Review of Terry Warner's Presentation

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In his presentation to the 2022 AMCAP conference, C. Terry Warner spoke on the subject of self-deception, which he has dedicated his life’s work towards understanding. His premise was that self-deception is something that can actually happen with people, that it is something that is treatable, and being able to recognize it will help in therapeutic healing.

Warner explained that self-deception occurs when a person encounters or feels a moral imperative to another person, but chooses to ignore it. In other words, when a person feels that she must do something that is right and good for another person, but instead of answering that call and responding with a selfless act, she ignores the call, that person falls into self-deception. The self-deception arises because the person then must justify their intentional ignorance. The way this justification occurs is that the self-deceiver begins telling themselves that they are actually a victim of circumstances, rather than a perpetrator against another. When two self-deceivers justify their own behavior and feed into each other’s hostilities is what Warner terms collusion.

Warner outlines three interwoven aspects of self-betrayals underlying collusion: 1) Victimhood, or focusing on one’s own suffering as the fault of others. You are a product of circumstances beyond your control, and everyone is picking on you. 2) The emotion of self-betrayal is a public assertion that others are to blame. Whether it’s in the form of complaining, denying, justifying, or blaming, self-deception requires your problem to be somebody else’s fault, and that the other person is aware of it. 3) Self-betrayers are schematic and oversimplified in seeing themselves as victims, because it makes it easier to absolve themselves of any responsibility. If the world is actually more complex than they pretend it is, then it is more difficult to justify themselves in ignoring their moral imperatives.

These aspects of self-betrayal align conveniently with the medical model of therapy, as it means that clients require the help of trained experts to solve their problems because the issue appears to stem from forces outside the client’s control. The clinician’s job, in such cases, is to simply diagnose and alleviate suffering. The morality of a client, Warner explained, is removed from the equation. The result of collusion and self-deception is war that is perpetually on the verge of breaking out openly, where each person’s defensiveness proves the other’s aggressiveness.

However, in place of self-betrayal there can be interpersonal unity, which seems to always be accompanied by a perfect love, perfect inward peacefulness, and perfect brightness of hope. Warner ties this to Christ’s teaching in 3 Nephi 11 on the importance of unity and the strict injunction Christ gives to avoid contention, as these are the first steps we must take as we start upon the path back toward our Father in Heaven. Striving
for that unity requires that we are open to connection with others and willing to take responsibility for our self-deceptions, for one cannot be a victim and perpetrator at the same time.

In the realm of therapy, Warner urged clinicians to consider what world they are helping clients live in more successfully — an artificial world justified by self-betrayal or the real world of human connection and unity? There is very little mystery in treating self-deception; when a self-deceiver takes responsibility for responding to the other instead of living in victimhood, then the self-deception has ended. Removing self-deception also removes the walls between us and allows us to see each other as fellow human beings. Receiving willingly the moral imperatives that come from others can lead to some of the most important moments of our lives. It can lead to hope, joy, and peace spoken of in the scriptures. It is indeed the case that the path to peace is itself, a truly peaceful path to trod.