

Hiding from Myself: The Pain and Power of Discovered Ignorance

I'm seldom the first person to know about things. Push notifications about our convulsing world overwhelm me, so I turned them all off. Quieting my mind, however, has come at a price. I've spent recent years deceiving myself. I thought I was filtering out the noise when, in fact, I was muting reality. I gasped this fact in June as I lumbered across Central Park inhaling Canadian smoke. No matter how delicately I curated my newsfeed, someone else's fire was burning my lungs.

Hauntingly like Covid, the Quebec wildfires alerted me to my physical vulnerability and that of my children. We had to mask again, except this time outside. No one was sure how long the smoke would linger. On June 29, Governor Hochul warned "Air quality is unhealthy in every corner of the state of New York."¹

Throughout this ongoing catastrophe, 1100 Canadian wildfires² have scorched more than 33 million acres of forest.³ While the United States

¹ Lola Fadulu, "[Wildfire Smoke: Smoke Canada Fires Stretches From Midwest to East Coast](#)," *The New York Times*, 29 Jun 2023, [accessed 5 Jul 2023].

² Rebecca Falconer, "[Canadian officials warn historic wildfire threat could persist into fall](#)," *Axios.com*, 13 Aug 2023 [accessed 15 Aug 2023].

³ Adam Voiland, "[Relentless Wildfires Canada](#)," *EarthObservatory NASA.gov*, 8 Aug 2023 [accessed 15 Aug 2023].

braced itself beneath the ashen veil of our northern neighbors, so too did Portugal, France, and Spain.⁴ And we all mobilized to battle the blaze; ten countries across five continents sent more than 1500 firefighters.⁵ This wasn't a Canadian problem everyone else could filter out; it belonged us all.

I'll admit sheepishly that reading about the firefighters, 400 of whom were American, was my way of seeking consolation. The story stirred pride amidst my alarm. I took credit for their bravery. "Look at all of us working together," I boasted to myself. I was missing the bigger picture.

A 2022 study from Gallup and Knight Foundation reports that nine in ten Americans follow at least one public individual for news and information.⁶ Why? Eighty percent say they like their personality, 70% find them entertaining, 66% affirm "they represent people like me."⁷ These public individuals are narrowcasters; they appeal to a niche audience, and

⁴ Bill Chappell, "[Smoke from Canada's wildfires darkens Europe's skies](#)," *NPR*, 27 Jun 2023 [accessed 5 Jul 2023].

⁵ Meagan Campbell and Dan Bilefsky, "[Canadian Wildfires Have Mobilized Firefighters from the U.S., Australia, France, and South Africa](#)," *The New York Times*, 29 Jun 2023 [accessed 5 Jul 2023].

⁶ Sarah Fioroni, "[From Institutions to Individuals: How Americans are now Looking to Public Figures for News and Information](#)," *The Knight Foundation*, 25 Apr 2023 [accessed 11 Aug 2023].

⁷ Telli Davoodi, "[Why Do Americans Turn to Individuals for News and Information? Personality, Trust, Perspectives Outside the Mainstream](#)," *The Knight Foundation*, 25 Apr 2023 [accessed 11 Aug 2023].

maintaining their followers transcends every other priority.⁸ Broadcasting simplifies information to appeal to a mixed multitude. In contrast, narrowcasting repels undesirable demographics. To cultivate comfort and loyalty, preferences of viewers or listeners drive content.⁹

While traditional news brands see news as what we should know, viewers 35 and younger see news partly as what they should know, but also what is useful, what is interesting, and what is fun to know.¹⁰ As algorithms increasingly balkanize information, we all become unwitting narrowcasters, led to encounter what is interesting and fun rather than what might be vital. This means that human interest stories about heroic firefighters supersede climate change articles in my newsfeed. I prefer stories with silver linings, and my habits, conscious or not, drive what I see.

As the fires raged, I sought a diversion in my summer reading list. *Braiding Sweetgrass*, by botanist Robin Wall Kimmerer, opens with the Iroquois creation myth of Skywoman. Her tale sparked my reckoning with the narrowcasting that had so problematically shaped my perspective.

⁸ Jason Mittell, "[Donald Trump doesn't need to broaden his appeal. The rise of cable TV explains why.](#)" Vox.com, 19 Oct 2016 [accessed 5 Jul 2023].

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Lucas Galan, Jordan Osseman, Tim Parker and Matt Taylor, "[How Young People Consume News and The Implications for Mainstream Media](#)," Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, Oxford University, Sept 2019 [accessed 11 Aug 2023].

In the beginning there was Skyworld. A hole formed through which Skywoman fell. Hurling downward, she saw only dark water. But in that emptiness many eyes gazed up. As Skywoman fell they saw it was a woman.

The geese nodded at one another and rose from the water. She felt the beat of their wings as they flew beneath to break her fall.

The geese could not hold her, so they convened a council. A great turtle offered his back. Gratefully, Skywoman stepped onto the dome of his shell. The others understood she needed land and the divers agreed to find some mud at the bottom of the water.

All the animals tried to help but the pressures of the deep were too great. Soon only the little Muskrat was left, the weakest diver of all. His small legs flailed as he worked his way downward. Before long, a stream of bubbles rose with his limp body. Muskrat gave his life to aid this helpless human; his paw still clenching a handful of mud. Turtle said, "Put it on my back and I will hold it."

Skywoman spread the mud over Turtle's shell and, moved by the gifts of the animals, she sang in thanksgiving, her feet caressing the earth. The earth grew as she danced her thanks, from the dab of mud on Turtle's back until the whole earth was made. Not by Skywoman alone, but from the alchemy of all the animals' gifts coupled with her deep gratitude.¹¹

Skywoman belongs to the Haudenosaunee People, who lived in what we today call Ontario, New York, and Pennsylvania. I remember feeling dread as I considered how vastly their creation story differed from ours.

For Skywoman, animals are capable of hospitality and sacrifice, and she is indebted to them for their graciousness and wisdom. I contrasted this story with the language of Genesis, "And God said, 'Let us make humankind in our image....They shall rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, the cattle, the whole earth...God said to them, 'Be fertile and increase, fill the earth and master it'"¹² The verbs "rule" and "master," reflective of a hierarchy I naïvely accepted, now dripped with arrogance.

¹¹ Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass* (Milkweed Editions: Minneapolis, 2013), pp.3-5.

¹² Genesis 1:26-28

Where in Torah was the alchemy between the animals and humans?

Where did God say that people and land could be good medicine for one another?¹³ The mutuality of the Skywoman story was exchanged for domination in Bereshit. I felt betrayed.

Clint Smith captured this feeling in his masterwork, *How the Word is Passed*, a survey about slavery remembrance¹⁴: "You get an eerie feeling....as though someone is talking to you who never had a voice...and all of a sudden, you feel very strange. It's not a feeling of guilt. It's a feeling of 'discovered ignorance.'"¹⁵

That eerie feeling of discovered ignorance filled me with unease. If animals could have voices and wills akin to human beings, how many others had been silenced? Was our Torah deficient or had I misread it? I sought out our sages desperate to find voices that could reconcile the gentle reciprocity of Skywoman with the seeming subjugation in Torah.

¹³ Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, p. x.

¹⁴ Julian Lucas, "[How America Remembers - and Distorts - Its Slavery Past](#)," *The New York Times*, 1 Jun 2021 [accessed 15 Aug 2023].

¹⁵ Clint Smith, *How the Word is Passed* (Little, Brown & Company, New York: 2021), pp.76-7.

The more I read the noisier my mind grew. I had missed so many voices. The one who spoke loudest was twentieth century sage Tikva Frymer-Kensky whose understanding of creation hinges on the phrase *tzelem Elohim*, image of God. She reads into Genesis that humans are avatars of God on earth, and, therefore, responsible for everything that happens. Human misdeeds impact the earth's fertility, polluting it, causing drought and famine. Frymer-Kensky reminds us that the earth sprouted vegetation on the third day, before human beings existed. The earth is fecund without human intervention, and it is also vulnerable to our transgressions. Frymer-Kensky's reading collapses the animal hierarchy that crowns humanity and insists that we and the earth are totally interdependent. Humans rely on the earth's creative powers and the fate of the earth is determined by human behavior.¹⁶

Dancing through my myopic filter, Skywoman collided with my unconscious obedience to a prolonged misreading of Torah. I grieved over my loss of confidence in Genesis and felt this gnawing sense that her story was more ethical. But the tradition of the Haudenosaunee People coupled with my sense of loss impelled me to emulate the muskrat and

¹⁶ Tikva Frymer-Kensky, "The End of the World and the Limits of Biblical Ecology (2001)" *Studies in Bible and Feminist Criticism* (Jewish Publication Society, Philadelphia: 2006), pp. 315-328.

brave the deep waters of Jewish text. To salvage the life-giving wisdom embedded in Torah, I had to reach passed what I knew, what made me comfortable.

That eerie feeling, as though someone was talking to me who never had a voice...and all of a sudden, I felt very strange.¹⁷ Narrowcasting might help tune out the noise, but who do we silence when we so carefully curate the channels that nourish and educate us? What delusions do we sustain, and what revelations do we disregard? I was proud of the heroic firefighters, but I never paused to think of the billions of plants and animals incinerated by the flames. Before Skywoman, I neglected to consider earth as a leading character in the unfolding story of humanity.

Right after creation, God subjects Adam and Eve to narrowcasting. "Of every tree of the garden you are free to eat; but as for the tree of knowledge of good and evil, you must not eat of it, for as soon as you eat of it, you shall die."¹⁸ God seeds the notion that knowledge is harmful. And so it's no wonder that Adam and Eve experience that eerie feeling of

¹⁷ Clint Smith, *How the Word is Passed* (Little, Brown & Company, New York: 2021), pp.76-7.

¹⁸ Genesis 2:16-17

discovered ignorance when they taste the fruit and hide, Adam saying, “I was afraid because I was naked.”¹⁹

Ignorance is nakedness is vulnerability. Only because Eve deigns to defy God’s narrowcasting is her intelligence kindled. The flame of curiosity and godliness ignites inside of her and the husband she feeds. “And Adonai Elohim said, ‘Now they have become like any of us, knowing good and bad.’”²⁰ Adam’s fear is justified. There is no knowledge of *tov*, good, without knowledge of *ra*, evil. We might share our heroes, collaborating across borders, but we do that because the world is on fire.

In the Vidui liturgy of Yom Kippur, we imagine God as the unfiltering funnel of human behavior. The very opposite of narrowcasting, nothing is muted, nothing is hidden from God’s sight. And we call God’s way *emet*, the way of truth.²¹

When we consider how we have strayed, are we willing to acknowledge the habit of abetting our own ignorance? The ways we filter to protect

¹⁹ Gen 3:7-10

²⁰ Gen 3:22

²¹ *Vidui Zuta, Mishkan HaNefesh: Yom Kippur* (CCAR, New York: 2015 | 5776), p. 298.

ourselves? With compassion, let us name the fear that tells us to mute what discomfits or disorients us, and resolve in the new year to approach the world like Eve and Adam, with fresh eyes, unplugged ears, and open hearts.

Expanding the circle of our concern enables us to weave a more durable existence. We need neither the simplicity of broadcasting, nor the sieve of narrowcasting to construct reality. Instead, we can evince the bravery of the noble muskrat, propelled ever deeper by our curiosity and our grappling, our fear and our selflessness, to uncover truth that creates worlds.