governments, corporations and powerful individuals to remain unchecked and unaccountable. To say that due to Wikileaks, governments will only be less liable to frankly and freely record conversations, or subject to disclosure of commands and facts, is hardly a noble riposte. Other critics of Assange have confused privacy and appropriate confidentiality with the right to know what governments are doing and saying in our name.

But the accountability that Wikileaks proposes does not mean that privacy in intimate relations such as personal therapy or medical records should be placed in the same category and as open to scrutiny. But even here records must be kept and in

cases of possible harm, confidentiality may be challenged. Assange has himself made the distinction regarding medical records, declaring that he endeavours, as much as possible, to safeguard lives in the process of disclosure. His leaks have been vetted by newspapers with integrity, including the Guardian and the New York Times.

So despite some human and personal flaws in this modern day 'internet warrior', he is on balance, heroically championing the truth that will promote the rights of the so-called common man. I hope that the truth will indeed set many free, including Julian Assange.

Biographical Note

Lyn Bender is a psychologist who was arrested and jailed briefly as a protestor in the Franklin River Blockade.