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Preserving the truth requires constant vigilance

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The ongoing debate over free speech isn't about the freedom to speak but about the freedom to lie. I don't have to support anyone's "right" to tell lies.

But as long as history is never truly free of bias, those with an ideological axe to grind -- fundamentalists and extremists on all sides -- will try to impose on others their version of the absolute truth.

There are still simple souls who believe the cleaned-up version of the Crusades and consider Richard I, known as the Lion-Hearted, the ultimate Christian warrior. That he violated his treaty with Saladin, broke his word of honor and massacred 3,000 Muslims after they had peacefully surrendered Acre has been ignored. What do we care now, 860 years later? Well, the lingering effect of letting myth overcome truth has been an ongoing fear and mistrust of Arab countries.

The Holocaust is fact. There are those who would revise the history of this century, who would cast doubt on what really happened. When the eyewitness generation is dead, all that will remain are their memories and the history books. Preservation of the truth is an essential work.

What is surprising is not that there are extremists who would deny the Holocaust as historical fact, but that we spend so much time telling them they are wrong. Telling fanatics they are wrong is a waste of breath, because you therefore become part of whatever conspiracy gives them nightmares. Opposition merely increases their determination to prove themselves right.

Personally, I'm all for harassing the revisionists through whatever tribunals are available, thus exposing them to contempt and showing children that such ignorance is rightfully dealt with through public scorn.

For those who would teach lies to children under their care, who would use a position of trust to preach hatred, there must always be the courts. Not for their opinions, but for their ignorance and the danger posed by men such as former Alberta teacher Jim Keegstra who, because of his licence to teach, was allowed to use the public school system to spread lies.

But for the rest of them, those poor fools who believe their vile opinions have merit, the best course is to expose them to the heat of daylight. Thus, the hearings of the B.C. Human Rights Commission into complaints by the Canadian Jewish Congress against Doug Collins, who writes a column in a thrice-weekly free paper, are important.

Any wacko has a right to say that he was captured and impregnated by aliens, hears country and western music through the fillings in his teeth, or the Holocaust is a Jewish conspiracy that never happened. That's free speech.

Responsible publications don't knowingly print lies, which is one of the reasons that vile opinions usually only find homes in self-published tracts and throw-away freebie papers.

This bumph crosses my desk regularly, as the demented of the world reach out for someone to listen to them. Some of it is vile, some vicious, much of it is racist, sexist and rooted in violent emotions. But all of it is the sad and silly product of deranged minds.

Most is merely banal. I once received a one-foot thick package (I measured it with my pre-metric ruler) of Biblical quotations and admonitions, in no particular order, all of them hand-written in tiny, cramped loops and whorls and then laboriously triple-underlined in black ink. The writing was so dense it was difficult to see the cheap yellow foolscap on which it was written. Who would expend such effort, without apparent purpose? Who cares? It went straight into the trash basket, as does the detritus of like minds who regularly denounce feminists, Jews, Catholics, civil libertarians, all politicians, most governments and anyone who would stand in the way of their unique version of truth and freedom.

There is only one defence against such hate: optimism. Hope and faith that good ideas and good people will always triumph. United States Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, a champion of the uniquely American constitutional guarantees of freedom of speech, wrote: "... the ultimate good desired is better reached by free trade in ideas -- that the best test of truth is the power of thought to get itself accepted in the competition of the market."

It is the constant testing that keeps hateful ideas from re-appearing. It is only constant vigilance that keeps them from ever becoming accepted as truth.

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