

Taking Back Control: Discerning Truth and Finding Clarity in the Complex Information Age

by Alexandra Ratcliffe

Thank you to every one of the 2025 Initiative for organizing this gathering and inviting me to share today on this very relevant topic on the day of the Aries full moon. A happy and blessed start of the new astrological cycle to everyone and thank you for finding the time to come together this weekend.

The topic of today's talk is "Taking Back Control: Discerning Truth and Finding Clarity in these worrying times and in the Complex Information Age".

We know the keynote for Aries is, "I come forth and from the plane of mind I rule", and that the esoteric ruler of Aries is Mercury, the god of communication, the messenger of the gods, and also known as the principle of illusion.¹

It is appropriate then that we will be discussing the challenges of finding our way through illusions to clarity and truth.

We are told in the Alice Bailey writings that it is the Dweller on the Threshold that needs to be recognized and overcome, and that this dweller is illusion-glamour-maya. Maya being "that vital, unthinking, emotional mess in which the majority of human beings seem always to live."² We are told also that only the intuition can dispel illusion, and hence the need for "training intuitives". She writes, "If you can overcome glamour in your own lives, and comprehend the nature of illusion, your general contribution will help in wider human issues. "And she continues, "The acuteness of the intellect, and the illumination of the mind, plus love, will accomplish much".³

We are reminded that Roberto Assagioli teaches in his "Act of Will": "I have a mind, but I am not my mind. It is a valuable tool of discovery; its contents are constantly changing; thus, it cannot be myself". We need to use the mind to bypass the mind to contact the Source which gives us the energy and the inspiration to do the work, and to discover truth. **For Jesus said "If ye continue in my word, then are ye my disciples indeed; and ye shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free".⁴**

¹ Alice Bailey, *Esoteric Astrology*, p. 272

² Alice Bailey, *Glamour a World Problem*, p22

³ Ibid. p, 24

⁴ John 8:31-31

Just as there are succeeding planes of body, mind and spirit, so too are there different levels and meanings of truth, ranging from concrete factual through subtle to Absolute Reality.

For a moment let's imagine that it was, let us say, 2000 years ago yesterday, on Good Friday, when Jesus the Christ stood before his accusers. We are told, he was mostly silent, except for this: He said: "For this cause came I into the world: to bear witness to the truth."⁵

Pontius Pilate, upon hearing this, replied: "What is truth?" and he did not stay for an answer.⁶ The story of the crucifixion and resurrection elucidates what happened after that.

What did Pilate mean when he asked, "What is truth?" This has been much debated. Was he angry, fed up; did he shout, "*What is truth?*" Or was he stunned into a kind of self-reflection, "What *is* truth?" Or was he mocking, as many suggest, "What is *truth?*"

This last possibility, dismissive, as if to suggest that there is no such thing as truth, that all truth is relative anyway, and who knows what truth is? This would very much correspond to a prevailing attitude today defined as the "Post-Truth" era. The term "Post-Truth" is defined as: "*Denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than that which appeals to emotion and personal belief*". In other words, *feeling and emotion* are at the heart of the Post-Truth culture, as opposed to rationality and fact. This term also refers to the concept that in today's world, truth is not just relative, but also quite personal, and not necessarily related to facts at all. And what are facts? They are also thought to be relative.

If honesty is the foundation of character, then truth is the essential base upon which democratic society is built. In his recent book called "*On Tyranny*" Yale history professor, Timothy Snyder, writes: "To abandon facts is to abandon freedom. And if nothing is true, then no one can criticize power because there is no basis upon which to do so."⁷

So, what are the facts? And how do we find them out? What we experience across all media today, is the obfuscation of facts, the deliberate creating of misinformation and even the withholding of the actual truth. We ask: What really happened? What did they *actually* say? And then we must ask, "What did

⁵John 18:37

⁶Sir Francis Bacon, "*Of Truth*" (Kessinger Publisher. 2010)

⁷Timothy Snyder, *On Tyranny* (Bodley Head, March 2017)

they actually *mean*? And what *didn't* they say?" Thus, we enter a whole different realm of our *own* perception, and discernment.

We can try out this fun practice to sharpen our wits anytime, any day, by just listening to politicians speak. To anyone.

But to return to a key aspect of our subject: the confusing flood of information. How much of the information we hear in media is based on what someone said, that someone said someone said. Like the Telephone game.

Think back to not very long ago, before the internet, how information was shared: handwritten letters, telephone calls. Before that, messages were carried on horseback. In *ancient times*, there were orators in the market place, they gave out pamphlet literature; then official publications expanded. The Church and the theatre influenced public opinion. The building of roadways facilitated the spreading of information.

And there was the big revolution: Gutenberg's printing press which printed the first Bible. By 1500, printing presses were in operation throughout Western Europe and had already produced more than twenty million volumes. The invention of the telegraph, photography, broadcasting, radio and TV, and then computer technology, each of these increased new *forms* of information and the speed at which it could travel, and in unprecedented *quantities*.

As early as the 17th century, it was widely recognized *that information could be used to modify public opinion in a desired direction*.⁸ Propaganda is defined as "*information that is not objective but used to influence or further an agenda or promote an emotional response*". Propaganda was used during the Reformation, the American and French Revolutions, and reached heights of organized dissemination during the First and Second World Wars.

With the advent of television came a whole new means of persuasion to alter the thoughts of the public, with not just words but sound, music and images. And then came advertising, with its dubious messages.

It is an eye-opening study to look at the life and work of a very little-known figure today, whose potent influence throughout the 20th century and into modern times has never really ceased. His name is Edward Bernays, an Austrian American and he is known as the Father of "Public Relations", a term he invented to replace the word 'propaganda' which fell into disrepute after WWII. Now called, public relations, propaganda has a prominent role in the work of

⁸ Edward Bernays, *Crystallizing Public Opinion* (Liveright Publishing, 1923)

most peacetime governments. Today we generally accept PR as being ubiquitous and moderately innocent.

To understand that it isn't, and to recognize the importance of the influence of Bernays, we may peruse his books, such as "Crystallizing Public Opinion," and the excellent documentary series on YouTube called "The Century of the Self",⁹ about Bernays and how the modern American mind came to be so readily manipulated upon, early in the 20th century. The title refers to the modern individual, whose thoughts and fears and desires, are cleverly and deliberately tapped into, for the purpose of spreading certain ideas, achieving certain goals and for the financial or political gain of a few.

Bernays lived to be 103, became a millionaire, was employed by celebrities and presidents to improve their public image, and by big corporations, advertising companies, *and* multinationals. His uncle was *Sigmund Freud*. It is said that before Freud, people didn't know or talk so much about feelings, and emotions, or seem them as being significant to the constitution of human beings. Freud *uncovered* the feelings, and the subconscious, but his *nephew*, Bernays, realized that these could be manipulated, and for substantial profit.

Everyone wanted to employ Bernays. It is said that Goebbels read his books and employed his methods. The tobacco industry is one of the many that employed Bernays to devise propaganda to *convince and influence* women to smoke, which until then was taboo for a female. This he very successfully did. Women were sold the idea that cigarettes would make them look independent, attractive and powerful. He invented the phrase and promoted the message that cigarettes, for women, were "Torches of Freedom".

We may understand the complexity, and unfortunately, the corruptible nature of international relations today, through reading the blue book *Problems of Humanity*, written in the 40's and particularly in the chapter entitled: "The Problem of Capitalism and Labour." But we can also look into the story of Edward Bernays, Guatemala and the United Fruit Juice Company and what took place in the 50's which is all documented; how the Guatemalan Democrat-Socialist president was overthrown by government and intelligence services through the help of the propaganda of Edward Bernays, who helped convince US citizens that the newly elected president of Guatemala was a communist. Abetted by the fears of the American people of a supposed communist threat *on their door step*, Guatemala and the overthrown Democratic president, never

⁹"The Century of the Self" -<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DnPmg0R1M04>

recovered from this event. The then VP Nixon went on tv to rejoice that ‘the people’ had overthrown a communist regime. It is an early example, of the use of propaganda Today this is known as, “psychological operations”.

This is what Bernays calls: “*The Engineering of Consent*”, which Noam Chomsky also refers to frequently in his many books and talks,

What is the engineering of consent? It is in part the influencing of society and of public opinion, using advertising, images, words, slogans, news headlines, which taps into the fears and concerns of ordinary people and thus gather public support for certain ideas and programmes of their government, and often and in particular, for war. It was Bernays who worked with President Woodrow Wilson to garner Americans’ support for the first WW with his invention of the phrase: “to make the world safe for democracy”. We all remember before the Iraq war, the soundbite- “Weapons of Mass Destruction”- WMD’s which engendered so much fear, and then consent. But never existed.

The engineering of consent takes place in numerous ways and for many purposes: how many ideas about life, and death, about your country and especially *other* countries, about *other* races and religions, about values in society, and about drugs and sex and violence, have you or your children absorbed and formed over many decades of exposure to news and films, images and information? And who determines and controls those things in the multi-media that we are told to think and to believe? And for what purpose are they so determined? *How many of those values have been formed, and thoughts adhered to, through our own independent thinking, discrimination and discernment?*

If we have been so fortunate in our lives to have been influenced by responsible and worthy teachers and parents, friends; or better yet, by the guiding light from within and above, then we may stop to consider the state of a person, a people or a society, which has not been so blessed, but whose opinions and beliefs have been formed by the influence of less worthy sources.

Which brings us to technology. Neil Postman, a respected cultural critic, wrote a well-known book called “Technopoly”,¹⁰ which chronicles our transformation as a society that *uses* technology to one that is shaped and even monopolized by it. “Technologies’ gifts are truly bountiful”, he writes, “but not without heavy costs. Are *we* controlling technology or is it controlling *us*?” He makes the valid point that with every new technology, we tend to rejoice and focus on what is *gained*, but also, always, there is something *lost*. Society tends not to see that.

¹⁰ Neil Postman. *Technopoly* (Vintage, 1992)

Another new, relevant little book by Catherine Price is called, “How to Break Up with Your Phone”.¹¹ It’s not only about phones but it’s about what she calls the real WMD’s in our lives: Wireless Mobile Devices. It’s humorous and well researched, offering helpful hints on how to “set yourself free from a life lived through a screen” and practical tips for taking back control from this technology.

Indeed, with continuous and constant conversations and connectivity, who will teach our children about real relationships and real connection? A valuable lesson, when first introducing children to the dazzling world of digital devices, and before they enter a life lived through a screen, would be to sit down with them and discuss: “What do you think is the difference between communicating with a real person, and this device? Let’s think about it.”

Catherine Price also writes of the new movement amongst young activists in technology like Evan Williams, ex CEO of Twitter, James Williams and Tristan Harris, ex-design ethicist for Google. and his organizations called ““Centre for Humane Technology” and “Time Well Spent”, which is a world-class team of former tech insiders and CEOs who are advancing thoughtful solutions to change the culture, business incentives, and design techniques that are driving how technology hijacks our brains. This group of bright young things. Some of them students of neuro-science, they have walked away from their careers in Silicon Valley, disillusioned with working in what is called “*the attention economy*”. The “attention economy” is defined as: “*an approach to the management of information that treats human attention as a valuable commodity*”. That is, a market which is dedicated to, fights for and profits from capturing your, and your children’s attention. A commodity which is your, our, most valuable personal resource in life. ¹² A NYT analysis calculated that as of 2014, FaceBook users were spending a collective nearly 40,000 years worth of attention on the site *every single day*. The global problems we face, Harris says, how to make democracy work, climate change...they require our undivided attention.

His insights are chilling: “Never before in history has the decisions of a handful of designers working at three companies had so much impact on how 2 billion people around the world spend their attention.” He says, “In the 70’s when you used your telephone, there were not a thousand engineers on the other side, working on how to be more persuasive”. He knows, having worked in the *Persuasive Technology Labs* at Stanford University. It’s no mystery, he points

¹¹ Catherine Price. *How to Break Up with Your Phone* (Orion Publishing, 2018)

¹² See Tristan Harris, *60 Minutes*, or “*Your Phone is Hijacking Your Brain*” YouTube

out, why Bill Gates and Steve Jobs were known to restrict their children's screen time; they knew something we don't: they're designed to be addictive.

These activists say: "Technology is never neutral. Companies are competing to touch your fear, anxiety or loneliness, and destroying our kids' ability to focus. It's what we call *a race to the bottom of the brain stem*, (or we might call it, a race to the lower chakras). We are creating a world of distraction. It is an uncontrolled global experiment of an entire business predicated on manipulation of the human mind. No one knows the long-term impact of these devices we carry around in our pockets." (unquote)

Goodness.

I don't know much about the brainstem, but as an educator I can say, these claims are not in the least exaggerated.

I once wrote a Mindfulness Article entitled: "Are You Connected?" I quote from it here:

"Although there was a time when a family in the same room, the same car, at the same table spoke to each other, perhaps there was never a time when strangers spoke to strangers on say, public transport. But today, casting a glance down the car of the train, *every person has a device and every device has sucked in a person*. Are we all strangers, strangely disconnected? Do we all want to be somewhere else, with someone else, every single moment?

A recent survey showed that 54% of people born in the internet age say that they prefer texting to talking to people. But 60% also said they felt that their family would benefit from "device free time". And rightly so. Because this is what happens: I am here with you and you are there with someone else. That's exactly what it is, in a room, at a restaurant, on the tube. I am here with you, friend, family or stranger, and you are talking with someone else and *are* somewhere else. In another study, 70% of people said the smartphone was ruining their romance or relationship. Their relationship with whom? Their partner? Or everyone here, now, as well?"¹³

Of course, this is not *us*; we may feel *completely* in control and that *we* use our WMD's, not that *they* use *us*. Good! We may have transcended the addiction that is so prevalent today; perhaps *we* are not the ones who respond like Pavlov's dog to every blip and beep of notification, nor are we the ones who are distracted when opening emails and suddenly find ourselves endlessly scrolling through Twitter or Facebook instead. But, nevertheless we will know someone

¹³ <https://www.everyday-mindfulness.org/everyday-mindfulness-are-you-connected/>

to whom it does apply, and it behoves us to understand: this has completely reshaped society today. For better or worse, (both good and bad) *it has changed everything.*

Now in considering this avalanche of information, influence and distraction in our search for clarity and truth, we cannot find a better discussion point than *Plato's Allegory of the Cave*. Put simply it is this: the people in this cave are chained to the walls and forced to look at shadows, and *for so long*, that they believe the shadows are real. When one prisoner is brought out into the light of the Sun, he is at first disoriented and cannot *believe* what he is told, that everything he now sees, up in the light, *is Real*. His eyes eventually adjust, and now he can even turn and face the sun, which is the ultimate source of *everything he can now see*. When he returns to the cave to free the other prisoners and tell them the truth about what is real, they violently resist any attempt to free them. (Plato says our lives are like prisoners chained in a cave, forced to believe in shadows)

So how does society, in the noise and complexity of the modern information age, lose its clarity and its touch with Reality and come to be confused or deluded (by the shadows?) Well here is another analogy and I hope you will follow it closely:

There's a term, in common usage now, for a kind of mind manipulation and it is called "gaslighting". It is derived from a play and then a 1940's movie called "Gaslight". "The Gaslight Effect" refers to the effect of hearing repeated untruths, contradictions and denials, until the listener or targeted individual or group, begins to *actually doubt their own perception*.

It attempts to *destabilize* the target and *delegitimize* their beliefs and the target's own comprehension of events. The term has been used in clinical and research literature, as well as in political commentary. This method and its effect is well known by those who wish to influence public opinion.

This film's message is very significant.

In the film, first the woman loses her freedom to her conniving husband who ultimately wants to drive her mad and *take over her wealth*. Out of love and foolishness, she gives up her power of choice to him and follows him blindly, allowing him to *limit her activities to what he has chosen for her to do*. She is enamoured, dazzled by her seemingly loving husband, but he dominates and badgers her, and incites fear. She's distracted.

First, she is dazzled; then she surrenders her will, her control, and becomes progressively more removed from the real world; then she loses her clarity.

Once she loses clarity, she doubts her own perception, becomes confused and starts to believe everything she is told. She is more and more susceptible to lies and illusion (he deliberately creates the illusion that the gas lights are flickering, and tells her that what she sees, the flickering lights, is not true). She no longer knows or remembers, who she is, and begins to go mad, which was *his* intention, in order to *rob her of her wealth*.

Eventually- spoiler alert- she is saved by grace and by a glimmer of light that comes from beyond her limited world, in the form of another person who by chance has momentary contact with her (because until now she has been imprisoned in her home by her husband). This person, this other truer influence, awakens her, step by step to reality (to what her husband is doing) and she begins to see the light. Her confusion is dispelled. She sees the truth and recognizes and remembers who she is and what she knows and what she needs to do; she takes back her power and throws off the influence of the villainous husband once and for all.

For our purpose here, we can substitute any number of sources, from modern life, of bedazzlement and distraction or malign influence in modern life. We can insert for example, the media; the distraction of celebrity; news that is not news but is entertainment; technology; breaking news which is always breaking; that useful little phone or tablet in our pockets we so love; gossip (the story behind the story) ; hearsay; an attention-seeking political leader; a friend , a relationship, or a teacher; someone or something that ignites our fear. These take our attention and cause distraction. Whatever it is, it has claimed our wealth and usurped our power.

The less we know who we are, the more we are confused and influenced by what others say. The woman in the film is led into a fog of doubt and can no longer discern truth and reality.

There is a powerful line from the Bhagavad Gita, which the Lord Sri Krishna spoke to Arjuna:

He said, **“Cleaving asunder with the sword of wisdom the doubts of thy heart which thine own ignorance hath engendered, follow the Path of Wisdom, and arise!”**¹⁴

¹⁴ Shri Purohit Swami, *Bhagavad Gita*, (Faber and Faber, 1935)

Perhaps unlike the woman, we *think* we have clarity; we are not mad; we are in control. So, we can afford to dig around in the cave, in the darkness, find out the real story behind the story (because we want to know) and this way we will eventually emerge into the light of knowledge.

But we can also ask ourselves, at any one time, how much do we need to know? I have, say, a new phone, a car or a new electrical appliance. They all come with a manual of instructions in many languages—I leaf through the 100 pages and ask myself, how much do I really need to know? I have a new dryer that, I am sure, walks and talks, but I have found the one setting that dries the clothes! Perhaps I am being ignorant and might be missing something that could transform my life. This is also true.

How much do I need to know, to function effectively and fulfil my purpose wisely?

A rule of thumb might be: if you really don't know very much, perhaps you need to know more. But if you know so much it's giving you indigestion, perhaps you maybe should know a bit less.

Another simple analogy: In the famous novel "To Kill a Mockingbird", the children get into great trouble by delving into the darkness of that haunted-looking house on the street where the scary man Boo Radley lives. They just couldn't stay away and leave it alone. Darkness is like that; people can't leave it alone. Did you have a questionable, spooky house on the street like that when you were a child? Do you have one now? Do you know what's going on behind *all* the walls in your neighbourhood?

It's a good thing we don't. But here's the key point:

Whatever we know, or we don't know, our service to humanity remains the same; it is this: *we need to heal the harm*. Whatever it is. If we know of harm, if we see or discover harm, and we are able to fix it, heal it, then *this* is what we are responsible to do. The harm to our planet, to our society, to our democracy, and to ourselves. And we are doing this, are we not, by the work and service we engage in, the groups and organizations we belong to and support, and the work of transformation of ourselves; that *also* is healing harm, that which is within, our unredeemed self, the hurt, pain or ignorance, which would stop us from reaching our highest potential.

And what is the key to this healing? Our *seeing*, through our attention. First, we see, we recognize; then we transform or heal. If we see no harm, no darkness, that's fine and good. Do you know that sentence that is always rolled out when there is a big cover up of anything? They say: "Move on. *There's nothing to see*

here”. But there is *always* something to see, to discern and to understand. In speaking about healing in relationships, the Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh says: “To be loved, is to be seen, to be recognized”. So, he says, first tell your significant other: “I see you” then “I am here for you”.

I heard these insightful words recently in a political drama which was full of dastardly deeds and intrigue. The character said: “When everything around you seems to be lacking in integrity, what do you do? You have to find it in yourself; you change the world from where you are standing.” ¹⁵

Assagioli said: First-Know Thyself- Then Master Thyself (that is, take control); then, Transform Thyself and thus, the world.

To master our thoughts, we must identify with the Master, not the thoughts. I am in control, not my thoughts. We become that which we identify with, or another way to say it: your life is what you pay attention to.

The earth is a veritable battlefield, a Kurukshetra, with the light and the dark, the lower and the higher battling it out. And the earth is quaking as the veils are being rent in twain. But the light, by its very nature, is the truth, the One and Only Truth, of who we really are, sparks of the eternal Divine Light.

There’s a Sufi story about a king who sent his servant into a far country to perform a mission; to Do Just One Thing. The servant found the country dazzling and distracting, and he returned to the King without having accomplished the mission for which he was sent. But he did do everything else.

William Wordsworth wrote:

*“Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting:
The Soul that rises with us, our life's Star,
Hath had elsewhere its setting,
And cometh from afar:
Not in entire forgetfulness,
And not in utter nakedness,
But trailing clouds of glory do we come”*¹⁶

¹⁵“Madame Secretary”. S.I Ep. 22

¹⁶ William Wordsworth. “*Intimations of Immortality*”

We have been sent here for a purpose, and it is a very high purpose indeed, not to be forgotten, lost in an iCloud of unknowing. We put our hands over our eyes and cry that it is dark

But every moment is an opportunity, to begin again, to uplift, to heal. Above the clouds, the air is clear, and the sun is always shining. Even at night. Now That. Is. A. Fact.

And here's another fact: Today, hundreds of people in your neighbourhood, and millions around the world if so fortunate, will get up, feed their families, and send them on their way with love. *This love is the warp and woof of humanity.* Until we hear this being broadcast in the news, we are simply not hearing the whole truth.

In the Gnostic Gospel according to the disciple Thomas, Jesus says: "If you will know yourselves, then you will be known, and you will know that you are the sons of the living father, but if you do not know yourselves, you are in poverty, and you are poverty".¹⁷

The world of breaking news, and shadows, of glamour and illusion *is* a world of poverty. "The only light that dissipates the fogs of glamour and confusion is the light of the soul".¹⁸

So we build the lighted house; lift our eyes to the hills; and saturate ourselves with sacredness

That we may not lose sight of the goal, the reason for which the king sent us into this country.

And that we may, as we celebrate this Easter, like the Christ, set our faces to go to Jerusalem, the place of peace; with love, determination and the power of our God-given will.

And so uplift humanity and bring heaven to earth.

¹⁷The Gospel According to Thomas , (Brill, 19959)

¹⁸Alice Bailey. *Glamour: A World Problem.*