

**The Stories We Tell**  
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Sunday, February 15 2026

In a recent article by the Associated Press, researchers studying caves on the Indonesian islands of Sulawesi and Muna completed carbon dating residue associated with stenciled handprints on the walls. They were delighted to learn that the prints date from about 68,000 thousand years ago. These prints are the oldest known of this nature found to date and may indicate our ancestors were expressing creativity and working together as a part of a group culture.

The researchers say that “there’s likely more art to be found on nearby islands that could be even older than the handprints.” Future studies may help scientists understand how cave painting spread across the globe and how it’s woven into the fabric of humanity’s early days.

I am fascinated by the work of archeologists, paleontologists, and others who study the ancient past, looking for artifacts and sites that help us uncover the secrets of our human ancestors. They seek to answer the time-honoured questions - Where did we come from? How did we populate the earth? What were we doing? How? Why?

As I watch, read, listen, and dig deeper, I’m left with a few bits of understanding, a few more questions of my own, and a couple of conclusions that seem to fit the patterns and possibilities these scientists have uncovered.

It seems that we humans have an incredible capacity for creativity. Our larger brains have developed in a way that opens us to original thought, to creative expression in many forms, to questions of why, what, what if, how, leading to problem-solving and the creation of new methods, strategies, and technologies. We’ve continued to search for answers and possibilities throughout our worldly tenure, as we do today.

Among our many traits, we also seem to have a great need to connect and communicate, to be seen and acknowledged, to get the attention and companionship of others, to share information, often in the guise of stories, and to leave some record of our existence for others. We’ve developed ways to share our knowledge and understanding in mutually accepted methods.

Somewhere between 50 and 150 thousand years ago, using the power of our creative brains, humans seem to have moved from gestural communications to specific sounds that substitute for concepts and ideas. Researchers theorize that the need to work

cooperatively, hunt, make tools, and bond socially moved early people to adapt music, vocal sounds, gestures, and thought into commonly understood words.

As groups of people interacted, they learned and adapted the words of others into their collective language. They helped one another learn new concepts to expand their understanding of things beyond their immediate environment. Language took over and became the dominant way to communicate with one another.

Language is our tool for more effective sharing with one another. We have a means to answer questions about how we got here, what we are meant to do as a species, how and why we are impacted and sustained by the natural world, to communicate and teach the norms and expectations of our social groups, to express feelings and emotions and thoughts and beliefs. We begin to tell stories, to narrate our lives in the moment and for the future, as well.

Imagine the mental capacities you would need in an oral culture - a storytelling culture. You have to be able to remember, to access facts and information and examples and words quickly. Your people can now reinforce cultural messages, share important information, or express spiritual understandings. The stories speak through the ages, but only by sharing and learning across generations. Like the modern game of "telephone," the messages may adapt or change over time, keeping a kernel of the original and adding or subtracting bits and pieces.

Each advance in our human ability to communicate with one another seems to be associated with a great leap of technology. Let's leap forward in time to around 4200 BCE and shift our focus to the Egyptians, who like other cultures (Mayan, Incan) developed symbolic ways to capture and communicate their existence, hieroglyphics. There are symbols for names and words and ideas. There are symbols that are combined to capture complex concepts. The symbols are drawn or carved or inked on papyrus - to endure and be shared with others.

On the heels of hieroglyphics, written language emerges. Paleontologist Ella Al-Shamahi, on the NOVA program, Human, describes the development of writing among the enslaved mine workers of Egypt, who observed the ways in which their overlords documented their existence and, perhaps, yearned for a way to be recognized and remembered, as well. It's a fascinating story, and I encourage you to take a look at the series.

With hieroglyphics and written language, a new kind of career opportunity emerges - the scribe. A person who is taught to understand, recreate, and communicate through the use of . symbols. A person who is available to provide this service to those who need to communicate with others. Approximately 1% of the population were conversant in

hieroglyphics - the majority of people were illiterate. This was a special skill for a very small portion of the population.

I imagine that an element of trust becomes important in these kinds of interactions - you have to trust the scribe knows what they are doing, will translate your thoughts and ideas faithfully into the message, and has the integrity to have your best interests in mind in doing this work.

Perhaps this is where we develop the use of references for employment, research into the person's background or with their previous employers to discern their work habits and reliability. The elements of power, adequate compensation, loyalty, integrity, and honesty begin to be a part of the consideration of who you trust come into play. Perhaps even job interviews - another form of storytelling - to see the potential scribe face-to-face and make an evaluation of their job worthiness.

Over the centuries, we have continued to develop strategies we hope will reveal when someone is telling the "truth." We understand that some communication involves literal truth - facts and figures, instructions, dates and times, testimony. Others are more nuanced to communicate "truths," which may explain historical events or cultural norms, for example. These are often shared in morality tales, fables, and culturally-specific stories and narratives.

We've come to believe we can discern when people are telling us the truth - we look for consistency in what they are saying, for behavioral deviations from their "usual" demeanor, and we try to catch verbal and non-verbal cues. We check to see if the person seems calm or agitated, we observe their gestures and mannerisms, we focus on their eye movements, if they seem tense or relaxed, if their narrative seems spontaneous or rehearsed, and we note the pace of their speech.

And, often these approaches do help us know what is fact and what is fiction. But we need to remember that humans are infinitely creative.

And there are people, for whatever reason, may not share the same cultural values we do about speaking the truth, being trustworthy, the importance of honesty, or respecting the worth and dignity of others.

Join me now in the late 20th Century. We will skip over some important technological advances that helped support the ongoing development of communication - like the invention of the moveable type press in 1440 by Gutenberg, the typewriter, the ball point pen, telephones and telegraphs and televisions, cell phones, and....well, you get the idea.

Now we are in the computer age. We have moved far from the huge electronic contraptions of the 1950s to having an incredibly functional and useful computer in almost 72% of the world's population, according to the World Economic Forum. In developed nations, that percentage jumps to around 96%. It's estimated that only 14% of the world's population has never made or received a phone call. We have 24/7 access to an unmanageable amount of data, entertainment, politically motivated commentary, news (and fake news), spending opportunities, self-help and medical advice, and other more nefarious information on the dark web.

A lot of us are getting communications now that have been generated by computer programs operating independently of human input in the moment. Further, the capacity and possibility of the computer age have opened the door to people who choose to post false narratives, dubious "facts", and communications designed to influence or sway the opinions, behaviors, or "truth" of users.

All of this interaction is at a remove - we are no longer face-to-face with the people with whom we are communicating. Our strategies for discerning truth once again need to be shifted to reflect our interactions in this information environment. So what new approaches do we need to incorporate in our internet use habits to get the truest information, news, and advice?

Here are some suggestions to assist us in finding out the truth of what we are being "fed" by our computers:

1. Check out the citations given in any material that arrives on your screen from AI and other sources.
2. Develop a list of trusted resources you have vetted for yourself, which you know you can rely on to share factual, current, and believable information.
3. Review the information for logical consistency. Does it hang together and make sense?
4. Use your instincts. The old adage still applies - if seems too good to be true, it probably is.

Throughout our history, we've told stories. Some educate, some amuse, some share information, some explain our presence on earth. There have always been those who were committed to telling the truth, as they understood it. And, perhaps as another example of our human creativity, there have been those who perceived a benefit in stretching, obscuring, bending, or obliterating the truth to serve their own ends.

With capabilities of the computer, internet, and AI, there are infinitely more ways we can be misled, purposely scammed, or lied to. There are an overwhelming number of ways we can be led to follow our worst instincts, investigate the darker sides of life, and indulge our impulses.

Each of us will be confronted with opportunities and options we may have never thought of before. And, we will be challenged, perhaps, to make a discerning choice about how we will use the tools that are available to us. As Unitarians, our Eight Principles are a tool we can use to consider our actions and decisions, discern the truth we choose to live with, and live our lives in congruity with our values.

Amen.