

## Chapel Lecture, 'Iolani School

Good morning! It is my sincere pleasure to be here to speak with you and share a little bit of what I've learned in my twelve years or so as a journalist.

I know I've already received an introduction, but I wanted to quickly introduce myself as well. My name is Jamelle Bouie, I live in Charlottesville, Virginia — right near the middle of the state — and I'm a columnist for the New York Times Opinion Section. "Opinion" is a little bit of a misnomer, in my, well, opinion. I share my views, but I also rely on the skills of journalism: research, reporting, interviewing and investigation.

I'm going to talk a little bit about those skills this morning, but first, I want to share something I've learned recently.

For reasons that are still a little unknown to me, I am on TikTok. I created an account earlier this year, and after a few months of mostly just watching videos I decided I would venture out and create my own content. I still watch videos though, and a few days ago, I learned about a conspiracy theory that has apparently been circulating on the app and among younger people.

The conspiracy is that Helen Keller, the American author and disability activist, who was famously both blind and deaf, did not exist. Or rather, did not exist in the way she is said to have existed. Everyone I've seen who has expressed this view has basically said that they just do not believe that someone could be both blind and deaf and still accomplish what she is said to have accomplished.

Those accomplishments include writing more than a dozen books, hundreds of speeches, and widely campaigning for various causes, including women's rights and labor rights.

People are also unsure how someone with those particular disabilities could be, as she was, prejudiced toward African Americans and other groups. How could she have those beliefs if she could not see or hear?

Now, there are *other* people on Tiktok who have taken it upon themselves to correct the people who believe in this particular conspiracy. They explain that Keller was not born blind and deaf, that she became blind and deaf as a young child. They

explain that Keller learned sign language and other ways to communicate, and had a lifelong aide who assisted with her writing and traveling and activism. And they explain that racism was a pervasive ideology at the time that Keller was alive, and there's no reason she wouldn't have absorbed those views in the same way as anyone of her class and station.

These people, I'll call them the fact checkers, are often exasperated as they explain the reality of the situation. And in their comments section, people sympathetic to the conspiracy, or at least sympathetic to the people who believe it, will say that, even if kids are getting the facts wrong, isn't it good that they are engaged in critical thinking? Keller may be real and verifiable, but we should encourage young people to question, question, question.

And that is absolutely true. We should question and question and question. But there is more to critical thinking than simply questioning.

To think critically is to understand yourself as a fallible person, whose perceptions can and will fail them. Your first instinct — your first reaction — can mislead you as much as it can guide you.

The problem with the Helen Keller conspiracy isn't just that it is wrong, but that its origins reflect one of the worst habits we can develop: a refusal to question ourselves out of a belief that our thoughts and our reason are the only things we need to determine if something is true or false.

Put a little differently, it is not critical thinking if the one thing you won't question is yourself.

Real critical thinking — serious critical thinking — demands humility. In particular, it demands the humility to accept that your thoughts may fail you, that your assumptions about reality may not actually be correct, and that you need to address and account for them.

This brings us back to journalism, which I mentioned earlier.

The tools of journalism — the research, reporting, interviewing and investigation — are designed to help us, the journalists, overcome and account for our own biases. They are designed to teach us humility; to show us that our first reactions may mislead us, to remind us that we need plenty of evidence before we can label anything a fact, and to keep us from becoming too enamored of our own perceptions.

The point is not just a good process that produces careful, rigorous work. The point, I believe, is to produce people — to produce journalists — who have internalized the signal idea that we do not, and cannot, know everything, or even most of some things. The point is to produce a little humility about our own ability to perceive the world.

It is good for the work, obviously, but it is also good for the soul. So much of the world involve peoples trying to sell falsehoods. And they'll do it — they always do it — by flattering your perception of yourself as smarter or better or more clever than the people around you.

What we want to do is cultivate a little humility — a recognition that anyone's perception can fail them and that we must gather evidence to support our questions as much as our conclusions. You can call this intellectual humility. It's the humility to know when it's time to learn rather than trust your own reactions.

It's the humility to know that yours is not the only way of seeing and experiencing the world, and that part of the job of critical thinking is to understand other ways of knowing and existing.

The alternative is to become so wedded to what you think you know that you're fixated on those initial thoughts and impressions. Your thoughts become rigid and narrow instead of broad and flexible. And you become vulnerable to anyone who might want to manipulate the sense of ego that sits at the root of all of this.

The tools of journalism help here. But you don't need to be a journalist to cultivate a journalistic ethos in your own life. All you have to do, first and foremost, is loosen up and take yourself less seriously. And after that, all you have to do is accept that there is a lot about the world that you do not know, a lot about the world that may not make sense, that may cut against your assumptions, but which can be investigated and understood if you make the time to do it.

There is a lot of talk, these days, of disinformation and misinformation and all the like. But I think the larger problem is that we refuse to turn our critical eye toward our own thoughts and perceptions. We need to remember that one of our first tasks before as students, as writers, and as people is to be aware of the limits of our own ability to know, and to question ourselves as much as we would question others.

*Jamelle Bouie is an columnist for the New York Times Opinion Section*