

“Surviving Fantasyland”  
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## THE READING

from Fantasyland by Kurt Andersen

[The ideas in this book] really started crystallizing in 2004 and 2005. President George W. Bush’s political mastermind Karl Rove introduced the remarkable phrase *reality-based community*. “People ‘in the reality-based community,’ he told a reporter, “believe that solutions emerge from judicious study of discernable reality. That’s not the way the world really works anymore.” He said it with a sense of humor, but he was deadly serious. A year later, the Colbert Report went on the air. In the first few minutes of his first episode, Steven Colbert, playing his right wing populist character, performed a feature called The Word in which he riffed on a phrase. “Truthiness.” He said:

*Now I’m sure some of the “word police,” the “wordinistas” over at Webster’s are gonna say, “Hey, that’s not a word!” Well, anybody who knows me knows that I’m no fan of dictionaries or reference books. They’re elitist. Constantly telling us what is or isn’t true. Or what did or didn’t happen. Who’s Britannica to tell me the Panama Canal was finished in 1914? If I wanna say it happened in 1941, that’s my right. I don’t trust books – they’re all fact, no heart. . . Face it, folks, we are a divided nation. . . Divided between those who think with their head and those who know with their heart. . . Because that’s where the truth comes from, ladies and gentlemen – the gut.*

Andersen goes on to observe:

Little by little for centuries, and then more and more and faster and faster during the last half-century, Americans have given ourselves over to all kinds of magical thinking, anything goes relativism, and belief in fanciful explanations, small and large fantasies that control or thrill or terrify us. And most of us haven’t realized how far-reaching our strange new normal has become. . . .

Mix epic individualism with extreme religion; mix show business with everything else; let all that steep and simmer for a few centuries; run it through the anything goes 1960s and the Internet age; the result is the America we inhabit today, where reality and fantasy are weirdly and dangerously commingled.

## THE SERMON

Two decades ago, when I was researching for my manuscript on the Ten Commandments, I came upon the assertion by a Roman Catholic priest, that most of what was wrong with the world was due to the emergence of Protestantism, which destroyed reliance on the authority of the church and left us in moral chaos..

A year ago, at an election party, which turned into a wake, at the home of our doctor, who is an Irish Catholic, I was startled when his brother, also a physician, said that what we were experiencing as the tragic outcome of the evening, could be laid at the hands of Martin Luther and the rise of Protestantism.

I share this background because I was fascinated, after I read the excerpt Winfield sent me of Kurt Andersen's new book, **Fantasyland: How America Went Haywire**, further subtitled, **A 500 Year History**, where I found support for that assertion about Protestantism. Andersen, host of public radio's "Studio 360" is a magna cum laude graduate of Harvard where he edited the Lampoon. He was co-founder of Spy Magazine and a columnist for the New Yorker, Time Magazine, and New York. He is the author of three novels and a collection of humorous essays.

I found Andersen's book to be tremendously helpful in putting the events of our present time into context. It is a remarkable, encyclopedic work, by which I mean incredibly wide ranging, not boring. I determined that I wanted to share it with you because I believe everyone in this congregation would find it enlightening in important ways. The problem, for me, is that I have far more to share than there is time in which to share it. I cannot do it justice: I could not do the book justice before you would eventually start to walk out from fanny fatigue.

It was five hundred years ago on Halloween, that the Roman Catholic monk, Martin Luther, reportedly nailed his 95 charges against many of the contemporary Catholic practices to the door of the church in Wittenburg. Among his complaints was opposition to the selling of indulgences by which the way into heaven could be purchased; he was offended by the profligate lifestyles of many of the clergy; and he insisted that common people did not need the intervention of ordained clergy between them and their deity. That last was interpreted as a belief in "the priesthood of all believers." As Anderson summarizes it:

*Millions of ordinary people decided that they, each of them, had the right to decide what was true or untrue, regardless of what fancy experts said. And furthermore, they believed, passionate fantastical belief was the key to everything. The footings for Fantasyland had been cast.*

[Andersen does not address the reality that it didn't take too long for Luther to back away from this principle when people asserted the right to believe things he did not believe, and to deny things he did believe. But the die had been cast.]

It is Andersen's thesis that the right of individual conscience, stemming from Luther and the Protestant Revolution, has been central to the development of the American psyche throughout our history.

The settlers who came to what we call Virginia, came in search of gold, but the history we are taught stresses the settlement by the Pilgrims who came to Massachusetts seeking to create a religious community that was in keeping with their religious beliefs, which were out of

step with the dominant religion in England. Andersen says, "In other words, America was founded by a nutty religious cult."

When Roger Williams and Anne Hutchinson asserted their beliefs, which were out of step with those of the leaders of the colony, they were expelled – they were fortunate: some dissenters had been executed. They forbade Church of England clergy, or Catholics, or Quakers to set foot on their land. They also worried that Satan's influence might be felt, which led to the Salem Witch Trials. There is a long American tradition of seeing and fearing conspiracies.

Religion played a major role in the early days of European settlers in the New World. There were repeated "Awakenings" [periods of renewed enthusiasm] when people had become too lackadaisical about their religion. Nonetheless, over time, various preachers decided that **they** had the keys to the kingdom and knew what was true. Andersen says:

*As we let a hundred dogmatic iterations of reality bloom, the eventual result was an anything-goes-relativism that extends beyond religion to almost every kind of passionate belief: If I think it's true, no matter why or how I think it's true, then it's true, and nobody can tell me otherwise. That's the real-life reductio ad absurdum of American individualism. And it would become a credo of Fantasyland.*

Of course, we know that when it came to the creation of a new nation, the leaders were largely people who were committed to religious freedom, having seen what trouble contention among religions had caused in the old world. While none of them called themselves "atheists," many of them had been impacted by Enlightenment thinking and were far from orthodox believers.

Among those benefitting from that freedom were the Unitarians and the Universalists who were, to varying degrees, religious dissenters. Andersen details the development of religious thinking in America, interestingly not mentioning the Unitarians and Universalists, although he does report in passing that at one point that he had, for a time, attended a Unitarian Sunday School.

He does address the development of Mormonism, and Christian Science, and a variety of medical quackeries like homeopathy. William Rockefeller, father of John D. And William, Jr. was a seller of nostrums to cure cancer. One historian suggested that America was the laughing stock of the world because of the variety of pills and syrups our ancestors consumed.

Andersen sees the Gold Rush as an indication of how enthusiasms could spread and how far Americans would go in following the dream of riches. He suggests:

*A propensity to dream impossible dreams is like other powerful tendencies, okay when kept in check by common sense, at least in the aggregate and over the long run. . . [However] societies and cultures can lurch out of balance. As ours would eventually do.*

Andersen's treatment of the Civil War and its aftermath is particularly relevant today. While slavery was clearly the central issue in the war, Southerners had a way of glorifying, in retrospect, the fantasy that "the South was the last outpost of the old fashioned virtues of chivalry, honor, grace and charm," and that fantasy grew and was enhanced after the defeat by the Union.

Andersen does spend a number of pages talking about the great Universalist, P.T. Barnum (although he does not mention Barnum's religion.) Barnum is central to the theme of the book in that he was a great marketer of fantasy. Says Andersen:

*[Barnum's] extremely successful pre-circus career derived from and fed a fundamental Fantasyland mindset: If some imaginary proposition is exciting and nobody can prove it's untrue, then it's my right as an American to believe it's true.*

Andersen also addresses Buffalo Bill Cody as someone who provided Americans with the fantasy that they were experiencing the Indian Wars first hand, when they attended his extravaganzas with real Indians and real cowboys.

For the sake of time I have to leap over the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century with the rise of religious fundamentalism, fear of Germans and Communists and Jews, and then there was the Scopes trial which held fundamentalism up to ridicule, although the jury found Scopes guilty.

The development of movies and radio helped feed the American hunger for fantasy. Movies required what theatre folk refer to as the "willing suspension of disbelief," but that suspension became easier with film, and then talkies, and then color films. Andersen believes that as we spent more and more time suspending disbelief, "we became more habituated to suspending disbelief unconsciously and involuntarily."

The 1950's saw the development of Disneyland and Las Vegas, Playboy magazine, Scientology, the Beatniks, McCarthyism, and the rise of Evangelical Christianity. All of these fed the development of America as a Fantasyland. Andersen suggests that the message of Playboy was,:

*You are not a scared, lonely chump with dreary domestic responsibility and a crappy job, . . . You are masculine and sophisticated and suave and well dressed and cool, with good taste, in a fun America full of women eager to have no-strings sex with you.*

It was an appealing fantasy!

I get uneasy when Andersen moves into the 60's and 70's which were the beginning of my ministry. He cites what he sees as the problems with books like Charles Reich's **Greening of America**, Thomas Szasz's **Myth of Mental Illness**, Ken Kesey's **One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest**, and Theodore Rozack's **The Making of a Counter Culture**. All of these were books that I celebrated in sermons as pointing to the coming of a new age - "The Age of Aquarius!" What I realized with Margaret Mead's **Culture and Commitment**, which Andersen does not mention but is of a piece with those he does, is that something was being overdone. Mead asserted that while, in the olden days, the older generation had been understood to have something to teach the young about living in the world, that the time had come when the older generation knew almost nothing about the new, modern world and needed to shut up and listen to the young. Wait a minute! Suddenly, reason and experience were misleading and needed to be tossed out? That was a step too far for me, and that whole trend in thinking was a step too far for Andersen. What he observed was that we were throwing out science and reason in favor of a fantasy life. "Facts" became passe.

It was a problem that even academia was falling into the trap! There seemed to be a growing consensus on campuses that:

*In a nutshell, all beliefs and approximations of truth, science as much as any fable or religion, are mere stories devised by people to serve their own needs or interests. Reality itself is a social construction, a tableau of useful or wishful myths that members of a society or tribe have been persuaded to believe. The borders between fiction and nonfiction are permeable, maybe nonexistent. Superstitions, magical thinking, and delusions – any of these may be as legitimate as the supposed truths contrived by*

*Western reason and science. The takeaway: Believe whatever you want, because it's pretty much all equally true and false.*

Two of the toughest courses I took as an undergraduate at St. Lawrence were in Music - understanding and appreciating it, not performing. It so happened that I was dating the daughter of the chair of the music department, who was one of the most rigorous professors on campus. I sweated blood to do well in his courses. I learned later from a faculty friend, that the professor had a sabbatical on which he went to California. When he came back, he was a changed man and he gave everyone A's – he had come to the realization that the academic standards for which he had stood were no longer relevant in the new world. He no longer believed he knew anything that students needed to learn from him.

Andersen asserts that:

*the anything-goes relativism of the campuses wasn't sequestered there, but when it flowed out across America, it helped enable extreme Christianities and consequential lunacies on the right – gun rights hysteria, black helicopter conspiracism, climate change denial, and more. The term useful idiot was originally used to accuse liberals of serving the interests of true believers further left. In this instance, however, postmodern intellectuals – postpositivists, poststructuralists, social constructivists, post empiricists, epistemic relativists, cognitive relativists, descriptive relativists – turned out to be useful idiots for the American right. "Reality has a well known liberal bias," Stephen Colbert said, in character in 2006, mocking the "beliefs trump facts" impulse of today's right.*

Andersen shares a great many more details of how Fantasyland, the belief that whatever we want to be true must be true, became so dominant in America. The end of the fairness doctrine in broadcasting, the rise of talk radio and the 24 hour a day cable "news" channels [news is in quotation marks] added significantly to the Fantasyland. He notes:

*For most of the twentieth century, national news media had felt obliged to pursue and present some rough approximation of the truth rather than to promote a truth, let alone fictions.*

Of course, the invention and spread of the internet was a major contributor. Andersen observes:

*After the 1960's and 70's happened as they happened, it may be that America's long standing dynamic balance – between thinking and magical thinking, reason and wishfulness, reality and fiction, sanity and lunacy – was broken for good. But once the internet came along, we were definitely on a superhighway to a certain destination with no likely looking exits.*

*Before the web, cockamamie ideas and outright falsehoods could not spread nearly as fast or so widely, so it was much easier for reason and reasonableness to prevail. . .*

*In the digital age, every tribe and fiefdom and principality and region of Fantasyland – every screwball with a computer and a telecom connection – suddenly had an unprecedented way to instruct and rile up and mobilize believers, and to recruit more.*

I don't want to skip over Andersen's comments on President Reagan's tax cuts.

*Reagan's fiscal big idea, cutting tax rates to expand the economy and thereby increase tax revenues, was famously mocked by his main GOP opponent as "voodoo*

*economics” – crazy wishfulness, magical thinking. A few months later, after Reagan invited him to be his vice-presidential candidate, George H. W. Bush disavowed his voodoo line. And as President, Reagan didn’t stick strictly to the voodoo path. He did dramatically cut some tax rates, but he also increased others and closed lots of loopholes to keep deficits from growing larger. Government did not shrink.*

*But while Reagan had sensibly tacked back toward reality, his true believers on the right maintained total belief in the voodoo. For them, the ultra individualist liberation of the 1960’s and ’70’s had generated a kind of fundamentalist religious faith in markets, and thus an absolute knee jerk opposition to any attempts by government to make markets work better or more fairly, and to taxes in general.*

He also addresses Reagan’s confusion between role he had played in film fantasies and the real world.

Because the book just came out in September, although Andersen had been working on it for two years, you can just imagine where this all leads: to a time when fact checkers are going crazy with the challenges they face daily. It doesn’t matter what the evidence clearly shows – it does not matter. Certain people feel that they have the right to insist that any news reports that do not reflect what they wish to be true, are therefore fake news. I don’t think you need me to spell that out in detail.

There is so much more worth sharing, but I want to say something about how this relates to us as Unitarian Universalists. I squirmed a lot as I read Andersen’s thorough development of the growth of Fantasyland in America. We lie at the heart of it, in a sense. Who more than us has stood up, historically, for individualism and the right for people to make their own decisions about religious beliefs? We are haunted by the assertion that as Unitarian Universalists we can “believe whatever we want to believe.” We pride ourselves on our diversity, but we have always, or at least generally, insisted that we have to exercise disciplined reason. We affirm our commitment to “A free and responsible search for truth and meaning.” [The principle originally said “Free and disciplined” but in 1985, the General Assembly voted to modify that “disciplined” to “responsible.” “Disciplined” seemed too harsh.]

I have spoken before about my sense that the Unitarian Universalist has moved in directions that make me feel less at home that I was when I committed myself to its ministry. That first came home to me back in 1995. In 1841, the great Unitarian minister Theodore Parker delivered a momentous sermon on “The Transient and Permanent in Christianity” in which he asserted that much of the dogma of the Christian Church was, in fact transient, and the important parts were the teachings of Jesus. It is considered one of the historic documents of our movement. In 1995, the Unitarian Universalist Ministers Association held a continental convocation in Hot Springs, Arkansas, as which we were to explore what modern Unitarian Universalists saw as “The Transient and Permanent in Liberal Religion.” It was the original goal to refine a consensus document from that gathering. It proved impossible. The major sticking point was on the centrality of our use of reason in religion. A sizeable segment of our ministers, particularly the younger generation, were unwilling to submit religion to any test by reason – they held out for being open to the irrational. It seems to me that this is an illustration of the rise of Andersen’s Fantasyland. Ultimately there was no consensus. A collection of the papers that had been delivered was published, but no consensus. I despaired as to where we were going as a liberal religious movement.

Another memory was stimulated by Andersen’s book. He goes into some detail about the Satanist panic of the 1980’s. There was widespread concern in our nation about the

satanic rituals to which hundreds or thousands of American children had been subjected. A survey of the members of the American Psychological Association showed that 93% of its members believed that people claiming to have experienced satanic ritual abuse were telling the truth. Andersen points out:

*From the early 1980's through the early 1990's around 200 Americans were indicted and prosecuted in dozens of states as satanic ritual abusers. More than eighty were convicted, some of them sentenced to long prison sentences for imaginary crimes.*

Most of the supposed victims were women who, therapists “discovered,” had multiple personalities as a result of repressed memories that were uncovered through hypnosis. There were children who reported that their day care teachers had flown them to distant cities and exposed them to wild animals and sexual abuse.

There was a UU minister in the Rockford congregation who was a Jungian therapist. He had at least one client who remembered her parents as having been active Satanists who allowed her to be sexually abused. The therapist referred me to Rockford police detectives who were specialists in Satantic cults and who told me confidentially that the school superintendent, a Catholic priest, and a well known therapist in the community were active Satanists who killed babies, but they couldn't prove it – which was the case with police across the country who were allegedly aware of child sacrifice they could not prove. The therapist from the congregation put me in touch with a psychologist from Rush Presbyterian hospital in Chicago who was a national leader in the treatment of multiple personality syndrome and the spread of Satanism. Some of the convicted perpetrators spent long times in prison for the purported crimes. It all bore a strong resemblance to the witch trials in Salem. The hospital in Chicago ultimately closed down its multiple personality unit and the state suspended the license of the psychologist. I remember a powerful series of articles in the New Yorker about a deputy sheriff in the Northwest, it may have been Alaska, whose daughters, under hypnosis, discovered that their beloved father had subjected them to Satanic rituals. The girls were so certain that the father began to believe it must be true and he had repressed his shameful memories. It was all bull. It was found that the girls' therapist had planted the memories in the hypnotic process.

I did extensive research into the Satanic panic and delivered a series of sermons on the subject. Andersen devotes ten pages to the Satanic panic as an illustration of how powerful and destructive fantasy can become.

The point of all this is, as Andersen makes very clear:

*The fantasy industrial complex invented and dominated by Americans [has] continued to spread exponentially, taking over parts of every conceivable realm, – politics, real estate, retail, “hospitality,” life. We have encased ourselves in a wall-to-wall 24/7 collage of fantasy and fantastic reality. . . A lot of American reality is now virtual. We're often unaware whether were inside or outside of Fantasyland.*

*For three centuries, in culture and religion as well as in politics and economics, the fantasist and realist impulses existed in rough balance, with a powerful animating tension between the two tendencies. That dynamic balance was key. We were like an internal combustion engine, a great machine powered by endless little explosions – every idiosyncratic vision and dreamy ambition permitted to ignite – but with control mechanism,s and gaskets and a sturdy engine block, all keeping the contraption from blasting apart. . . .*

He asserts:

*As life became easier, however, the easier climate was more conducive to the loosey-goosier parts of the American psyche. A tipping point came in the 1960's when our yin began to be overwhelmed by our Yang. We discarded the good residue of our founding Puritan ethos – discipline, austerity, hyperliteracy – and doubled down on the old Puritan beliefs in magic and an imminent apocalypse and utopia.*

Andersen is not a Jeremiah, foretelling certain doom. Nor does he have any simple remedies. The hope he offers is this:

*If we're splitting into two different cultures, we in reality-based America must try to keep our zone as large and robust and attractive as possible for ourselves and the next generations. . . We need to become less squishy. We must call out the dangerously untrue and unreal. . .*

*Cultural predispositions and national characters are real, and societies do come to crossroads and make important choices. But while our Fantasyland tendencies were present from the beginning, the current situation was not inevitable, because history and evolution never are. Nor now is any particular future. We could regain our national balance and composure. These last decades may turn out to have been a phase, one strange act of our ongoing epic, an unfortunate episode in the American experiment that we will finally move past and chalk up to experience. Nations and societies have survived and recovered from far more terrible swerves, eras that felt cataclysmic as they were happening. The good news, in other words, is that America may now be at peak Fantasyland. We can hope.*

I believe that our religious tradition is well equipped to help us, and therefore our nation, through this wilderness, but, as I said earlier, we are not immune from the virus that leads us away from reason. We need to be aware of the temptation to surrender reason for the appeal of a happy-ever-after and feelgood Fantasyland and seek the courage and perspective and strength that will enable us to be warriors for greater balance between reality and fantasy.

I have tried to present enough of Kurt Andersen's message to encourage you to check it out further. I found it enlightening and compelling and I believe you will too. It is important.