

## Glasgow Unitarians 8 March 2020

### 1984 and all that....

#### Rev John Clifford

**First Reading:** Our first reading comes from the book, 1984 by George Orwell. This book tells the story of one Winston Smith, a mid-level manager in the Ministry of Truth of Oceania, whose job is to make history match the dictates of the oppressive dictatorial regime, personalised as Big Brother. Winston changes/ i.e. falsifies, documents and photographs and invents stories to twist history to fit the party line. He yearns to rebel and is caught and taken to the Ministry of Love to be re-educated. This re-education involved extensive and brutal torture. Here he is talking to O'Brien, his torturer: p265-266

**Second Reading:** Again from 1984 by George Orwell – Winston has undergone further torture and humiliation and was contemplating the restructuring of his mind and thereby of his whole world: pp290-292.

**Sermon:** “1984 and all that”

My thoughts today are a painful mixture: on one hand there is the awareness of the many parallels between the dystopian society portrayed by Orwell in his novel 1984 and our current world, and I will speak to this; on the other hand there is a fierce awareness that our current situation is, for many people in this world, much worse than Orwell projected. We are polluting and destroying our natural world to the point that the forces of nature in which we and the rest of plant and animal life have evolved are now developing in ways that will profoundly change, probably destroy what has taken millions of years to create. All the ominous figures of power in Orwell's world are male and in our world women have very few, if any, positions of power – and we are a third of a century further on in time than the literary and real worlds' 1984.

Some years ago it was believed that the runaway stupidity of humans would destroy the world through a nuclear holocaust that would distort plants and animals (including humans) and lay waste to natural resources. And it is still not impossible for this additional hazard to occur, but it is not necessary. Global warming and

climate change are making natural disasters more frequent and more powerful at the same time that our technology and political frameworks are more oppressive of individual freedom.

Unitarians have traditionally been optimists, believing in the human potential to change, to grow, to improve by learning from our and others' mistakes. We had some of this knocked out of us by the two World Wars and we no longer proclaim the "progress of mankind onward and upward forever" — but we still mostly take a stance that includes affirmation of the innate dignity of the human person. This often causes us to oppose public policy and actions which we believe infringe this innate dignity – and that is partly what this sermon is about. It is also one of the things that International Women's Day is about – human dignity, equal rights, and personal growth, but it's probably best to stick to one sermon this morning rather than present two interleaved sermons, if only because of time constraints.

To be sure Orwell's dystopic vision was an extension of the examples of dictatorships he was aware of and he was in effect warning us not to go the way of Nazi-ism or Soviet communism. And while much of the modern world has gone the way of totalitarianism, the façade of democracy still has some sway in this world. But for how long?

As an aside, I did not have room for a pocket biography of Orwell in the Order of Service so I'll mention just a few facts now. On-line **Britannica**: "**George Orwell**, pseudonym of **Eric Arthur Blair**, (born June 25, 1903, Motihari, Bengal, India—died January 21, 1950, London, England), English novelist, essayist, and critic famous for his novels *Animal Farm* (1945) and *Nineteen Eighty-four* (1949), the latter a profound anti-utopian novel that examines the dangers of totalitarian rule." Orwell started this novel while a patient with tuberculosis at Haimeyers Hospital in East Kilbride and there is a plaque commemorating his stay there. By the way, the copyright on *1984* expires on 1 January 2021. So much for a commercial break.

One of the chilling aspects of Orwell's Big Brother was how the intention of the torture and re-education was to get the victim to love Big Brother above all else, especially above Truth. You were to

subjugate yourself and your freedom to the lies and the exploitation willingly. The last paragraph in the book reads: “He gazed up at the enormous face [Big Brother]. Forty years it had taken him to learn what kind of smile was hidden beneath the dark moustache. O cruel, needless misunderstanding! O stubborn, self-willed exile from the loving breast! Two gin-scented tears trickled down the sides of his nose. But it was all right, everything was all right, the struggle was finished. He had won the victory over himself. He loved Big Brother.” On this very dramatic and depressing note, the story finishes – but not the book and we will come back to this point later!

And what about Orwell's predictions/warnings for our world? Nothing about global warning. Britain, referred to as Airstrip One (shades of the unsinkable battleship), was a small part of the larger Oceania which comprised North and South America, South Africa, Australia and New Zealand. Eurasia comprises roughly Europe plus the Soviet Union. Eastasia comprises China, Japan, Korea, and Northern India. All three super powers were dictatorships with oppressive ideologies and there was a shifting war between the three. Our world, of course, does not replicate this, although one can see parallels.

Orwell got one important extension from his 1930s-1940s view wrong, however, at least for Oceania: Government was the total oppressor, the total power that controlled everything including its citizens. Today's reality is different: there are plenty of oppressive and corrupt governments but there are also oppressive powers that exploit everyone that even governments cannot control: Big Business and its wealth control even governments and main governmental policies. One looks at North America, here in Britain, at much of the rest of the world, and Companies that mine oil, rare minerals needed for our digital society, transport, and communications all transcend national boundaries and thumb their noses at governments and their citizens, exploiting their power to corrupt political leaderships and to avoid oversight and taxes. As democracies become more tyrannical, as political leadership borrows the tools of dictators, we find that just in the last few years we are bombarded by falsehoods claiming to be truths, scientists and journalists are marginalised, persecuted, and even murdered

and investigative processes are corrupted – all these are not only tools of government but also of powerful businesses that exploit people around the world and across national political boundaries.

Aldous Huxley contacted George Orwell after *1984* was published and said that Oppression and Exploitation of the masses didn't need the violence he portrayed as normal. As Wikipedia puts it, In October 1949, after reading *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Huxley sent a letter to Orwell and wrote that it would be more efficient for rulers to stay in power by the softer touch by allowing citizens to self-serve pleasure to control them rather than brute force and to allow a false sense of freedom. Huxley wrote 'Whether in actual fact the policy of the boot-on-the-face can go on indefinitely seems doubtful. My own belief is that the ruling oligarchy will find less arduous and wasteful ways of governing and of satisfying its lust for power, and these ways will resemble those which I described in *Brave New World*... Within the next generation I believe that the world's rulers will discover that infant conditioning and narco-hypnosis are more efficient, as instruments of government, than clubs and prisons, and that the lust for power can be just as completely satisfied by suggesting people into loving their servitude as by flogging and kicking them into obedience.'

Elements of both novels can be seen in modern-day societies, with many of us unconsciously accepting greater exploitation of ourselves in exchange for convenience and comfort. The clearest examples of this are in inventions of the past few years – the first iPhone was invented in 2007 and the developments of speedier and stronger mobile phone networks and iPads followed a few years later. Now, almost all communication is digital and small digital computers are placed in almost all everyday devices. The development of specific small programs (called Apps) which make these devices easier to operate has extended their use into every corner of our lives and with this extension we who own and use the devices have become the product. Information about our every activity is harvested, usually without our knowledge or consent. Google/ Facebook/ Amazon know more about us than we know ourselves.

Examples to help you understand the magnitude of the problem:

Last week there were warnings about baby monitors – these aids to parenting can be hacked and outsiders can see whatever the monitor broadcasts, allowing theft, kidnapping, even blackmail. When you log into a store's friendly local wifi with your smartphone, the store can follow you around the store and helpfully supply you with information about products over the tannoy in real time. The latest cars have computers in their engines that can be hacked and your car can be controlled maliciously from outside. Modern televisions are straight out of *1984*: they can hear and record what you are saying in your living room -- or your bedroom if you have a modern telly there. Alexa (Google) and Echo (Amazon) can not just your queries, they can listen in to your conversations, they can record and transmit your queries and sell this information about your tastes to others.

Britain is the most surveilled country in the world outside China. Even TV murder mysteries routinely portray the police as checking CCTV footage to solve crimes. Facial recognition software is getting good enough for a particular person to be followed in retrospect and in real time.

Social media – Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc, have greatly increased our ability to communicate with others and to broadcast our opinions, but the data they collect on us is oppressively all-encompassing. More reliance on social media for actual information about the real world has its costs, too – people are easily fooled by misinformation and instead of enlarging our sense of the world, it results in narrowing of our sources of information, which leads to fragmentation of community, the opposite of the integrative effect of better communications. Powerful business and political machines use Social media to influence our very decision-making functioning. The Tories put up a deliberately misleading page during the recent election and when caught out attempted to laugh it off as nothing serious; we know that Russian trolls interfered in the US elections and tried to interfere in ours. This is possible because of targeted ads that are designed to speak to our personal, individual, tastes and experiences – i.e. telling us one thing and our neighbour down the road something else.

Government secret agencies can and do monitor our email messages and our phone conversations in order to protect us from

terrorists. One problem with this is who defines "terrorists". There have always been abuses and excessive interests in anyone who stands out – think of the way the FBI in the USA spied on Martin Luther King and Liberal Unitarian congregations in the States especially California had visitors who turned out to be plain clothes police checking on the sermons of radical preachers – but digital technology expands their power unbelievably. Climate change activists are lumped with politically violent extremists.

We can't put the genie back in the bottle, but there are practical ways we can minimise the intrusion of our persons; there are changes in attitude and habit that can help us keep a measure of freedom and control. If you use Facebook, control your list of friends and take the attitude that whatever you put on your account has the same privacy as publishing it in your local paper; if you surf the web be aware that not just your search words are recorded but also your mouse movements on the answering pages; change the default passwords on your devices; don't give information out to anyone who rings your phone; don't click links in email messages unless you were expecting the message and the message is part of a conversation, not out of the blue.

The order of service has an introduction to on-line privacy. Please read it. It also has, on the back page, an argument in favour of giving up your freedom to enable others to continue to make money from your information. Read this, also, and be warned.

But I said I would return to the fact that *1984* does not end with the end of the story. It ends with a dozen pages of explanation of NewSpeak, explaining the technical and philosophical aspects of mind control through language. The way it was written by Orwell, it can be, and has been, interpreted as a post 1984-world commentary, i.e. as written in a society where the totalitarian regime no longer obtained. Thus, it is possible to see a glimmer of hope that the brutality and oppression of *1984* did not continue indefinitely.

### **Closing Words:**

Wendell Phillips on January 28, 1852.

Speaking to members of the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society that day, Phillips said:

“Eternal vigilance is the price of liberty; power is ever stealing from the many to the few. The manna of popular liberty must be gathered each day or it is rotten. The living sap of today outgrows the dead rind of yesterday. The hand entrusted with power becomes, either from human depravity or esprit de corps, the necessary enemy of the people. Only by continued oversight can the democrat in office be prevented from hardening into a despot; only by unintermitted agitation can a people be sufficiently awake to principle not to let liberty be smothered in material prosperity.”