Ambiguity & Truth

By Milton Glaser

“Make it clear.” This fundamental assumption of communication would seem to be an attainable goal. Objectify the audience, understand their desires—appeal to their interests, eliminate the extraneous and presto “effective communication.” Well, maybe not.

Some months ago I came upon a book by Leo Steinberg called the Incessant Last Supper, based on what may be the greatest single work of western painting, Leonardo DaVinci's Last Supper. I've always loved the painting and have been looking at it for over a half-century beginning with a penny print I bought in kindergarten. In 1951, not many years after World War II, I visited it for the first time. It was in terrible shape, covered with mold and dirt and darkened by centuries of wear and bad restoration – Nevertheless the genius that Leonardo had invested in the work showed through and could not be denied. I had occasion to visit Milan frequently because I was doing a lot of work for Olivetti, at that time one of the most progressive of all European industrial concerns. In the eighties they initiated a complete restoration of the painting. Sadly, Olivetti is no longer an extraordinary example of how a corporation could be a good citizen as well as a profitable business, in fact it no longer exists. On one of my visits to Italy, they arranged for me to visit the painting in the process of being restored.

An attractive middle aged matron in a brown business suit was concentrating her attention on the face of Christ, high above the floor on a scaffold that had been constructed next to the painting. I say painting instead of fresco because, as many of you know, the Last Supper was an experiment in using untested pigments and binders that Leonardo was interested in. This is one of the reasons the work has fared so badly since it was first created. Dr. Pinin Brambilla Barcillon, who had the incredible responsibility of restoring the work single handedly, motioned me up the scaffold alongside her, inches away from the head of Christ, the centerpiece of the painting towards which all forms converged – I cannot describe my emotions as I realized the privilege of seeing Leonardo's work from a vantage point that few will ever have.

The head was a pointillist composition of tiny dots and fragments of color that dissolved into an abstraction as you got closer. Dr. Brambilla sat behind an optical instrument that illuminated one square inch of the painting's surface at a time (a day's work) as she looked through a magnifying lens – Her primary tools were a scalpel, a cotton swab, soap and water. Layer by layer she was cleaning away the dirt, waxes, varnish and over-painting of centuries. I tried to imagine what might be going through her mind, considering that if she took one extra swipe with her swab, the world's most precious patch of paint could be irreversibly gone. As it was, only half the original pigment of Christ's face existed once the various

retouchings had been carefully removed. After revealing the real Leonardo fragment Dr. Brambilla would float in a thin neutral film of watercolor around it to unify the image.

As I looked at it, I realized that re-creating the image in the mind, out of the bits and pieces that remain, makes the work even more evocative than it might have been originally, a point I want to get to a bit later. I've returned to re-visit the sublime masterpiece at ground level many time since then and I urge all of you to do the same since the painting and the space it defines are unreproducible. The first thing you'll observe is that your preconceptions about Leonardo's style are challenged—it is not dark and defined by dramatic chiaroscuro: on the contrary it is more like an impressionist painting full of fragmented cerulean blue, white and pink. Despite all of this I never understood why the work was so compelling until I read Leo Steinberg's remarkable book.

At this point some of you must be asking “Am I at the right keynote? What does this have to do with marketing or communication?” Bear with me.

The painting is a demonstration of how the brain works and a revelation of how belief conditions our senses of reality. It is not an attempt to illustrate one moment in time. That apparently was too simple for Leonardo. If you approach the work with the idea that it illustrates the words ‘one of you shall betray me' all the figures in the painting assume poses that clearly respond to those words with shock honor and revulsion. One of the principles of Renaissance communication was that the position of a figure revealed character and emotion.

On the other hand if you shift the message you hold in your mind to the institution of the Eucharist, “Take this and eat: this is my body,” the meaning of the apostles' gestures change before your eyes in response to this first call to communion. Think of it, two completely separate ideas in two different moments in time being simultaneously conveyed.

The mural is filled with irreconcilable contradictions. The table is too large for the space its in, yet too small to accommodate the apostles. Christ is enlarged (astonishingly this is almost never observed) so that seated he is as tall as Matthew and Bartholomew who are standing. Because Leonardo is interested in saying two different things at the same time, the painting can be read left to right where the apostles on our left have only heard the announcement of betrayal and those on the right are responding to the theme of the Eucharist. On the other hand, Christ is also speaking directly to us with his dual nature expressed in his two hands, his nervous right simultaneously referring to the treason dish and a glass of wine, his left offering redemptive self-sacrifice. It's important to understand that the apostles are not aware of the entire gesture. They, after all, can only see Christ in profile. Only we can see how all the forms in the painting converge on the triangular form of Jesus to represent his divinity.

Of course for us the question is why would the most lucid mind in human history introduce so much ambiguity in a work that intends to affect its viewers? Ambiguity incidentally is a military term that means to be attacked from two sides at once. The answer may have to do with the way we process information. The human brain is a problem-solving organ, a

characteristic that probably is at the center of our dominance over other species. The brain frequently remains inert until a problem is presented to it. In the case of The Last Supper, the profound ambiguity it contains alerts and stimulates the brain into action. DaVinci clearly believed that ambiguity was a way of arriving at the truth. As a result, the painting moves us in a deeper and more profound way than any direct statement.

I suggest that all of us involved in communicating ideas to others can learn a lot from Leonardo. Of course, the truth of the Last Supper has been unfolding for centuries and our work usually has to be understood in seconds. Five hundred years later another genius, Pablo Picasso, spent many years depicting subjects from several different points of view at once, understanding that any single point of view was a misrepresentation. Before I go any further, let me apologize to Leo Steinberg for reducing his brilliant observations to a simple-minded proposition.

In our practice we frequently use a less elevated version of the ambiguity principle to create a puzzle that the audience can solve within a short length of time. Clearly, the period of time between seeing something and understanding it is critical, too short and the viewer is not engaged, too long and you lose his attention and frequently generate confusion and resentment.

Since ambiguity seems often to be a central and powerful tool of communication, the next question might be what is its relationship to telling the truth. Of course the truth has never been easy to determine and one could say that at this moment the truth has become more elusive than ever. Yet we must begin with the presumption that telling the truth is essential for human survival.

Several years ago on a flight from Las Vegas to Dallas a hostess entered the aisle with a vigorously steaming tray of hot towels. As she approached me, I observed that the steam was actually coming from a wineglass next to the towels— “What is that?” I asked the hostess, who I later found out was a former kindergarten teacher and grandmother. “Dry ice and water,” she replied, “Is that for the drama?” I asked. “Yes,” she replied. For whatever the reason that brief conversation continues to haunt me.

What can it mean when a freezing glass of dry ice is used to simulate a steaming towel on a plane trip? Can this modest deception benefit either the airline or its passengers? Where was the decision made to do it? In the boardroom? In the advertising agency? On the flight itself? Does the airline believe that the drama of the steaming towels will suggest a policy of concerned service? What happens to the customer in the last row of the plane when he is handed a cold towel while the tray above his head is steaming madly? Does he doubt his own nervous system? Does he believe he has had a stroke? What makes me uncomfortable with all of this? Why do I believe that harm is being done?

I once created a test called The Road to Hell. I had just finished illustrating a section of Dante's Divine Comedy for an Italian publisher. When I first got the assignment I was unhappy that I had been given Purgatory as a subject as opposed to Inferno. As an illustrator, Hell had always seemed more interesting to me. Frankly, I never quite understood the

difference between Hell and Purgatory. As you may know, the difference is simply that those in Hell are not aware of what put them in Hell and are doomed to be there forever. Those in Purgatory are aware of their sins and consequently have the possibility of getting out by moving to a higher plane. This fact immediately made Purgatory more relevant to me, in part, because Purgatory is where most of us are right now. In any event, awareness of what we actually do in life seems worth thinking about.

Let me read you The Road to Hell, a series of questions that become more difficulty the deeper you go. The first couple are easy, would you—

1. Design a package to look larger on the shelf?
2. Do an ad for a slow-moving, boring film to make it seem like a lighthearted comedy?
3. Design a crest for a new vineyard to suggest that it's been in business for a long time?
4. Design a jacket for a book whose sexual content you find personally repellent?
5. Design an advertising campaign for a company with a history of known discrimination in minority hiring?
6. Design a package for a cereal aimed at children, which has low nutritional value and high sugar content?
7. Design a line of T-shirts for a manufacturer who employs child labor?
8. Design a promotion for a diet product that you know doesn't work?
9. Design an ad for a political candidate whose policies you believe would be harmful to the general public?
10. Design a brochure piece for an SUV that turned over more frequently than average in emergency conditions and caused the death of 150 people?
11. Design an ad for a product whose continued use might cause the user's death?

When I gave this test to students between the ages of 21 to 28, I discovered that in a group of 20, 3 or 4 of them were willing to go all the way—That is, participate in advertising a product whose use might cause the user's death. These were generally idealistic young people as yet seemingly uncorrupted by money or professional life. However, they drew the line at harming their family, friends or neighbors.

The other day in the country, I thought I'd make a Greek salad for lunch. Tomatoes are not quite in season but I had some good onions, peppers, cucumbers as well as a small square of feta and some excellent olives, olive oil and Greek oregano. As I was adding the feta to the salad I checked the nutritional label; it read 70 calories per serving. “Not bad” I thought, and crumbled the cheese into the bowl. Something made me examine the label again. Under “number of servings” it said 7. I had just added 490 calories to a diet-conscious lunch for my wife and myself…I wondered how did a thimbleful of feta become a serving? You all know the answer.

After lunch I turned on the TV to watch the ball game. A commercial for a nasty-looking green salve to treat arthritis was on, showing a smiling young woman testifying to the efficacy of the medication. “I was barely able to move my fingers” she said, “and now I can type for hours without any pain.” At the bottom of the screen in 6 point, barely visible type, were the words “results may not be typical”. Could I have picked any more trivial examples to indicate the lies we experience in daily life? Perhaps not, but the truth is we are subjected to a thousand of such misrepresentations every day of our lives. So pervasive is the culture of small distortions that we can no longer recognize them as lies. To quote Mc Luhan, “The fish in water doesn't know it's in water”—nevertheless the assault has changed our brains and our view of reality and truth.

Most of us here today are in the transmission business. While we don't often originate the content of what we transmit, we are an essential part of communicating ideas to a public that is affected by what we say. Should telling the truth be a fundamental requirement of this role? Is there a difference between lying to your wife and friends and lying to people you don't know? Certainly one thing that makes lying easier is thinking of the audience not as citizens but as consumers—the consumer is another species, and in professional life they are often thought of as the “other”. To quote Elaine Pagels in her book, The Origins of Satan, “The social and cultural practice of defining certain people as ‘others' in relationship to one's own group may be, of course as old as humanity itself.” While marketing is obsessed with the way groups behave it doesn't generally conceive of those groups as being our fathers, mothers, sisters or friends, this would make the job far too complex. Rather, these groups are thought of as ‘markets' with generalized characteristics that make manipulating them seem ethically acceptable. One thing seems consistent, the greater the psychic distance the easier it is to persuade people to act against their own self-interest.

The issue seems more significant than ever. Today, given the aggressive distortion of truth and reality that pervades our civic and business life. It is not a coincidence that Karl Rove, a brilliant marketing man is, next to the President himself, the most important man in Washington and perhaps the world.

What is truly frightening is the degree to which lying has become acceptable in our public life. I'm not sure when the word “spin” replaced “lie” but it is characteristic of how our language has become a way of deflecting or distorting reality. We seem to be awash in lies from business, the government, and almost every institution we have traditionally looked to as a source of belief. Our government has embarked on an investigation to determine whether the atrocities performed at Abu Ghraib were aberrational or systemic. What would be equally important is an examination of whether lying has become systemic in our nation and the way our government speaks to us. The relative lack of public outrage as government and business lies are revealed is troubling, and may indicate how the American sense of what truth is has been profoundly shaped by our most pervasive educational medium, advertising.

Actually it works two ways, advertising influences our relationship to government and government influences our view of advertising. A recent somewhat homophobic ad by Anheuser-Busch (no relation), in addition to characterizing Miller as a “sissy” beer, “outed” the Miller Beer Corporation as being owned by a South African company, paralleling the

outing, by unknown government insiders, of CIA Agent Valerie Plame. As you all know, that event was triggered because her husband told the truth about whether or not nuclear materials were being shipped from Niger. In my memory this is the first time that the patriotism of a competitor has been questioned in order to promote beer sales. Marketing can be shameless.

Politicians and businessmen have re-discovered the power of Lenin's old idea that a lie repeated often enough, becomes the truth. This dark assumption throws a pall over America as well as the entire world and endangers democracy itself. When people believe that their government systemically lies to them they become cynical. Cynicism breeds apathy and a sense of powerlessness that causes people to withdraw from public life. It is not coincidental that less than half our population votes. If only 44% of our country vote and we are equally divided ideologically, it means that 20% of the electorate control the fate of our nation—this has become a profound threat to the future of our republic and democracy itself. We can only call this a systemic scandal and observe that those in power have done very little to change the condition. Which raises one last question. From our government's point of view, have we become the “other”?

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