

The University of Southern Mississippi  
**The Aquila Digital Community**

---

Faculty Publications

---

2021

## We Too Are Guardians of Truth

John R. Rachal

*The University of Southern Mississippi*, [jrrachal@comcast.net](mailto:jrrachal@comcast.net)

Follow this and additional works at: [https://aquila.usm.edu/fac\\_pubs](https://aquila.usm.edu/fac_pubs)

---

### Recommended Citation

Rachal, J. R. (2021). We Too Are Guardians of Truth. .  
Available at: [https://aquila.usm.edu/fac\\_pubs/18370](https://aquila.usm.edu/fac_pubs/18370)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by The Aquila Digital Community. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of The Aquila Digital Community. For more information, please contact [Joshua.Cromwell@usm.edu](mailto:Joshua.Cromwell@usm.edu).

We Too Are Guardians of Truth

John R. Rachal  
Professor Emeritus of Adult Education  
The University of Southern Mississippi  
Hattiesburg, Mississippi

[jrrachal@comcast.net](mailto:jrrachal@comcast.net)

key words: adult education, truth-seeking, evidence-based learning, conspiracy theory, facts, democracy, social justice, liberal education, disinformation

### We Too Are Guardians of Truth

In his successful courtroom defense of the British soldiers who killed five American colonists in what was soon called the Boston Massacre, John Adams observed: “Facts are stubborn things; and whatever may be our wishes, our inclinations, or the dictates of our passions, they cannot alter the state of facts and evidence” (p. 337). The Adams rule seems even more acute today as social media, slanted news organizations, and traffickers in “alternative facts” clamor for adherents, often with prevarication, mendacity, and credulity as their primary modus operandi. Dark corners of the internet, both foreign and domestic, spread lies and bizarre and cultish QAnon conspiracy fantasies on a scale unavailable to the dissemblers of Adams’ day.

As of this writing, one-third of Americans believe that the current president was not legitimately elected, and nearly three-quarters of those claim that their belief is based on “solid evidence” rather than suspicion (CNN/SRSS poll, 2021). For that huge swath of Americans, the stubborn fact that over 60 court cases found no evidence of widespread voter fraud is not stubborn enough. For those Americans, their wishes, inclinations, and the dictates of their passions rule. “I wish it so; it must be so; therefore it is so” can never serve as our standard of truth. Social justice is built upon the twin bedrock principles of fairness and truth. Though they are intertwined, and both must constantly be defended, my focus here, prompted by recent events, is on truth. Truth is under assault, initiated or abetted by people in elected positions of power, and adult educators have a role to play in its defense.

Now would not be the first time that leaders in adult education saw a significant component of their role to be advocates of adult education as a bulwark against autocracy and the disinformation and “alternative facts” which give it traction. If disinformation and “alternative facts” are the fuel of autocracy, the obverse is that truth is the fuel of democracy. “The undereducated,” as Rachal (2015) notes in his discussion of Eduard Lindeman’s views, “could too easily be swayed by demagogues, but a society that valued adult education was less likely to succumb to the hate-mongering and fear-mongering that were, and always have been, demagogues’ stock-in-trade” (p. 2). Democratic themes abound in Lindeman’s work, and he feared the potential threat of Italian fascism to the United States (1927). The word *democracy* also found voice in others, reverberating through articles and speeches of the fledgling American Association for Adult Education (AAAE). Some of these themes are possibly descended from John Dewey’s iconic *Democracy and Education* (1916), published when he was at Columbia (1905-1930) and only eight years before Lindeman began teaching at the New York School of Social Work in 1924.

Aside from Lindeman, other early though lesser-known advocates of the interrelationship of adult education and democracy include Alexander Meiklejohn, who addressed the 1924 American Library Association (ALA), just as it was forming an alliance with what would become the AAAE in 1926 with the financial support of the Carnegie Foundation. In stark terms, he declared: “Democracy is education. . . . In so far as we can educate the people, in so far as we can bring people to an understanding of themselves and of their world, we can have a democracy. In so far

as we cannot do that we have got to have control by the few” (p. 183). J. T. Jennings, speaking on “Adult Education” at the 1925 ALA Conference, noted that “the success of a democracy depends upon an educated and intelligent citizenship.” John Finley, co-editor of *The New York Times*, opined in the two-year old *Journal of Adult Education* (forerunner to *Adult Education Quarterly*) that “adult education today—insurance through life against intellectual unemployment—is the hope of a continuing democracy” (1931). AAAE President James Russell (1931) observed that “Democracy can last on just one condition: getting everybody educated” (quoted by Cartwright, 1931, p. 363). The very first issue of the *Journal of Adult Education* (1929) contained articles on the education-democracy theme by Everett Dean Martin (“Liberating Liberty”) and Glenn Frank (“On the Firing Line of Democracy”). As adult education began to coordinate and centralize in the 1920s, Lindeman, Martin, and others saw it as integral to a defense of democracy.

So where do contemporary adult educators fit in this tradition? We have now been given an object lesson, one insisting that truth and democracy are sometimes fragile. That fragility has been on display for several years, reaching its apogee on January 6<sup>th</sup>. We have politicians, beginning with the former president, who peddle lies as if they were facts, and in doing so, they corrupt truth and rend democracy. Facts are foundational to truth, and truth is foundational to democracy (there may be other, more transcendental, more revelatory avenues to truth, but I leave them to theologians and metaphysicians). Writing in 1926 about “crowd thinking” and conspiracy-mongering in a fine chapter on “the educational value of doubt,” Everett Dean Martin decries the contemporary yet ageless problem that “acquaintance with

facts does not seem to be necessary for the formation of opinion. I can easily assert alleged facts on my own authority; it hurts my pride when I am asked for evidence” (p. 98). Almost a century later, Martin’s concern rings even more true. After January 6<sup>th</sup> no imagination is required to see where such alleged facts and reality-free opinion can lead.

If facts are foundational to truth, let us start with facts, those stubborn things that, at their most elemental, constitute data bits of reality derived from our own or from others’ sensory experience. Mary arose at six a.m., Bill was born in the United States, a new president won by a specific margin in the state of Georgia; these are all facts, each one derived from observed data. We can interpret them differently (Lincoln was the best president; no, FDR was), we can be misinformed about them (pine is harder than oak), and most dangerously, we can invent them so that others will believe them, as in the oxymoron “alternative facts.” Alternative facts, i.e., false facts—better termed lies—are the nurseries of autocracies. We as educators have a responsibility to combat them.

When I taught freshman English long ago, I was expected to expose my charges to the fundamentals of grammar and punctuation so that they might avoid technical problems as they sought to narrate, explicate, compare, or persuade, not only in the weekly short essays they submitted to me, but also in the prose of their later lives. But I was also, I believed, obligated to help make their writing more convincing, more explicit, and—hope springs eternal—even more interesting. Many times a forlorn student, dissatisfied with a grade, would acknowledge the technical errors, but would offer the defense that more credit should be given to the content

of her essay because it was *her opinion*, on the apparent assumption that one's opinion lies beyond the pale of criticism, since any critique is itself mere opinion. I don't believe that I ever actually made the insufferable observation that informed opinion is better and more credible than uninformed opinion. But I did insist that opinion, to be based in reality and to be persuasive, needs facts, examples, and specifics. These are the elements, the atomic particles, of truth. As I came to teach graduate adult education students, aside from technical suggestions about their writing, the most common observation that I made concerned the need for those same three things—facts, examples, and specifics. Evidence mattered. In the over 30 years I have reviewed manuscripts for three journals, the same rule applies: No evidence? Case dismissed. Probably every educator of adults seeks this emphasis on supportive fact and detail in her students' writing and speech. But in an age of pandemic levels of untruth, that emphasis should be intentional and central in our teaching.

John Kozy, chair of the Philosophy Department at my undergraduate alma mater, was the best professor I ever had. His classes were pure Socratic method, alive with his probing questions about, for example, *The Republic*, followed by our callow yet earnest answers. Particularly memorable was his desire that in writing multiple papers over the term, we should never go to the library in search of secondary sources. Unthinkable as that might seem for graduate students, learner interaction with the primary sources, unfiltered by others, was far more important to him. He wanted us to critically think through the subject matter for ourselves, responding one-on-one to the primary sources, rather than become youthful

scholars who could recite Smith and Jones's gloss on *The Republic*, only to forget it shortly after the course. While knowing Smith and Jones might be useful, he preferred that we arrived at our own conclusions unencumbered and uninfluenced by secondary sources. He meant for us to think. Possibly some variant of that, for certain assignments, might be possible for graduate students, but equally so for adult educators working with other clienteles, whether in HRD or adult basic and secondary education. Where discussion, dialogue, and debate are appropriate, clarity of thesis supported by factual evidence in search of truth should be our north star.

It is this kind of individual critical thinking, as opposed to the "herd opinion" (Martin, 1926, pp. 175, 196) that is so pernicious in our current tribalized culture, that I believe is at the heart of a liberal education. Surely a liberal education is not a collection of memorized quotations or a listing of books read or the number of certifications and degrees acquired, valuable as those things might be. Rather it is a critical habit of mind, imbibed perhaps through a curiosity about perennial ideas, human achievement, and scientific inquiry—not merely a mental cataloguing of those ideas, achievements, and inquiries. It is a modest skepticism about the information we encounter, and a willingness to question not only the thinking of others, but, far more challenging, our own. To be clear, no branch of learning has a monopoly on a liberal education. Any field, from art to mathematics to zoology, participates in liberal education to the extent that critical thinking, rather than rote learning, is central to its pedagogy. Possibly this critical habit of mind is best taught through modeling it, as Professor Kozy did. But we can also ask our learners, "Is it

rational?" "What are the supporting facts?" "What are the contradicting facts?" "Do you believe this because you *want* it to be true?" Or, alternatively, do you disbelieve it because you *don't* want it to be true?" "Are you viewing it through the filter of an ideology?" "What is the source?" "Does that source seem credible?" "Are you willing to entertain the possibility that both the asserted perspective, and thus you, could be wrong?" These questions are embedded in a liberal education, but they have even more salience in the tumult of our present politics.

For some who are way too deep in an ideological rabbit hole, those questions will swirl overhead and never be considered at all; or if they are considered, they will be answered to satisfy their owners' wishes, inclinations, and passions. Sometimes the truth is too complex and a preferred simplistic and mistaken explanation or agenda is offered in its place. Other times the truth is so simple that some conspiracy fantasy is conjured, stoking anger and providing the solidarity of special or secret knowledge among the believers. For the overly credulous, "truth" must align with their belief system; there is little room for nuance or outliers. Those "stubborn things"—facts—will not be faced. This is challenging for educators, especially, perhaps, for adult educators. Yet an underlying assumption of teaching, so obvious that we don't even recognize it, is that what we teach, the knowledge we value, is accurate, is true. So inherently we value truth. Only one step remains, though a long one: to acknowledge that teaching something about discerning truth from falsehood is also part of our charge. Perhaps some not distant adult education conference might have a roundtable to explore other means of promoting a critical habit of mind in our learners, or it could be a theme issue of one of our journals.

None of this is an argument for politicizing our courses or classes. It is not a polemic about Left vs. Right. My theme, my purpose, argues for inculcating in our learners a natural skepticism and an instinctive resistance to the sly beckoning of herd opinion so as to distinguish truth from misinformation and disinformation. It is an argument for fostering truth-seeking in our learners, with the political and sociological chips falling where they may. Education has often been portrayed—as in some of the quotes above—as the best inoculation against both misinformation and its far more destructive cousin disinformation, and thus as a champion of democracy. So we have a role in this, especially now. It is not just the rational politicians, the Cronkite-esque journalists, the fact-checkers, the scientists, and our own adult education ancestors who advocate for reality. We too are guardians of truth.

## References

- Adams, J. 1992/1770. *Bartlett's Familiar Quotations*. J. Kaplan, general editor, sixteenth ed. Boston, New York, London: Little, Brown and Co.
- CNN/SSRS Poll. January 9-14, 2021. Cited in Applebaum, A. January 20, 2021. Coexistence is the only option. [TheAtlantic.com](https://www.theatlantic.com).
- Dewey, J. (1916). *Democracy and education, an introduction to the philosophy of education*. New York: Macmillan.
- Finley, J. H. (1931). The Clearing House. *Journal of Adult Education*, 3, 334.
- Jennings, J. T. (1925). Third general session: Adult Education. *Bulletin of the American Library Association*, 19, 121-123.
- Lindeman, E. C. 1956/1927. Selected writings. In R. Gessner (Ed.), *The democratic man: Selected writings of Eduard C. Lindeman*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Martin, E. D. (1926). *The meaning of a liberal education*. New York: Norton.
- Meiklejohn, A. (1924). The teaching of reading as a part of education. *Bulletin of the American Library Association*, 18, 182-184.
- Rachal, J. R. (2015). Reflections on the Lindeman legacy. *PAACE Journal of Lifelong Learning*, 24, 1-6. First appeared in Italian, trans. E. Marescotti, as Foreward to E. Marescotti, *Il significato dell'educazione degli adulti di Eduard C. Lindeman* [The meaning of adult education by Eduard C. Lindeman], 2013. Rome: ANICIA.
- Russell, J. (1931). Cited in M. Cartwright, American Association for Adult Education annual report of the director. *Journal of Adult Education*, 3, 362-385.