

Search for truth means letting go of old beliefs

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No doubt it is an activity of the “getting older” years to do some major reflecting on who we have been in the past and who we are continuing to become. One very important exercise in remembering is recalling beliefs I once held and still hold, as well as those beliefs I have discarded.

These latter beliefs often required a great deal of effort to abandon. When I was a young novice, for example, and in charge of directing the choir, I thought Latin hymns should never be replaced by the then-emerging English hymns championed by folk groups. Today, I recognize the beauty of so many English hymns that brought passages from our sacred book, the Bible, into our liturgical services, making them readily available to our hearts and minds in poetry and melody. I have come around over the years to recognize that both traditional and contemporary music have value.

Institutions suffer from the same challenge as individuals when invited to let go of some treasured beliefs in favor of a broader picture of reality. This is called cognitive dissonance. Our brains resist learning anything that will shake the foundations of our belief systems.

If we are fortunate, we may have learned from family and friends and educators how to live with “both/and,” recognizing that reality is usually larger than the little portion of it we can see from where we stand.

When I lived in Peru, I saw how difficult it was for my Peruvian friends to let go of the conviction that only the rebels committed atrocities, until photos and commentary revealed mass graves and clear evidence of government forces’ responsibility.

Too, it has been very difficult for me to learn anew how to love my country and at the same time embrace the bigger picture of our whole history — both incredibly wonderful and grievously sinful.

In the past several weeks, many of us have watched the Jan. 6 hearings on television or internet. Some of us have

tuned in to further commentary supportive of the testimony of witnesses. Many others have chosen neither to watch the hearings nor to listen to any commentary that summarizes them.

This is an ancient story somehow, with only the communication technology changed.

In the Christian scriptures, in the last chapters of John’s gospel, we can watch another hearing taking place. Jesus the Christ is before Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor, who is reluctant to punish this Jewish man, but also fearful about any threat to his position of power that might come from the crowd.

Pilate asks Jesus, “So you are a king?” And Jesus answers, “Just as you say, I am a king. For this I was born and for this I have come into the world, to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is on the side of truth hears my voice.” Pilate says, “What is truth?” (John 18: 37-38)

Today, we are with Pilate in some ways. We ask, “What is truth?” falling into the temptation of imagining, like Pilate, that there is no way to know what is really true. We suffer from cognitive dissonance, which has been greatly influenced by those who keep telling us that only they have the real story and that these so called facts are just fake news. “What is truth?” they echo.

In the end, we need to listen to the whole story and also beg God to help us let go of beliefs that blind us to the truth.

In my faith tradition, we sing a hymn with these lyrics:

Open my eyes, Lord, help me to see
Your face, open my eyes, Lord. Help me to see.

Open my ears, Lord, help me to hear
Your voice. Open my ears, Lord. Help me to hear.

I pray those words frequently — for myself, for my community, for my Church, and for my nation. Help me to see. Help me to hear. How do you pray to know the truth?

Sister Eileen White is a member of the Leadership Council of the Grey Nuns of the Sacred Heart. From a Faith Perspective is a weekly column written by members of local faith communities.