

Published on Friday, June 3, 2005 by CommonDreams.org

## Writing "Truth" on the Sidewalk: Who Do We Think We Are?

by Caroline Arnold

Truth: A private virtue or a public reality? A moral or a logical category? A set of non-negotiable facts, or a consensus about the way the world is? What's its opposite – falsity, fiction, omission, ignorance? Does it set us free, or bind us together?

Conservatives often argue that liberals believe that there is no such thing as "truth", only "narratives" that we liberals take for truths because they fit our ideologies. Ignore for the moment the tautology (the conservative pot knows exactly how ideology blackens the liberal kettle because of the ideological fires sooting its own pot) and consider: human societies are fueled by narratives – stories. Societies live and governments are conditioned – politically, economically and morally -- by and through publicly-shared stories.

Here is a true story. Or a narrative that fits an ideology.

On Friday May 20, 2005, U.S. Army recruiting offices were to be closed for retraining following reports of coercion and fraud in recruiting practices. That day in Akron a group of ten people gathered outside a recruitment center to "Stand Up for Truth in Recruiting." Their vigil was part of a nationwide effort of the (Quaker) American Friends Service Committee (AFSC)

Among them was Karl Liske of Kent, a Quaker father and grandfather, retired mail carrier -- and a friend I have known for 30 years for his kindness, convictions, honesty, and gentle humor. He had with him a small container of red water-soluble paint, which he had used to create red handprints on protest signs.

As the vigil was winding up, Karl used the paint to compose the word "TRUTH" on the sidewalk right in front of the recruiting office. Within minutes, eight police officers appeared, demanding to know "Who do you think you are, defacing public property?"

There was some discussion about children chalking on sidewalks without being arrested. One officer wanted to know what they were protesting. Finally the police decided that defacing the sidewalk was political, and told Karl he was not a child.

"Yes, I am," replied Karl, "I'm a child of God. But I painted that word because truth has been so bloodied by our nation."

The police demanded that the protesters wash off the offensive word, which they did. Karl was ticketed for criminal mischief, (but not arrested) and subsequently arraigned on Misdemeanor 1 charges in Akron Municipal Court. He will have a jury trial in September, represented by noted civil rights lawyer Warner Mendenhall.

This story isn't very public. Nothing appeared in the Akron Beacon Journal. A local TV camera crew left before the alleged 'crime.' Only the Cleveland Indy Media Center posted a short article about it on their website.

One of the most moving stories I have ever read is Heda Margolius Kovaly's *Under a Cruel Star*, about her experiences in Auschwitz and in post-war Prague under the Stalinists. In the book she

asks "How can [German] citizens let their governments do such things, [starving prisoners in Auschwitz] in their names?" and quickly points out "they didn't always know."

"It is not hard," she explains, "for a ... regime to keep people ignorant. Once you relinquish your freedom for the sake of 'understood necessity,' for Party discipline, for conformity with the regime, for the greatness and glory of the [nation], .... you cede your claim to truth."

While a few people in Akron were standing up for truth in recruiting, national attention was focused on stories about torture and abuse of prisoners and defilement of the Koran at Guantanamo Bay. The story from the White House was that the Newsweek story was untrue, that the President would never allow such things, but they would be justified against evil terrorists, were necessary for spreading democracy, and it was disloyal and immoral to report them. The White House insisted that Newsweek wash the offensive words off their sidewalk.

This week, when Amnesty International called U.S. detention facilities "the gulag of our times" and asked Bush said the charge was "absurd," and Cheney said that the United States "has done more to advance the cause of freedom, has liberated more people from tyranny" than any other nation. The Wall Street Journal said Amnesty International's charges "amount to pro-al-Qaeda propaganda."

It's not hard to keep people ignorant. The offending "TRUTH" was washed off the Akron pavement within minutes, and the message of the protesters went unreported. People who asked how their government could do terrible things in their names were denounced with "Who do you think you are?" and accused of 'defacing' our nation's public image.

That should be OUR question. Only when people – ordinary women and men of common decency, good conscience and humane feelings start asking our leaders: "Who do you think you are, torturing prisoners and making war, in our name?" can we start to reclaim Truth.

Truth that is both a private virtue and a public reality, both moral and logical, both fact and consensus. Truth that both sets us free and binds us together.

Truth that won't wash off .

Caroline Arnold served 12 years on the staff of Senator John Glenn and is now active with the Portage Democratic Coalition and Kent Environmental Council.

This column will appear in the Kent-Ravenna Record Courier on Sunday June 5, 2005