

Can We Handle the Truth?

While enduring our second month of sheltering in place, my brother Bill paid me a short visit. He lives an hour's drive from my small abode in a northern California valley; his home is up a breathtakingly beautiful mountain road east of the valley. He often makes a point to stop by when he comes to the valley to buy groceries and run other errands. His most recent visit was surreal because we both donned masks -- until Bill couldn't bear it anymore and removed his with a sigh, "These N95s just don't work with beards."

Bill and I have been close all our 60-plus years. I have no doubt that this closeness is due mostly to the shared trauma of our mother's passing when we were children. One outcome of that trauma is that our conversations rarely reside on the surface; we're deep sea dwellers, coming up to the surface not even for air, but to periodically remind ourselves that life, if we choose, can be very shallow.

As Bill and I took our socially distanced places on my narrow couch, I suggested the parameters of our conversation: "The news is so ugly, let's talk about something else." I then shared with delight that just the night before I'd listened to an entire album produced in 1969 by a famous rock band. I was impressed that every song on it was still outstanding. Bill is quiet, prone to telling stories that punch with profound, often moralistic insight. Thus, he began.

"There's a blues song on that album that really kicks ass. I remember right around the time that the album came out, I went over to my friend Paul's house, and while we were sittin' around he played a blues song on his record player, an old song performed by some down-home brothers -- and it was the *exact same song* that the rock band had produced for their album." He continued with exasperation, "I couldn't believe it -- that band didn't change a goddamn thing, not a *single* note, not a *single* phrase or nuance. They took that original blues song, performed it, then claimed it to be their own. I could never listen to that band's music again."

I sat there, quietly mulling over my stew of feelings -- denial, deep sadness, betrayal by the band, anger at being betrayed, and anger at Bill for completely ruining

my ability to feel good about that band ever again. I replied with a slight chuckle in an attempt to disguise my inner conflict, my warm rage: “You know, you didn’t have to tell me that story,” by which I was really saying, *Did you really have to totally ruin that precious little pleasure of mine?* Bill’s simple answer knocked me hard on my ass:

“Yes, I did.”

Some would label Bill a selfish killjoy – which I was tempted to do. We continued our conversation, and when he was ready to leave, Bill and I bypassed the hug and bowed to each other in love. His story lingered, and I began to ponder the power of truth: its ability to enlighten and to deliver from bondage, but also its tendency to rob us of any sense of good feeling or hope. Truth can uplift and deflate simultaneously, placing us in a severe state of quandary that oftentimes only the passage of time and honest introspection can resolve.

These past several weeks of living in the knowledge of Covid-19 have transformed me from one who devours the news to one who observes how we handle the truth. Surely, the truth is approachable, even knowable; and yet, I have observed that Americans treat it as a Great Unknown, a set of facts or experiences that can *never* be fully ascertained. What I’ve seen is that we regard the truth as an annoyance, even if slight: it too often hurts, divides, confuses and confounds us. Ultimately, the truth will dismantle our very foundations; it is thus to be feared and avoided at any cost.

The disdain that most people hold for truth first became evident to me through the racial prejudice that defined me as “less-than” during my early childhood years. Later, as an impressionable young teen, I read Chairman Mao Tse Tung’s *Little Red Book* along with Marxist-Leninist writings that revealed some undeniable truths about the dangers of unfettered capitalism. While I was never rebellious, I learned to regard the truth of any matter as a treasure and faithful guide. I also learned that the truth is rarely kind: I have agonized over the realities behind America’s wars, acts of rendition and torture; I have seethed against white people for allowing their privilege to callously, yet with ease, blot out the world around them; and I have been betrayed by political leaders – even so-called progressives -- who have conditioned themselves to either tolerate or wholly welcome lies as their constant companion.

Covid-19 is affecting me, giving me the opportunity to think long and hard about the greater implications of Bill's story of my once-beloved rock band. My desire to hold onto my misperceptions about that band brought to mind another misguided hope. A few years ago, I became passionate about engaging others in a personal pursuit of truth. I conducted several workshops and facilitated a monthly community conversation encouraging the participants to question their most basic assumptions. I began with two pervasive assumptions: 1) that human beings are comprised of separate races; and 2) that the white "race" is superior to all others. On average, about 10 people (in a town of 15,000) participated in these widely advertised conversations. While those who attended were serious about introspection, committing myself to broadening this kind of work eventually felt futile; I couldn't *make* any white person question their identity and sacrifice their privilege in the pursuit of truth. Only their personal experience of suffering, resulting in an epiphany of intense clarity or remorse, would suffice.

Covid-19 is a raging fire that we are ill-equipped to extinguish. Putting it out requires a level of selflessness -- an epiphany -- that we have not yet experienced; it will also require honoring the truth. America reacted too slowly to the virus' spread primarily because we confidently believed the statement, "America is the greatest country in the world!" Blindly trusting in this apparent greatness, we found ourselves dependent upon leaders whose response was not unlike my reaction to Bill's story: denial, anger, and accusation.

The Covid-19 pandemic has emboldened me to push away from the public lies that have accumulated over my lifetime; I no longer even attempt to examine or reconcile them. Knowing that I am powerless to make the pursuit of truth more attractive to others, to make it shake sense into us, to mold it into something that we can more easily digest and embrace, I am reduced (or elevated, depending on one's perspective) to the role of observer. And what I'm observing during this pandemic is a large-scale need to discard the truth. Surely, Jack Nicholson's most poignant words in the film, *A Few Good Men*, ring loudly in my ears: "You can't handle the truth!"

Except that we *can* handle the truth if it's forced upon us -- not a highly ambiguous enforcement that allows us to choose, for instance, whether to abide by

scientist's recommendations for preventing the spread of Covid-19. Handling the truth has to do with *holding* it: Do we hold the many truths revealed by this virus or treat them like hot potatoes? Are we waiting for the concern around the racial disparities of those infected and dying to cool down so that we don't have to make fundamental changes in our education, housing, and employment policies? And what of our dysfunctional public health system -- are we paying close enough attention to acknowledge its severe deficiencies and massively invest in it? Our economic "safety nets" have proven to be woefully unsafe -- are we meditating on how to ensure that human life always takes precedence over profit? Americans consume excessively and waste too much as a celebrated way of life -- will we allow this pandemic to inspire introspection around what matters most in our lives?

I've often lamented to others that only a natural disaster of tremendous magnitude will cause the people of the world to recognize the truth of our connection to each other and to the earth. Sadly, as much damage as Covid-19 has already done, it seems to have merely heightened our divisions, ignited a partisan fervor to reopen the economy, and increased the desire to resume all the dysfunctional systems that have never served us well. But we have not yet seen the end Covid-19, and only time will tell whether we can indeed handle the truth.

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