

When being wrong can feel right



SHIFTING IMAGES

MILIA ALI

I never imagined that most of the values and precepts I learned while growing up would become dated and rendered almost irrelevant during my lifetime. In particular, the lessons in humility that our parents and teachers taught us seem to have simply gone out of the window. I wonder what happened to the oft-repeated adages that our elders were wont to quote in the belief that these would help us live a more meaningful and fulfilling life? For example: "Be like the bamboo; the higher you grow, the more elegantly you bow when faced with hard winds," or "True humility is staying open to learning, regardless of how much you already know."

Some people tend to make a subtle distinction between intellectual and overall humility. Mark Leary, the Duke University social and personality psychologist, describes intellectual humility as "the recognition that the things you believe in might in fact be wrong." However, I think that at a basic level, the two overlap for people who lack overall humility tend to be intellectually arrogant. What's critical is not to make the common mistake of equating humility with a dearth of confidence, or self-esteem. Actually,

humble people have a deeper sense of self-worth and remain secure when challenged intellectually. It is quite difficult to identify the reasons for the overbearing behaviour of the *nouveau riche* and the parvenus. But the sudden acquisition of wealth, power, and/or social position is a major contributing factor. Only few remain unaffected by this affliction. Why? It seems nature has not equipped us to



contain sudden success with equanimity and humility. Unfortunately, social media, especially Facebook and Instagram, have taken boasting to a pandemic level. Most readers must be quite familiar with self-aggrandising messages and narcissistic photos on social media from friends, family, and even remote acquaintances around the globe.

Recently, I noticed a video posted by a Facebook acquaintance in a bathrobe, captioned: "After a shower at the first-class lounge in Dubai airport." It seems that there is no escaping the ridiculous propaganda blitz! Regrettably, social tolerance for people who brag is on the increase. The errant behaviour is often passed off as "silliness" or at best as harmless bantering. I guess some degree of boasting is inevitable (it has always existed), but we cannot understate its negative side-effects. For instance, by hogging the entire conversation, the braggart crowds out the chances of a meaningful interaction with people that one can truly learn from. Another, perhaps unintended, effect of boasting is that it makes others feel inadequate, or at worst inferior. While initially most

people are overwhelmed, even impressed, by the self-propagators, over time friends and acquaintances find the company of narcissists and boasters tedious. Unfortunately, humility is easier to preach than practice, especially in the current global culture that promotes and rewards overconfidence and arrogance—starting from the career counsellor who dissuades interviewees from demonstrating even a minimal level of ignorance to social acquaintances who often equate modesty with weakness and ignorance. Over the past few decades, status and material success have overtaken moral and ethical values and principles. We seem to have turned off our analytical lens and no longer judge people on their intrinsic merit and character. This is bound to have long-term implications because by accepting the loudest and proudest view, we may be at risk of accepting ideas that may turn out to be erroneous. Historically, intellectual humility is what has led to great discoveries and inventions. One illustration is the scientific method where a scientist actively works against her own hypothesis, exploring alternative explanations for a phenomenon before settling on a conclusion. How can we inculcate and promote humility? We need to work harder at convincing people and ourselves that a person who admits he is wrong is perhaps the most secure in his

knowledge. At a personal level, humility helps us acquire valuable character traits like introspection, self-awareness, and respect for diverse ideas and views. Since humble people are more open to learning from others, they develop better analytical and cognitive skills and are constantly evolving. They are thus more likely to change the status quo for the better. We also need to underscore the role of chance and opportunity in our success. Most successful people have a high sense of their achievement and attribute it to their superb skills and acumen. The realisation that a large part of our success depends on good fortune can take the steam out of our high opinion of ourselves. Perhaps, the best argument I can offer in favour of humility is through my personal experience. When I open myself up to the vastness of my own ignorance, I can't help but feel claustrophobic. Often I imagine my mind as a small boat adrift in uncharted waters, without a clear map. The waves of hubris and ignorant bragging are constantly trying to veer me off course. Hence, I need to muster humility and forbearance to accept diverse views and understand that each one of us is only a piece of the whole puzzle. Could I be wrong? Maybe. If you disagree, try to convince me otherwise—for I am always open to the challenge of reasoning!

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A short history of fake news

KURT JACOBSEN and SAYEED HASAN KHAN

FAKE news isn't what it used to be. Before President Trump seized and exploited the term, fake news consisted of plain old partisan propaganda, government disinformation, corporate PR and, least appreciated and most widespread, the press lazily acting as stenographers of power.

Indeed, Trump's favourite example of "fake news" is any journalist who dares to deviate from whatever he tweets in his self-absorbed role as the most powerful political leader on the planet. So neither is it true that all news is fake or that fake news is a myth, it's the rabidly personal dimension that sets Trump's complaints far apart from those of many serious media critics. At far apart moments, Trump does have a point, but the notion of appointing a proud chronic liar as the supreme arbiter of the truth is hardly a remedy. A fascinating memoir by investigative journalist Seymour Hersh, entitled *Reporter: A Memoir*, reminds us that schemes by Trump (and some of his opponents too) to control the spin of the news are old hat. Not all journalists are dauntless pursuers of truth. Lifelong exceptions such as Robert Fisk, Greg Palast, Patrick Cockburn, Jeffrey St. Clair, Pepe Escobar, John Pilger and a few others come to mind, but they hardly would fill a newsroom. Of them all, no one has yielded more important stories, and to the deep displeasure of angry governments, than Seymour Hersh. For this unwavering scrupulous work he now is exiled from mainstream US media. Hersh's odyssey—and an odyssey is a journey filled with perils—is an instructive one. His first lesson in early 1960s Chicago, long before Black Lives Matter erupted, was that scribblers who want to survive do not contradict police lies, especially when told about ghetto blacks. The cub reporter was appalled. Later, when he doggedly unearthed the My Lai massacre case (where an

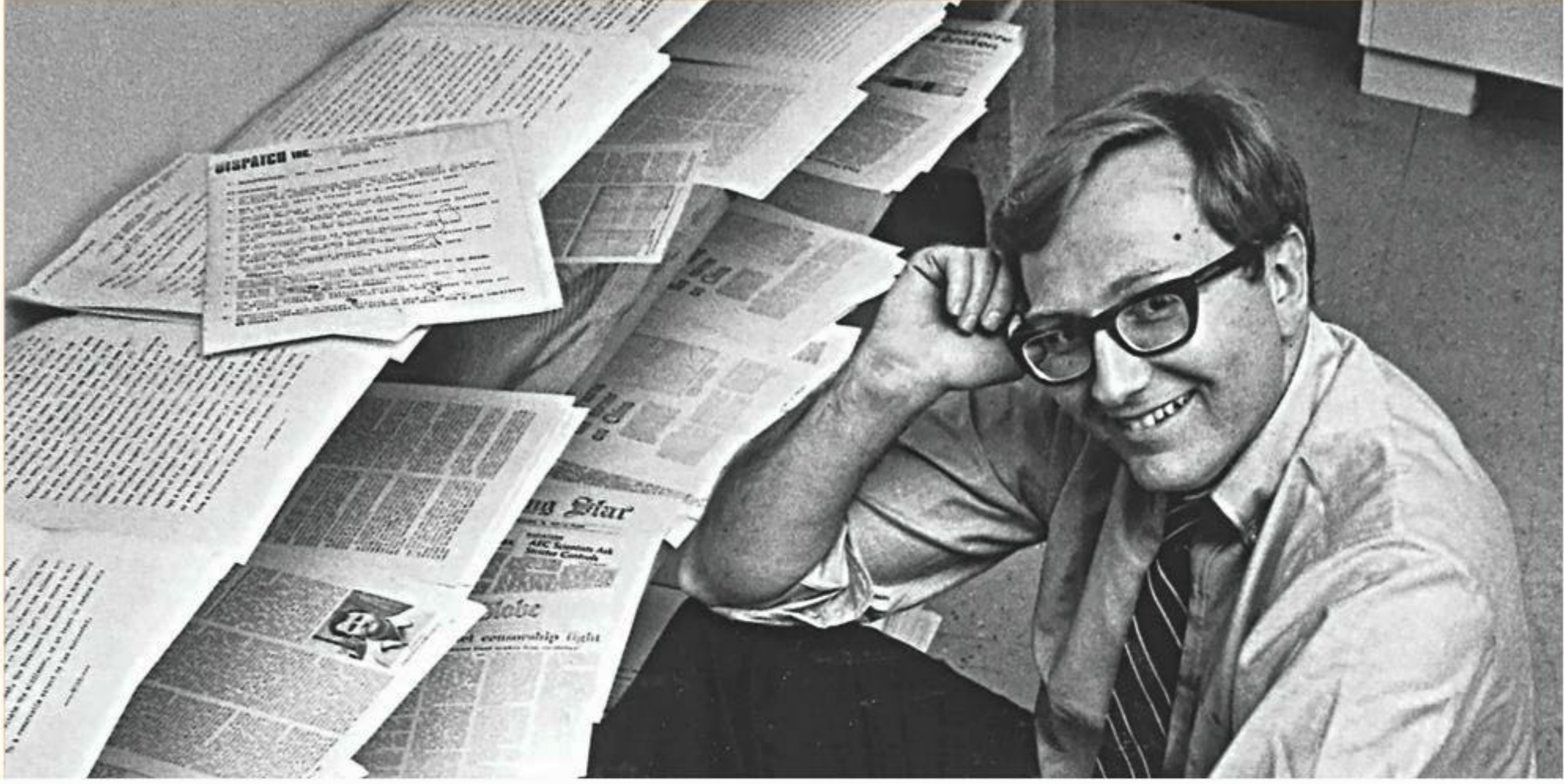
Hersh even upset the heroic US narrative of the Bin Laden raid. Yet the toughest case he encountered, far more so than government probes, was a major corporate crime investigation, which was buried under a blizzard of lawsuits.

American infantry unit murdered hundreds of Vietnamese civilians), he soon found himself "frightened by the extent of self-censorship I was encountering in my own profession." One prominent colleague called Hersh "a lying son of a bitch". A *New York Times* editor primly opposed printing the shocking story because of concern about "adverse consequences for America". What is the reasoning here? That repugnant activities must be concealed so that perpetrators can do it again? And that supposedly will boost America's reputation and the reputation of the press that suppresses the news? Atrocities in Vietnam, Hersh observes, began virtually from the day that American military forces splashed ashore in 1965 but no correspondent dared relay the news. Hersh eventually wrote two books about My Lai, one about the slaughter itself, and another on the devious cover-up. The journalistic heroism depicted in the films "All The President's Men" and "The Post", where reporters help bring down the Nixon administration, is rather rare. Hersh got hold of an internal Pentagon memo attesting, despite public denials, that it could "reliably monitor a Test ban treaty with

the Soviet Union", which the *Washington Post* spiked when the Pentagon brazenly denied it. Hersh rebuffed *New York Times* editors who insisted that he run his stories by Henry Kissinger in the White House and CIA Director Richard Helms, who were the "architects of the idiocy" he was busy investigating. Ready for more? Hersh disclosed that the US Chemical and Biological Weapons programme, despite Nixon's official ban, continued and that the "promulgation of rules was little more than a charade." A CIA Director of Operations was incensed that the *New York Times* did publish Hersh's piece on CIA drug running antics despite false denials. Hersh lauds lonely figures in the military and CIA who "were

ignored by the US because Nixon and Kissinger needed Pakistan dictator Yahya Khan as go-between in their opening to China. Hersh also pointed out that an extravagant project to raise a sunken Soviet sub was hatched when school lunch subsidies were getting cut, surveillance budgets on citizens raised, and the sabotaging of a democratic regime in Chile pulled off. The sheer moral numbness of government snoops is nearly amusing. When one Nixon White House aide's wife complained that she believed their phone was tapped, the FBI agent tapping it wrote to superiors that because it was a silent tap that she must have a persecution complex. Hersh, who notes Reagan in the Iran-Contra scandal "had been given a pass," also

instrumental too in exposing Abu Ghraib torture. There also is no Iranian nuclear weapons programme, despite the manufactured common wisdom saying otherwise. Hersh even upset the heroic US narrative of the Bin Laden raid. Yet the toughest case he encountered, far more so than government probes, was a major corporate crime investigation, which was buried under a blizzard of lawsuits. All of these cases doubtless are, in Trump's view, fake news. Today many of the government crimes Hersh exposed have been made legal under the guise of improving security. It is more dangerous for whistleblowers to expose malfeasances than ever. Except for a dying breed (though one hopes not) like Hersh there would be nothing



Investigative journalist Seymour Hersh (file photo) reminds us that schemes by Trump (and some of his opponents too) to control the spin of the news are old hat.

PHOTO: AP

troubled by what they knew," and leaked information of high misconduct. He thereby learned of secret Cambodia bombing, an illegal CIA spying operation on antiwar activists, and that the 1971 Bangladesh horrors were

found evidence of US government collusion in procuring key materials for Israeli nukes. The "road of death" aerial attacks on fleeing Iraqis in 1991 was ordered by a zealous general after a pledge of safe passage. Hersh was

but a tide of fake news to envelop us. Kurt Jacobsen and Sayeed Hasan Khan are well-known commentators and the authors of *No Clean Hands, Parables of Permanent War* and many other books. Copyright: *The Statesman/ANN*

QUOTABLE Quote

ERIC HOBSBAWM
(1917 - 2012)

British historian of the rise of industrial capitalism, socialism and nationalism

More history than ever is today being revised or invented by people who do not want the real past, but only a past that suits their purpose. Today is the great age of historical mythology.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

1 Mailing need

6 Pub game

11 Danger

12 Bring to bear

13 Protractor

measure

14 Brown tint

15 Move carefully

17 Tofu source

18 Winter weather phenomenon

22 Wrongful act

23 High-stepping aids

27 "Cats" poet T.S.

29 Get some shut-eye

30 Like some early space flights

32 Deceitful person

33 Envoy

35 Old horse

38 Fuel from bogs

39 Fill with wonder

41 Ear parts

45 Miser Marner

46 Japanese cartoon films

47 Make suitable

48 First performance

DOWN

1 Sauna site

2 Finger count

3 Bol. neighbor

4 Significant event

5 Cloth fold

6 Dry areas

7 Chopping tool

8 Workout count

9 Half of a sextet

10 Remain

16 Sinking signal

18 Article

19 Soda choice

20 " -- go brag!"

21 Grinding item

24 "Star Wars" heroine

25 Eye drop

26 Nimble

28 Violent weather

31 Game cube

34 Crouton's place

35 "Apollo 13" org

36 In the thick of

37 Fancy party

40 Ray-gun sound

42 Feeding time need

43 Outback bird

44 Determined

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YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

D	A	M	U	P		A	R	A	B	S
E	V	I	T	A		L	O	C	A	L
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BEETLE BAILEY

by Mort Walker

BABY BLUES

by Kirkman & Scott