

**12@12**  
**How Lies Fail Us All**  
**February 19, 2015**

I would like to show you a few pictures, and I would like to see if you can find the common thread. It shouldn't be very hard. Each of the photos shown involves someone who has been caught lying in one fashion or another. From Watergate to Benghazi and from Brian Williams to this year's Little League National Championship team, statements were made and actions were taken that were found out later to have little basis in fact.

Although I have shown you photos of those who have been recently caught in lies, I think a quick glance of history will show us that dishonesty is nothing new. There have always been those who have sought to further their own cause or undercut others' through fabrication. But it seems to me that any confidence we might have placed in human testimony has taken a serious ding as of late. Who would have thought that a news anchor of a national news provider would make up stories about his involvement in a combat zone? And could we have ever dreamed that a Heisman candidate from vaunted Notre Dame, as was Manti Te'o, would tell a nation about the death of his girlfriend only to find out later that the girl never existed?

What is sad about these stories is not just that those I have mentioned were caught in a web of lies (whether they be their own or that of others'), but that the whole scene chews away at a foundational building block of knowledge. And that building block is human testimony.

I would guess that many of us would say that we believe what we believe because we have given it a good deal of thought or because we have examined all the evidence. But most often that isn't true. Most of what we hold as knowledge isn't based on well-reasoned arguments or a grand preponderance of evidence but rather on more basic foundations—foundations like memory, sense perception, and human testimony.

Let me explain. I would guess that many of you hold a great deal of things to be true about your childhood. You hold it true that you

climbed up a tree in your neighborhood, snuck out of the house one night without your parents knowing, or dressed a doll to look like Michael Jackson. You may have no proof that any of those things happened, but nonetheless you hold it to be true because you remember it happening, and your memory is a great source of knowledge for you.

Or consider the globe that is on the stage today. When you came into today I could have asked you if you thought there was a globe on the stage. And you would have probably said yes. In response I could have said, "Why do you believe it. You have not tested to see whether it was really there. You have not conferred with other eye witnesses." And you would have said, "I believe there is a globe on the stage because I can see it." For you, sense perceptions are a good source of knowledge and you rely on them.

Think now of what you learned in the classroom over the years. How much of it was supported with rigorous proof? The teacher told you certain things about American history or about how a cell works and you took them at their word. You may have even flaunted your new found knowledge to others even though you did nothing to confirm what was passed on to you. You simply believed what you believed because you trusted human testimony as a reliable source of knowledge.

You see, throughout our days we come to significant conclusion, we pick up knowledge, not because we have spent hours pondering an issue or because we have tested and proven everything we consider to be a fact, but because we trust basic sources of knowledge like memory, sense perception, and human testimony.

Now, at this point, you might say, "We may trust memory, and sense perception, and human testimony, but they can fail us." And indeed they can. Even with our best efforts we will sometimes remember things incorrectly or think we see something that is not really there. But imagine if we could not trust these sources of knowledge at all.

Imagine a world in which your memory begins to play tricks on you. You recall things of your past only to find out later that they never happened. Or let's suppose you lose your memory and suddenly cannot

draw upon it. You do not know where you were born, you don't remember that you must regularly check your fuel gauge, you have no idea who the people are in your family. Perhaps you have seen this very loss of memory in some member of your family. The erosion of memory would clearly impact life at the deepest level.

Or consider the loss of reliable sense perception. Suppose you begin seeing people who are not there. That was the case for John Nash, the Princeton math professor featured in the movie *A Beautiful Mind*. For a period of his life, Nash could not discern between that which he actually saw and that which was just in his mind. If you saw the movie, you know how dysfunctional that made him. For a time he had to be institutionalized and drugged.

Now, let's consider human testimony. What if we couldn't trust it as a source of knowledge? What if we couldn't believe what a teacher told us or the instructions given to us by a colleague? What if we couldn't trust our parents when they told us not to cross the street or the pastor when he tells us of the historicity of the resurrection of Jesus? What if we couldn't trust the man or woman who tells us, "I love you"? It seems to me that would make for a very dysfunctional society. It would be a world in which so much knowledge would cease to flow.

Now, if you are a regular at 12@12, you can tell this talk is quite a bit different than ones I normally give. Usually I try to give you insights that might be helpful in your personal or professional life. Today is more of a social commentary. I have hope that has been okay with you. I have done so today, because from time to time I think someone must put a stake in the ground or wave a flag and cry, "Danger! We don't want to go there!" In this case, we don't want a world full of lies.

We should be able to trust a teacher when they tell us something. We should be able to trust a politician when they tell us how money is being spent. We should be able to trust the FDA when they tell us a drug is safe. We should be able to trust a news anchor when he or she tells us what is happening on the other side of the globe. You see, lies like those represented in the photos earlier or the ones we might be tempted to tell aren't just about the people who tell them. Or even about the people who are immediately affected. They are about all of us. Lies fail all of us.

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