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Voices of Sisters



U.S. Rep. Liz Cheney receives a safety brief before departing on a 37th Helicopter Squadron UH-1N Huey Feb. 10, 2017, at F.E. Warren Air Force Base, Wyoming. (Staff Sgt. Christopher Ruano/U.S. Air Force)



by Sr. Joan Chittister

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In 1975, a quote in *The Oak and the Calf* carried a warning from one of the most profound thinkers of the era. "In our country," Russian writer and historian Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn said, "the lie has become not just a moral category, but a pillar of the state."

It gave me great pause until, now, I myself have seen the truth of it. Here.

But how do you begin a national discussion about it? By saying, "I can't believe this is happening?" Or, maybe: "This has to be some kind of mistake, right?" Or, how about a simple "There's no way this can be true"? And then the unwary say?

"What? What can't be true?" they say.

"The fact that one of the oldest political parties in the United States has purged a member — a leader of the party, to be exact — for telling the truth. The truth. Not for telling a lie. For telling the truth."

"Nah?"

"You heard me. That's what can't be true."

And when people pass it off with a yawn, you know for sure that it's true. What you don't know is who cares. Anybody? Which, in the end, is really a worse situation.

That's what is turning all political morality upside down. And in our own time. Here. Where such things "do not happen."

Which is where the discussion really begins.

Because if it is true, who do they think is harmed by it? Liz Cheney? Get real. Liz Cheney is right up there with George Washington now. Any child who ever heard of George Washington has known that we need someone to remind us that truth — trustworthiness — is an essential component of leadership for a good long time now.

No, in the end it will not be Cheney who suffers from this debacle. The people who will be harmed are the people who did it. One hundred and forty-seven Republicans voted to expel Cheney from her leadership role for admitting that President Joe Biden won the election, not Donald Trump. Eighty percent of Republicans, the polls say, agree with Cheney's purge for telling that truth. So it's their lie now; not simply Trump's. It belongs to the people who are denying us the integrity we're looking for, and because of whom we know without a doubt now that we can't expect any integrity from them either.

After all, it's one thing to have members of Congress disagree on which form of a policy will best solve a given problem. But to remove a national figure from leadership because they tell the truth simply tells us the truth we need to know about them: they will tell any lie necessary in order to get power and keep it under any circumstances.

Regardless of what happens to the country because they lie.

In Germany, the "Big Lie" was "Jews? What Jews? We didn't do anything to the Jews."

In the United States now the "Big Lie" is "Lose? No, Donald Trump didn't lose the election. It was stolen from him." (At least he thinks it was. Maybe.) But as long as we silently accept his big lie, as long as we do nothing to expose it, he will see that the people he lied to about it keep voting its carriers into office.

Of course, there are a few little lies that have go with it to keep the big lie in place. Like "There was no insurrection at the Capitol. It was nothing but the usual raucous crowd of tourists."

And "No, we aren't doing anything wrong by lying about that. We just want to keep our Congressional seats, and our committee chairmanships, and our pay checks, and our pensions. And we're being very open about that. So that's very honest, isn't it?"

Indeed it is. It tells us plainly that the leadership in this party has abandoned honor and honesty for the sake of dishonest gains for personal profit.

It tells us that thanks to partisanship — the-do-it-our-way-or-we'll-purge-you-crowd — we have created ourselves a Congress that has no conscience and leaders that allow no conscience to operate. It reminds me of the Chinese soldiers manufactured and buried all together by the Qin Dynasty to affect a display of military might. All of those nameless artifacts in dusty terracotta. So goes democracy.

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It tells us that thanks to partisanship, we have suffered a total loss of leadership at the highest legislative level of the land. Which assures the rest of us that any degree of moral decrepitude is admissible as long as the legislators get what is good for the legislators. So goes democracy when the people are not watching.

It tells us that the loss of leadership that emerges is a partisan ploy to get more power rather than to produce new ideas in a creative country and is nothing more than an intellectual firing squad that robs the poor of their votes and bows to the powerful for its personal gain. So goes democracy when the people are not watching.

It tells us that government "of the people, by the people, for the people" is a sham because our legislators have made it so. So goes democracy when the people are not watching.

And yet, there are voices behind us, voices that raised us to believe in truth, voices that stay in us even as we see the chaos of lies around us. Voices that we must pass on to our children again, perhaps, so that the next generation can see in us what we cannot see in the public models who are lying to us now. Who lie to us over and over again. Who lie about everything these days. Whose lies are eroding the very foundation of our democracy.

But those echoes of ours from the past may well be our hope for the future, for the Resurrection outlives a time of lying and conspiracy theories planted for political reasons. Their political reasons now.

One voice cries out to us from the past to remember:

"I am not bound to win, but I am bound to be true. I am not bound to succeed but I am bound to live the best life that I have. I must stand with anybody that stands right and part from him when he goes wrong."

And who said that? It has been attributed to Abraham Lincoln. Cheney is in good Republican company here.

From where I stand, it is that very challenge that Cheney gives us today. Our responsibility now is to decide — with whom shall we stand?

The question is: Can this party survive? Should it? And if it does, what will happen to the rest of us? Eventually.

Remember the quotation with which I entered this discussion — "In our country the lie has become not just a moral category but a pillar of the state" — came from Solzhenitsyn (1918-2008) who, after all, was a Russian novelist, philosopher, historian, political prisoner and an outspoken critic of human rights abuses and political repression in the Soviet Union. And he ought to know.