

## INTRODUCTION

*The insincerity of man – all men are liars, partial or hidiers of facts, half tellers of truths, shirks, moral sneaks. When a merely honest man appears he is a comet – his fame eternal – needs no genius, no talent – mere honesty – Luther, Christ, etc.*

Mark Twain

When we can on Saturdays, we spend an hour or two over coffee. We cover a wide variety of subjects. We unload about work, our families, theology, politics, complexity theory, the arts, college football and the state of the culture in general. (Then we buy our second cup of coffee and begin again.)

Not long ago, between biscotti on such a Saturday, Steve was wrapped up in making a point and began a statement with, “Well, the truth be told....”

For some reason, at that moment, the phrase stopped Devlin dead in his tracks. He’d heard those words before. In fact, they had become a kind of stock phrase in our everyday conversations. But this time “the truth be told” took Devlin far away from the dialogue at hand and down another track.

“So what is Wamberg saying here? Why does he have to reassure me that he’s telling me the truth? Isn’t telling the truth at the basis of our relationship? Is what he’s about to say so incredible that he needs to let me know that he understands the outrageous parameters of his statement?”

Meanwhile, Steve rambled on about the virtues of option football. He’s a Nebraska fan from way back.

The flood of questions continued in Devlin’s mind, and perhaps revealed a darker current. “Was he telling me truth about other things he didn’t qualify? Or were those statements at least not held to the same standard of truthfulness? Or was the statement he was making not true and he was setting me up by reassuring me of its veracity? Can I really count on anything my friend is saying?”

By this time it was evident that Devlin was no longer actively engaged in the conversation at hand. Steve stopped, leaned across the table and caught Devlin’s eye. “Dev, where are you?”

“Oh. Sorry. Just... well, you said ‘the truth be told.’”

“I did? OK, what about it?”

“I say it a lot these days. I wonder why?”

“It’s a phrase that allows you to gather your thoughts for the next sentence?”

“Sometimes. But where did it come from? Why did anyone ever feel a need to remind – no – *warn* someone else that they were telling the truth?”

That made the conversation shift gears.

We talked about our dads, and how truth was an expectation, no exceptions, growing up. We talked about Harry Truman and Mark Twain and how refreshing they were for their straightforwardness. We offered each other examples from business and personal lives where truth was rewarded, and where truth was ignored or even punished.

We talked about how we were raising our own children with an appreciation for the truth. As products of two fine seminaries, we talked about Christian ethics. As consultants, we talked about media and press “spin” and where lines could be drawn between reality and fantasy for businesses and not-for-profits alike. We talked about telling our wives the truth when it wasn’t always comfortable. We told stories of our own failures with the truth, and some successes.

And in the course of that conversation, we realized afresh that telling and hearing the truth were no longer “givens” in our culture. We wondered what we’d all look like as a “Pinocchio Nation.” How long would our noses be if they grew every time we dodged the truth?

At the very least, people wouldn’t be turning their heads very quickly in a crowded bus. But how did we get here as a society? What’s so hard about the truth that we collectively avoid it rather than embrace it? In an age of “moral sneaks” we ask with Mark Twain, “Where are the ‘merely honest’ people?” And, “How do I become one?”

These questions brought to light a number of issues regarding truth and its practice that we felt we needed to explore. This book comes from our exploration. In the first section we discuss the role and impact of truth in everyday life along with a notion we call “The Rule of Truth” that calls for each of us to allow truth to be an equal-opportunity offender for ourselves as well as those around us. In the second section, we take a look at truth in spirituality, the family, the workplace, and society at large. In the final section, we examine what we’re handing off to the next generation in regard to truth, and what we can do to practically enhance the place of truth in everyday life

with “Fourteen Tactics to Tell the Truth.” (There are actually exercises to do in a workbook at the end of all this to help you put truth into practice.)

Truth is an ideal, but it is an ideal that calls for practical application. That’s why we freely mixed the philosophical and the practical in the pages that follow. Strange as it may seem, what follows isn’t too far removed from our Saturday afternoon discussions over coffee: eclectic, passionate, a little off-the-wall. We hope it gives you some fresh ideas about the place of truth in your own life.

It did for us.

*Devlin Donaldson*

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## Chapter One: **The Role of Truth**

*Truthfulness is a condition of any collective undertaking.*

Ralph B. Perry

Have you heard the story of the farmer and the baker? They had entered into a bartering agreement: Every day, Zeke the farmer would exchange a pound of butter for Louie the baker's pound of bread. It wasn't long before Louie felt he was being cheated - and in fact, when Louie carefully checked the butter's weight he found out he was being shortchanged.

He immediately took Zeke to court. (This story obviously comes from a culture nearly as litigious as ours.) Louie was angry as he laid his argument out before the magistrate. "I know I'm not getting a pound of butter for the bread I give to this farmer!" he said heatedly.

The magistrate, hoping to bring both parties to a peaceful settlement, asked Zeke, "Sir, let's start by checking the weights you use to measure the pound of butter you give to your friend, the baker."

Zeke responded, "Don't have any weights, your honor."

Louie smiled to himself. This case was about to settle in his favor. What was this hayseed thinking, anyway, trying to do business without weights?

The magistrate continued. "How then, sir, do you measure the butter?"

Zeke shrugged. "Well, your honor, I just use the weight of the one-pound loaf he gives me to measure the weight of the butter. Seems to me that if he's short on the butter, then I'm short on the bread."

Case dismissed.

Discussions of truth are long and esoteric. This one isn't. We can't afford to complicate the argument here, because we have a more practical aim with this book. We're here to remind ourselves that truth is also at issue in everyday relationships. Indeed, it is "a condition of any collective undertaking."

If truth doesn't have that role, we're all at risk. Who is cheated when truth is not given its proper role in our everyday social contracts? The ultimate answer: Everyone. When one side's "short on the butter," the other side's "short on the bread."

That means trust is violated, and that negates the role of truth in our collective undertakings: to build trust.

### **The Magistrate's Question: What's Your Standard?**

Let's go back to the magistrate's question. We need to examine our standard. We need to know what we're using as weights.

What's your standard definition for truth? For starters we could just look at what the dictionary says. Webster's says some of the following things when defining truth: "...the quality or state of being true, the quality of being in accordance with experience, facts or reality; conformity with fact, agreement with a standard rule, etc.; that accords with fact or reality."

There's a wonderful Greek word, *alatheia*, which translated means "truth." One day in Greek class (many years ago) we ventured to ask, "So how would ancient Greeks have defined 'truth'?"

The wise professor responded, "It would have been a little more visceral than Webster's. Something like 'the stuff out of which reality is made.'"

Take your pick. Of course, these definitions assume that we are able to sort out facts and tell them truthfully. While their interpretations can be widely divergent, there are some specific things that can be agreed upon. That is the truth that we are concerned with.

It's the stuff out of which reality is made, not those long philosophical arguments. It's how you answer your children's questions. It's how you address your boss's concerns. It's how you act out your responsibility to your community.

### **Whose Reality? : The Peril of Post-Modern Truth**

In the rock opera *Jesus Christ Superstar* Pontius Pilate, during the trial of Jesus, asks the following musical questions:

*So what is truth?*

*Is truth unchanging law?*

*We both have truths; are mine the same as yours?*

Lyricist Tim Rice wrote these questions around 1970. They reflect the encounter between Pilate and Jesus as recorded in the Gospel of John in the Bible, and expand on it. Rice's rendition is a model of the ongoing ambivalence about truth that marks the post-modern society in which we find ourselves. There are many books written about post-modern thought. There