One of my favorite Saturday morning pastimes is solving the *New York Times* crossword puzzle. Now, since the title of my talk is "Standing for Truth in an Age of Fakery," I feel obliged to admit that I’m not always successful, but I like to give it a go ... after all, they say that working out puzzles can help to stave off cognitive decline as one ages...ask me in twenty years... or maybe we should make that *ask me in two years!*

Anyway, in the puzzle of Saturday before last, the clue for number 1-across, a nine-letter word, read as follows: "Like a world in which objective facts are less important than appeals to emotion and personal belief." I didn’t get the answer right away, but I had yet to enter any cross-fill for the 'downs', and there were some clever and helpful clues to be considered; here are a couple I particularly enjoyed...

**clue** (9 down): "Like Swiss vis-à-vis other cheeses"; **answer:** holier, the first letter of which, *h*, give me the final letter of the word I was still seeking, while at the same time revealing its penultimate letter as most likely a *t* or an *s*

another **clue** (6 down): "More familiar name for Enrico Rizzo in an Oscar-winning film"; **answer:** Ratso (have you seen *Midnight Cowboy*? ...it's a good one...check it out!)

After a bit more work on the ‘downs’--do you know what a “tosspot” is?--I was able to fill in the answer to number 1-across as *P-O-S-T-T-R-U-T-H, post-truth.* Sure enough, "post-truth" works as an apt descriptor for a world in which knowledge is devalued, in which appeals to emotion command the high ground in
political and social discourse, in which parochial beliefs turn people’s eyes away from inconvenient and unwelcome facts.

On Sunday mornings, after a quick glance at the front page of the New York Times, the first section I typically turn to is the Sunday Review. And there on the first page of the very next day’s Sunday Review was an op-ed penned by former CIA chief and retired Air Force General Michael Hayden titled "The End of Intelligence: How do you brief a president who isn’t interested in facts?" Not too far in to the article, I learned from General Hayden that the Oxford Dictionaries organization had named "post-truth" as its word of the year for 2016, a year in which the British electorate had voted to exit from the European Union and, of course, in which the American electorate had voted to send a ...a ‘new kind of leader’ ... to the White House. The encroachment of post-truth thinking, Hayden lamented, represents a departure from sacrosanct Enlightenment principles that guide deliberation and judgment, principles that privilege “experience and expertise, the centrality of fact, humility in the face of complexity, the need for study and a respect for ideas.”

And there, as I turned the page to continue reading Hayden’s intriguing op-ed, was a massive 6-column graphic, a freshly planted gravestone embossed with the single word, TRUTH! Well, prodded by Professor Maria Mitchell’s gentle though persistent nudges, I had already committed a week or so earlier to the aforementioned title of my talk; here now my weekend amusements were prodding me to pick up the gauntlet and develop my theme. It seemed as though the universe was speaking to me, or at least that particular and left-tilted universe chronicled by the New York Times ... or should I say by the ‘failing’ New York Times, home of ‘third rate’ journalists intent on the unwholesome purveyance of ‘fake news.’

Another term that has risen to some prominence in current parlance is “gaslighting” or “to gaslight”. Until recently, I have had only a vague sense of its meaning as involving some sort of dissemblance. A bit of research reveals, in fact, that the word comes from the title of a British play, later adapted as a Hollywood movie of the
World War Two era, in which a man seeks to manipulate his wife into thinking she is going insane by insisting that her perceptions of reality are delusional, that she is mistaken in her recollections of what has actually happened.

The term has since come to represent the actions of someone trying to manipulate the perceptions of a vulnerable individual, perhaps by presenting a set of ‘alternative facts’, as it were, in an attempt to induce self-doubt in the mind of the victim. It turns out, in fact, that the American Dialect Society selected “gaslighting” as its 2016 word of the year, given its newly prominent usage in the America lexicon. As Ben Yagoda, a “Lingua Franca” columnist for the Chronicle of Higher Education, explains, “The new prominence came from Donald Trump’s habitual tendency to say ‘X,’ and then, at some later date, indignantly declare, ‘I did not say ‘X.’ In fact, I would never dream of saying ‘X.’” Multiple journalistic venues around the country had begun featuring the term in their coverage of the election and its aftermath; even Teen Vogue got in on the act, publishing an op-ed headlined “Donald Trump is Gaslighting America,” whose author argued that Trump had risen to power by “normalizing deception.”

And the beat goes on. Amanda Carpenter, a ‘never-Trump’ Republican, CNN contributor, and former communications director for Senator Ted Cruz is currently out doing the talk-show circuit, stumping for her new book, Gaslighting America: Why We Love It When Trump Lies to Us. Well, I’m not so sure “love” is the right word for it, but Carpenter’s argument is that Trump’s winning formula serves to discombobulate his opponents into a “state of weakness and confusion,” while his supporters revel in his ‘win at all costs’ tactics in a crusade to restore America’s ‘greatness.’

Interestingly, in an article directly beneath the Hayden piece I spoke of earlier, London Business School professor Daniel Effron reports on his research, recently published in the Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, which showed that “reflecting on how a falsehood could have been true did cause people to rate it as less
unethical to tell—but only when the falsehoods seemed to confirm their political views.” He offers the following as an example: after the president last November retweeted a video released by a far-right hate group in Great Britain that was falsely said to depict a “Muslim migrant” attacking a Dutch man on crutches, his press secretary subsequently offered a rationale that even if the video might not be real, the threat that it portrays is real. Now, to be fair, Professor Effron’s research also showed that Trump opponents are also susceptible to this ‘it could have been true’ effect; reflecting on a discredited report that the president had removed a bust of Martin Luther King from the Oval Office, self-avowed anti-Trumpers were less bothered by this admittedly ‘fake news’, reflecting that he probably would have removed the bust if he could have gotten away with it.

Speaking of CNN contributors, perhaps you’re familiar with Jeffrey Lord, your (about-to-be) fellow alum. In fact he graduated in my class, the class of 1973 (yikes, this June the College will be hosting my--our--45th class reunion!) Mr. Lord rose to some celebrity as a surrogate for candidate--and later President--Trump on CNN. In one of his more infamous exchanges with fellow panelist Van Jones, who had just criticized Mr. Trump for refusing to denounce the endorsement of Ku Klux Klan leader David Duke, Lord pronounced the KKK to be a “leftist” organization and the terrorist wing of the Democratic Party.

Well, perhaps such a preposterous claim can be attributed to an unguarded utterance issued in the heat of political debate. But apparently not; in an appearance at his alma mater last Fall--were you there?--Jeffrey Lord essentially repeated this claim, spinning the fact--yes fact--that the Democratic Party of the 19th and early 20th centuries had some linkage to the Ku Klux Klan into an insinuation that the modern Democratic Party, and progressivism more generally, bears some allegiance to the beliefs and tactics of KKK extremists.

In a subsequent letter to the College Reporter, my colleague Matt Hoffman offered a bristling rebuke, charging that Mr. Lord “used semantic tricks, cherry-picked quotes,
de-contextualized historical half-truths, and omission of any contradictory evidence to spin a fanciful, revisionist narrative in which left is right, up is down and night is day." Reflecting further, Professor Hoffman observed, "As an academic committed to educating young people in a way that privileges an honest search for truth using rigorous scholarly methods, listening to Mr. Lord made me feel like a doctor sitting in a surgery gallery watching a charlatan perform an organ transplant with a monkey wrench; it was educational malpractice of the highest order." I can only add, 'what better example of fakery than this'?

We are, after all, on a college campus, call it an ‘ivory tower’ if you must, where the modus operandi is scholarly inquiry, even if imperfectly pursued. Mr. Lord returned once again to these grounds just this past semester, to engage in a debate inspired by Professor Hoffman’s letter. Unfortunately, illness prevented Matt from participating. Despite a plea by his able replacement, Professor Stephen Cooper, that their interlocution proceed in good faith and with honest intent, Mr. Lord felt compelled to offer his customary riff on the racist sentiments of long dead Democrats. Perhaps such a stance is the only refuge of a person compelled to defend a set of pronouncements and policies designed to leverage the ongoing racism in American society into a basis for political power and malfeasant governance. Or perhaps Mr. Lord has indeed convinced himself that his analysis carries some intellectual heft; is it possible that a fellow can gaslight himself?

But enough about Jeffrey Lord. We are here today to celebrate your scholarly achievements, the intellectual integrity with which you have undertaken your study, and the personal integrity with which you have lived your lives here at F&M. I trust you have taken to heart the importance of an honest search for truth in the pursuit of not just your scholarly endeavors but of your chosen professions as well. By accepting our invitation to join Phi Beta Kappa’s Theta of Pennsylvania, you have confessed your love of learning and accepted an obligation to carry on your learning, and the sharing of same, throughout your life and within the spirit of the liberal arts. Remember too, that the liberal arts tradition celebrates free and open inquiry and a
willingness to engage, even if skeptically, with the ideas of those with whom you disagree.

Well, Harvard beat us to the punch in claiming Veritas as its motto, but we have a pretty fine one ourselves: Lux et Lex; Light and Law. It goes nicely with the name Franklin and Marshall, don’t you think...what with the imagery of Ben out there challenging thunderheads with his kite, and of John handing down his judicial wisdom from the high bench? But for me, and I’d say more profoundly, the light of Lux et Lex connotes an imperative to examine the world and its elements in the full light of day and with an aim toward discovery of new and more nuanced truths, while the law signifies an obligation to build and spread one’s knowledge with benevolence and good grace, and of course as bounded by the strictures of rational discourse and honest disputation. Lux et Lex, keep it with you as you make your way into the future.

Now if you’ll indulge me for just another moment or two, I’d like to express my gratification for having played a part, however small, in the education of several of you sitting here today. So to Alperen, Phu, Sarah, Jacob, Yuqi, Karly, Marko, Izzie and Sheena, it has been my honor and my pleasure to have served as one of your instructors. To the rest of you, let me say, ‘why didn’t you enroll in one of my courses’?

And to each and every one of you, I say congratulations and well done. Go forth, be fruitful, and multiply...then send your money and your children back to dear old F&M!