

Ain't That the Truth

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READINGS

A reading from Steve Kowit

This evening, the sturdy Levi's
I wore every day for over a year
& which seemed to the end
in perfect condition,
suddenly tore.
How or why I don't know,
but there it was: a big rip at the crotch.
A month ago my friend Nick
walked off a racquetball court,
showered,
got into his street clothes,
& halfway home collapsed & died.

Take heed, you who read this,
& drop to your knees now & again
like the poet Christopher Smart,
& kiss the earth & be joyful,
& make much of your time,
& be kindly to everyone,
even to those who do not deserve it.

For although you may not believe
it will happen,
you too will one day be gone,
I, whose Levi's ripped at the crotch
for no reason,
assure you that such is the case.
Pass it on.

An excerpt from from the Harvard Business Review by Tamara Erickson, a fellow of the London Business School.

One of my most vivid memories of time spent with my father as a little girl was watching the evening news together. Each time, after Walter Cronkite confidently closed his broadcast with “And that’s the way it is,” my father would ask me one question: What do you think the “other guy’s” point of view would be? Night after night, he painstakingly pointed out the possibility of another perspective, in doing so giving me perhaps his greatest gift.

No account represents an absolute truth. All reporting is, by definition, a retelling of the story, a conscious selection of facts to include, a decision to omit details considered extraneous or unnecessary. In most instances, I believe this retelling is done with a sincere attempt to provide a straightforward account, but it’s nonetheless shaped through the writer’s lens, based on the reporter’s sense of what will be important, interesting, and relevant to the intended audience.

To all who crave the sense of certain truth implied by Mr. Cronkite’s confident assertion, as my father’s daughter, I would argue that the information environment of 50 years ago was probably more difficult and dangerous than today’s. With fewer sources, it was more difficult to understand the perspective of the teller. Not surprisingly, there was a greater tendency to accept one report as the only reality.

I find today’s potential for confusion much less troubling than yesterday’s veneer of a single truth.

Rend Your Heart by Jan Richardson

To receive this blessing,
all you have to do
is let your heart break.
Let it crack open.
Let it fall apart
so that you can see
its secret chambers,
the hidden spaces
where you have hesitated
to go.

Your entire life
is here, inscribed whole
upon your heart's walls:
every path taken
or left behind,
every face
you turned toward
or turned away,
every word spoken in love
or in rage,
every line of your life
you would prefer to leave
in shadow,
every story that shimmers
with treasures known
and those you have yet
to find.

It could take you days
to wander these rooms.
Forty, at least.

And so let this be
a season for wandering
for trusting the breaking
for tracing the tear
that will return you

to the One who waits
who watches
who works within
the rending
to make your heart
whole.

SERMON

Perhaps you have seen this, on social media – twitter or facebook – where someone will post an article you can click on, or share a quote, and the only description they write about why they are posting it is a one-word affirmation such as:

This.
...or...
Truth.

Sometimes they are more emphatic with phrases like:
This. THIS (all caps) and then, SO MUCH THIS (still all caps.)

...or...
(all caps) TRUTH.

It's the modern version of age-old phrases like the logical-literal thinker saying, "Absolutley" or the proper monarch saying "Quite Right" or the responding congregation member saying "Preach it and Amen" or the common Midwesterner – "Ain't that the truth."

There is a way in which we have always had some language of emphatic affirmation. So the articles posted online, or the story shared or the social commentary expressed, they all are a certain nuance of truth – a type of experiential resonance. When you hear something that just speaks so clearly to your own experience, something that cuts so sharply at a social issue, something that is so edgy because it is rarely stated so openly – it is a type of truth that is not about absolute ultimate universal truth – it is about particular, experiential, embodied, lived truth.

Last week, after a beautiful morning here on MLK Day, I listened to Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s speech from 1962 to the national press club. These lines caught my attention:

But those who adhere to the method of nonviolent direction action recognize that legislation and court orders tend only to declare rights, they can never thoroughly deliver them. And only when the people themselves begin to act on rights on paper give them life blood, a catalyst is needed to breathe life experience into a judicial decision by the persistent exercise of the rights until they become usual and ordinary in human conduct.

The phrase *breathe life blood into a judicial decision* is about embodied truth. Emphatic, lived, truth. A statement, article, speech, sentiment that gets the emphatic "Truth or Amen" response is so often something that is ignored, a reality that is unspoken, or shunned, in society. Rev. Dr. King was also emphatic of the necessity of legislation and legal realities – he also said in that same speech that *while law cannot change the heart, it can restrain the heartless. – they may not change the heart, but they change habits.*

It was true, and still is, that legislation and executive order and court decisions are central to the establishment of more just and equitable treatment of the oppressed in our world. And yet, we know that is not the only aspect of true and lasting change.

In a powerful movie, *The Great Debators*, the closing scene is a final argument from James Farmer, Jr., the son of a preacher, against his opponent arguing for the morality of the rule of law. The movie is set in the 1930s and based on a true story of a debate team from the historic black school, Wiley College, seeking to be on equal footing with white teams. The closing scene, pushing the edges of truth in the south at the time, were these words, in the spotlight on a large stage in front of a largely white, southern academic audience; James Farmer spoke:

*In Texas...
they lynch blacks.*

*My teammates and I
saw a man strung up by his neck*

*We drove through a lynch mob,
pressed our faces
against the floorboard.*

*I looked at my teammates.
I saw the fear in their eyes...
and worse...
the shame.*

*What was this Negro's crime
that he should be hung, without trial,
in a dark forest filled with fog?
Was he a thief?
Was he a killer?
Or just a Negro?*

*Was he a sharecropper?
A preacher?
Were his children waiting up for him?*

*And who are we to just
lie there and do nothing?
No matter what he did,
the mob was the criminal.
But the law did nothing,
just left us wondering why.*

My opponent says

*nothing that erodes the rule
of law can be moral.
But there is no rule of law
in the Jim Crow South,
not when blacks are denied housing,
turned away from schools, hospitals,
and not when we are lynched.*

*St. Augustine said,
"An unjust law is no law at all, "
which means I have a right,
even a duty, to resist..
with violence or civil disobedience.
You should pray I choose the latter.*

We know, from scenes like this, from our own lives, that laws, so-called facts, pseudo-science like eugenics – all things claiming to be absolute in a particular time have just as flawed a history as personal experience or emotion. For something to be true does not necessitate quantitative evidence all the time. At times, the lived experience of people, within their own life narratives that are complex and nuanced, cannot be quantified in a way that will convince another. We have known that to be true through centuries of testimony from communities of oppression – based on race, gender or gender identity, sexual orientation, class, age, ability, ethnicity – for so long, and still, much of that testimony has been discarded and without enough “evidence” to prove it.

Neuroscientist, David Eagleman, writes in his book *Incognito*, “*emotional systems are evolutionarily old, while the rational systems is a recent development – but as we have seen, the novelty of the rational system does not necessarily indicate that it is, by itself, superior. Societies would not be better if everyone were like Mr. Spock, the cyborg, all rationality and no emotion. Instead, a balance – a teaming up of internal rivals, is optimal. This is because the disgust we feel at pushing a man off a footbridge to stop a train from hitting others is critical to social interaction...some balance is needed.*”

Quite often, we find, that the heart, the body, the life we live, is light years ahead of the quantitative facts that would come later.

Former fake newscaster on Comedy Central, Stephen Colbert had a term to refer to modern political references to truth – “Truthiness”, as Colbert named it, was truth, sometimes in opposition or at least disregarding reason, logic, or fact, was something that was true to someone because they believed it was true – that was the only test. It was a critique about individualized “gut feeling” truth without communal testing or relationship.

The difference between that and experiential truth, is that experiential truth is always done with an affirmation of someone else’s testimony – that is, it is fundamentally communal. It is about communal wisdom through shared story, and is verified through communal experience – saving it from individualistic fundamentalism.

In one of the traditions of the reformation, John Wesley proposed a quadrilateral of religious truth. So imagine four parts of a square, or a circle – or however you can visualize four equal parts of where truth comes from. The source of truth for Wesley, the founder of Methodism, were these:

Scripture, Tradition, Reason, Experience.

He claimed that every tradition, particularly among Catholicism and Protestantism, put focus on all of these, and favored some over others – one would become a primary filter, or a weighted preference.

The idea was:

Catholicism favored tradition.

Protestants favored Scripture.

And it was influenced by reason and experience.

Well, over time, parts of the radical reformation claimed the final two as primary sources of truth.

The Humanists favored reason

The transcendentalists (and in fact, the early mystics of many traditions) favored experience.

We are heirs to the tradition that favored experience. The Unitarians and Universalists both believed in reason, but also and primarily experience – experience of the natural world, personal experience of the holy, experience of universal love.

For me, some of my most profound moments of change in perspective, or opinion, were much more grounded in lived experience, in embodied conversation and learning and perceiving of the world – moments filtered much more through the heart than the head.

One of those was in high school, with one of those hippy-dippy, unconditional love, justice seeking, people loving, open-minded Methodist weirdos; to whom I now happen to be married.

I remember it clearly – we were driving back from cleaning bathrooms at her parents paint store, and we began talking about religion. Dangerous. Jenna liked me well enough, other than the whole “I’m going to be a pastor” thing. She attended the “falling off the left side of the world” Methodist church down the road from my “fiercely moderate” Lutheran church.

In a high school class, we were learning about religion, quite generally – learning about different traditions and cultures, and it was the week to talk about Buddhism.

Perhaps a surprise to some of you, given where I serve now, at the time I thought that studying Buddhism was wrong because it was false, heathen-istic teachings. It was a philosophy, not a religion, and either way, it was evil.

And upon sharing that with Jenna, she responded as a good liberal Methodist would: “are you kidding me? You can’t be serious.”

“I’m dead serious”

“Wow...um...okay...so...”

And she began talking about how in her church, which blew my mind, in her *church* they talked about other religions. And how one’s religion was highly an accident of one’s family of origin, and it was regional and cultural and each religion had similar teachings of how to be a good person and we could learn from people different from us.

And other weird things like that.

So thank God for that conversation before I took my world religions class from a Buddhist professor.

What I realize looking back on the conversation – it was a heart thing, not a head thing. It was a heart change – not based on facts or statistics, maybe a little on reason and logic – but it was about a testimony I heard of love and openness toward difference.

To receive this blessing, you have to let your heart break open, says Jan Richardson, which Pat read to us this morning. Let it fall apart so you can see the chambers you have hesitated to go – and wander those rooms – it will take you days, years, 40 or so – and there, in the open heart, truth finds new light.

We live a heart-centered world, even if we long in our public discourse for more and more facts and reason. We live in a world of heart-shattering brokenness and heart-healing beauty, every day. But it’s a challenging truth to remember – reason and logic are always through the filter of culture, experience – our social location and our genetic makeup – framing our lenses of what is “logical.”

Amidst the complexity of truths in our world, there are strong narratives that we are told to believe. False narratives of success, of what makes a happy life, of materialism and militarism and commercialism – narratives age old and ever changing like racism and xenophobia and transphobia – the narrative of individualism which places us in prisons of either privilege or oppression – either way, isolation – all touted as absolutely true. We are judged, still, so often by everything but the content of our character.

Perhaps you’ve seen this litany somewhere – speaking truth about the experience of young women and the complexities of modern world demands with old world values. She puts this particular experience this way:

Girl get pregnant before 25
She is too young to be a mom.
Girl gets pregnant after 30
She is too old
Girl considers abortion
She is a murderer
Girl considers adoption
Can't believe she is just going to give her baby away, how could she do that?!
Girl keeps baby
How's she going to afford the baby?
Girl gets welfare
Living on benefits taking our money
Girl gets job
How can she stand to be away from her baby all day like that?
Girl becomes a stay at home mom
She probably doesn't do anything all day but watch TV
Girl wants to leave horrible partner
Nobody knows what it means to work things out anymore
Girl wants to stay with no good partner
She's dumb
Girl lets her kids play without her
She is an unfit mother – where is she?
Girl is overprotective of her kids
Poor kids, no childhood
No matter what you do, people will talk [edited: crap]
So do what is best for you.

Ain't that the truth.

We live by stories – narratives – that remind us of who we are, that warn us of our tendencies that lead to suffering – stories that provide support when the world barrages us with other narratives telling us we are less than, that we don't measure up.

It's those stories – that we are to be perfect, the always needing to be better, the oppression of needing success – those stories seem to wreak the most havoc. Because we try to portray, then, that we have it all together – that we have it figured out – it becomes a type of absolute – facebook profile style truth.

We absolutely have to portray that we're stable,
that we're educated but not elitist,
that we're caring but not over emotional,
that we're laid back but not lazy,
that we're hard working but not over-working,
that we're rational but not heartless,
that we're open minded but not wishy-washy,
that we're fierce in our opinions but not fundamentalist.

That we're the perfect balance and we got it all figured out
and everything is going great – nothing to complain about.

I don't know about you, but I'm reminded everyday of the truth that life is messy; that I
don't have it all figured out;
that the only absolute truth I know is I absolutely do not have all the answers.
As soon as I think everything is going well,
like the ripped jeans in the poem, I'm reminded...

I'm not in control. Everything is not in order.
Ain't it the truth that just when life seems to have order, and everything is working well
and I'm in control...it starts with the small things as reminders:
my pants rip, I spill my coffee, I send a badly-phrased email, I fall up the front steps (how
do you even do that?), my daughter throws up on me, I forgot about the meeting that just
ended, the tire light comes on in the car, the checking account is too low again, we see a
mouse in the kitchen, the furnace is cycling without turning on, the mouse is now in the
car...
all of which may or may not have happened to me...

Ain't it the truth - it can all come crashing down in a moment with those bigger things,
beyond the coffee or the pants, that actually matter:
That chaos breaks into our order
That what we once knew for sure is now unclear.
That the relationship that was sustaining is all of the sudden gone.
Life gets cut down or cut short...

Ain't that the truth

That the wrong conversation,
The harsh critique,
The briefest failure
Creeps in again – and again – and again
And piles up around us
And it takes all we can muster to clear it out into enough safe open space to live fully – to
get out of the mess, the cramped life filled with all we hoped we could have been
All we wished we could have known
All we thought was certain.

It's this constant internal battle – of what is good and what is bad,
What is true and what is false,
What is heart-shattering and what is heart-healing

And it can be that just as quickly as the mess of our lives pile up,
something else can also shatter through the bleakness
The good friend with a listening ear.
The flute, violin and guitar with stunning harmonies.

The hopeful testimony of hospitality, or grace, or love
Found in an unexpected place.

It's in those moments when we can find a deeper truth
That we are not alone, that the struggle is real
And we aren't afraid to name it as such,
and that so, too, is the resilience
That we are going to fail
And our jeans will rip
And our heart will break
But the truth breaks in to remind us
We will also succeed
And there will be more pants
And our heart can still be mended –

With the radiance we find in each other,
The beauty of confusion that feels more and more comfortable
Compared to the veneer of yesterday's single truth,
With the story that we didn't expect,
With the change of heart in the one we thought it least likely to change –
And perhaps that is ourselves.

Ain't it the truth
That it is in those moment that the character of our life is most clearly defined.
That we begin to see what truly matters, what matters most.
That a gentle soul can turn our heart again back toward beauty.
Those brief moments and glimpses of grace can revive us to life again.

It is perspective that breaks through those moments to remind us of the truth of life and we
discover again what it's all about
this breath
this moment
this person
this poem
this truth - lowercase t - shining in a million brilliant moments
of breath, of life, of beauty, of love.

Ain't it the truth. Can I get an Amen?