

Gaslighting: Child Abuse and the MAGA Right

So, in 2022, the Miriam Webster dictionary announced that the word “gaslighting” was their ‘word of the year.’ And that’s what I want to talk about today. As I’ll discuss, gaslighting does enormous harm in the most intimate relationships in families and marriages, but also in the social and political world, the world of so-called “post-truth” politics.

And so I’m gonna’ start with that..

Recently, I was trying to engage a MAGA republican friend of mine in a real conversation—one stimulated by various assertions she was making on social media that seemed-- well, they seemed divorced from reality. But I really wanted to understand how and why she thought these things... but the problem I came to see Right away was that in order to have a real back and forth, a real exchange of ideas, a real argument if you will, we would have to agree on what constitutes “evidence”. Maybe you’ve also had this problem? I said to her come on “look if I cited something that I had heard from Rachel Maddow on MSNBC, you would understandably be suspicious and dismiss it as liberal propaganda period and if you cited something that you heard from Tucker Carlson, I would very likely react in the same way..”

So somehow I said we would have to agree on how to determine truth, what objective truth meant and which sources of it we trust, because without that starting place the conversation would quickly descend into mutually assured destruction.

And so this gets to... The issue I wanted to talk some about today You can't talk about these issues without introducing the notion of gaslighting and how truth gets distorted, manipulated, or just damaged beyond recognition.

So, as most of you no doubt know, gaslighting is a word that comes from a play and then movie of the same name, in which a husband diabolically and intentionally seeks to drive his wife crazy in order to get his hands on her wealth. And the husband does so by isolating his wife and getting her to doubt her own perceptions. The meaning of "gaslighting" here refers to the fact that when she notices that the GAS LIGHTS in the house seem to go up and down, her perceptions are denied and she's told in effect that she's crazy. He tries to drive her crazy in small ways and large ways and is only stopped when an outsider comes in and is able to validate the wife's perceptions.

Now this concept of gaslighting was appropriated by psychoanalysts to describe a particularly toxic form of child abuse in which a child is given 2 diametrically opposed messages. On the one hand the parent communicates something very hurtful to the child but on the other hand conveys to the child the message that the parent *really* only loves the child and thus the child's experience of being hurt is fictitious. The child's actual real experience is minimized or discounted. " Oh, You know we love you," or "that never really happened that way --you're just imagining it" Or, say, a father tells his son something like "you'll never amount to anything.." and when the son becomes sullen or depressed in any way, the father says, "I love you and only want the best for you...you know I was only joking..."

or, here's a recent example that came up in my own practice-- a patient of mine who was regularly punched by her father at the dinner table recently talked to her brother--who was

present for all of these beatings--and mentioned that their father, now deceased, had beaten her and the brother simply responded with some version of-- “well you were hard to get along with.”

But see in order to understand the nature of the damage done here, you have to realize and remember that the child is dependent on her family for pretty much everything, including what makes up reality, and what's Right and wrong, and what's moral.

In other words, the way things are and the way they're supposed to be are all developed in the context of family life in which the child is completely dependent on the parents for attachment and for safety --- for pretty much everything... So if a child is hurt or abused in some way and that hurt or abuse is denied or discounted by the parents, the child simply cannot objectively evaluate reality and instead almost always will blame him or herself. And when this happens systematically, the child's very ability to test reality is damaged and in extreme cases creates a psychosis of some kind.

We see this toxic interaction quite often in the defensive strategies used by spouses who are cheating on their partner. So, a woman I treated caught her husband having an affair and she also discovered all the ways he was lying about it—and she confronted him about the affair and his lies-- to which the husband responded: “I'm not lying you're just imagining things.....you're just being paranoid” So instead of engaging with his wife's accusation the husband just denied having the affair and accused the wife of making things up. This dynamic is seen frequently in marriages that are marked by infidelity. The unfaithful spouse has to preserve and protect him or herself, protect his or her dishonesty and -- therefore present him or herself as completely innocent and that any insinuation to the contrary is just crazy.

-----And in this context you so often run into defensive comments by the gaslighter like “you're just overreacting” or “you're just being unreasonable” or “you're just being over-emotional” or “you're just being irrational.” And I say him or her, but really, there's a highly gendered dimension to this because the cheater or gaslighter is more often the man than the woman. Amongst the many reasons for this is that the woman is more dependent on the man and thus, the childhood situation gets repeated here over and over.

So this brings us back to the example I gave of trying to establish ground rules for a conversation with my conservative friend because, in our society, we depend on the authority of certain institutions to communicate or convey what's real and what's not-- especially if you think about it—we look to science, to certain organs of government and of religious institutions, or the courts, or, unfortunately, even to certain influencers on social media.

Once these institutions are seen as untrustworthy, then everything is up for grabs. In a situation like that, we've entered the Twilight Zone world of “alternative facts” or a post-truth politics." We are cut off increasingly from sources of truth that might be trustworthy, and our ability to think critically declines and we become more and more vulnerable and dependent. This is a type of gaslighting. This is saying that “reality is what you are told it is,” that there is a secret darker reality that is twisting your perceptions and beliefs.

One dimension of this is the appearance in public life of denials of plain facts. So we see repeated denials on the MAGA Right of the existence of climate change even though we were faced every day in the real world with one after another tragic example of climate change. For the Right, scientific truth is seen and then dismissed as a dangerous fiction or as irrelevant, or as merely serving the interests of liberals and elites.

Or --Remember when Trump and others on the Right denied that Barack Obama was a citizen, the so-called birther conspiracy theory, even though Obama released his actual birth certificate. And when Trump finally had to admit that he was a citizen, Trump actually just did a sidestep and said that "Hillary Clinton and her campaign of 2008 started the birther controversy,"

So when we talk about reality or facts being disputed, I think we see this on the RIGHT all the time. So, there were over 60 court cases adjudicating claims that Trump and his allies made that the 2020 election was fraudulent or stolen. In every case, their claims were discounted, dismissed, and refuted. The courts--the justice system--is one of those institutions that we have come to rely on as authorities to adjudicate truth claims but in this case this authority was utterly discounted by Trump and the Right--- or ignored completely. Many of you will remember the canard from the Right that there was a child kidnapping an abuse network run out of a pizza shop in Washington DC again a claim so absurd and objectively false but one that was intended to create an atmosphere of doubt and distrust of the so-called deep state. The net effect of this was intended to deliberately and consciously aid the Right in acquiring political power.

Another tactic of the Right is to attack the messenger, to attack and vilify the bearer of news and the bearer of truth claims that the person in power want to discredit. And this happens all the time and not just in Trump world. Some of you might remember when a Ukrainian passenger jet was shot down in 2020, an attack clearly linked to Iran and missiles sent them by Russia. The disinformation campaign that this triggered, by Russian and Iran, was truly crazy, blaming the Ukrainians, NATO, the US CIA, and any and all actors that the real perpetrators needed to undermine. When Brazil's amazon rain forests went up in flames, President

Bolsonaro couldn't be bothered to talk about the fires and their link with climate change, but instead fired the head of the agency tasked with tracking deforestation.

So we can see I think that the highly intimate interactions between a parent and child in which reality is distorted and the child is coerced into adopting this corrupt and distorted story then starts to appear as a dynamic in other settings, for example in marriages where infidelity is an issue and eventually in society and in the political world.