

Honesty in the ICU?  
 Reading from the Old Testament: 2 Samuel 12:1-11a, 13  
 Reading from the New Testament: 2 Timothy 2:15

I think it may be time for frank to retire; not the name, nor the person, but the adjective. There are words that through overuse, misuse, and outright abuse are rendered irritating, and sometimes meaningless. Each year Lake Superior State University offers forth a list of words that just need to go away. For example, “*Price Point* - It's really just using two words to say the word *price*. ‘We did a *price-point* comparison on the two products.’ It's another attempt to sound intelligent when all one is saying is, ‘we compared prices.’

How about the simple adverb/conjunction *So*? It doesn't have to disappear. I'm not a zealot; but I do think its use could be curtailed. **So** as in *I'm SO over this*; or *I'm SO done with your nonsense*. We even go as far as to give it the starring role in our sentences by adding an inventory of **O's**: I'm **sooooo** hungry. At least in the first world, I don't think all those **O's** are legit.

In this same category of dictionary pruning, I'm thinking that *Like* would have to make the list, and that's without even including the *Facebook* connection. What does it even mean anymore? *I'm LIKE, “You didn't tell me about that!” And he's LIKE, “Oh, yes I did!”* Put the two words together and you have a nightmare conversation, “*I'm LIKE, SOOO done with this relationship drama.*” It makes you want to throw a flag, *Unnecessary Language; 15 yards from the spot of the foul; 4<sup>th</sup> down.*

Another category of words well past their sell-by date, would be words or phrases so carelessly and frequently abused that they actually become a sign that what they modify

is the opposite of what they purport. The classic example of this would be *vine-ripened tomatoes*, or *fresh baked goods*, or *new and improved*, or how about *secret sauce*? It's not a secret if everyone knows you're talking about thousand island dressing. To this list I would add the following: *quite frankly* or its cousins, *let me be frank* and *to be honest*.

To me, it seems these words or phrases now function as red flags warning that what follows is at least a redesign or alteration of the actual truth, and very often an avoidance of honesty altogether. I hear someone say, *to be honest* or *let me be frank*, or *quite frankly*, and I feel like I'm standing at one of those three-way mirrors in a men's store, the salesman clutching a wad of material at my back and saying, "A perfect fit. This suit was made for you. You look mahvelous!"

Quite frankly, when you hear someone use the phrase *quite frankly* these days, the truth may well be in a different zip code. With the deluge of voices you encounter with every click of the mouse or swipe of the screen, each one declaring opinion as truth and the algorithms of preference drawing you down a bias cementing rabbit hole, you wind up in a place where tribal inclination deftly masquerades itself as reality to the extent that truth itself is at risk. All those voices allow you evade the rigorous and humbling discipline of engaging an honest look at the world and yourself.

An article in *Scientific American* explored the question of why people are increasingly vulnerable to conspiracy theories. "We all have a natural inclination to give more weight to evidence that supports what we already believe and ignore evidence that contradicts our beliefs. The real-world events that often become the subject of conspiracy theories tend to be intrinsically complex and unclear. Early reports may contain errors,

contradictions and ambiguities, and those wishing to find evidence of a cover-up will focus on such inconsistencies to bolster their claims.” (*Scientific American*)

Do you remember those quaint days when we could share a laugh in checkout line of the grocery store as we pointed to the ridiculous headlines of the tabloids? “Murdered by her drunken cat!” “Russians Halt Aging Process.” Or does anybody remember the three headlines on the same front page of the *Weekly World News*? “Space Creature survives UFO Crash in Arkansas;” “Hillary Adopts Alien Baby;” “Secret Service Building Special Nursery in the White House.” If you read that without laughing, getting the joke of it all, or if you attributed the smallest shred of credence to it, I hope someone else manages your finances for you.

But now that anyone can have a microphone on social media, the ridiculous is rendered plausible, and people who ought to know better are buying it and selling it. As a spokesperson for *Ripley’s Believe It or Not* observed, “If you’re told something enough times, you’re sure to start believing it.” Through the magic of *Twitter*, *Reddit*, *Facebook*, *Instagram*, and a thousand other apps our kids haven’t revealed to us yet, the ridiculous morphs into a movement and soon we’re looking at our leaders or self-proclaimed influencers on the screen and asking, “Did he or she actually say that?” And thus, the unintended consequence of an ostensibly benign feature of your search engines, the technology that tracks and reinforces your preferences, can lure you into accepting an alleged truth that is contrived or manufactured, but not real. The glut of dubious information that clogs our screens and the willingness of people to believe it leaves one asking along with Pontius Pilate, “What is truth?”

In such a world, is truth itself at risk? When a patient is admitted to a hospital following an accident or as a victim of violence, the vigilant reporter standing outside the ER typically discloses the patient's status as either stable or serious or critical. Is honesty itself in the Intensive Care Unit?

Israel's narrative reaches a ruinous turning point today at a place called truth, and it happens right on the heels of David and Israel having achieved its greatest glory. Observing that a person's sense of morality decreases as their power increases, the British historian Lord Acton famously said, "Power tends to corrupt; Absolute power corrupts absolutely." Israel's King David offers one of history's great exemplars of this proverb. From his humble beginnings keeping sheep, David has ascended to the pinnacle of power. King of all Israel; heir of the covenant promises of God; mighty in battle; achieving all that his predecessor, Saul, could not. David was literally the chosen child who seemingly could do no wrong, which inevitably creates a common human problem. When everybody is telling you how wonderful you are (a circumstance I have never encountered personally); you may actually start to believe it, and worse, you may begin to feel people are obliged to tell you how wonderful you are, or you may pursue the power that would compel people to tell you how wonderful you are.

David had achieved that kind of power, the power that fosters the illusion that you are above the law, immune from consequence, able to take what you want without thought of the welfare of those from whom you take it, even if the cost to them is life itself. That kind of power brings with it an assumption of no moral accountability. David took Bathsheba; conspired in the murder of her husband Uriah; sent his troops into battle and risked their lives in order to coverup his misdeeds. The news cycle passes and he's still

living in the illusion of his alternate reality. David had the power to live without consequence, or did he?

Enter Nathan, a prophet in David's court, the same prophet who had told David he would not be the monarch to build a temple. In Nathan, we see an integrity of purpose. For Nathan, the truth shall not be altered for the sake of power and will not be servant to the king. As Jesus would in generations to come, Nathan shares a parable that opens a window so that the breeze of truth may enter in. A poor man has one thing, a lamb; and the poor man cherishes the lamb as one would a child. A rich man is hosting a luncheon, and hesitant to use what he has, takes the poor man's lamb, certainly not because he needs it, but because he can.

Hearing the story, David, the adulterer, the perpetrator of sexual assault, the unassailable king that purposely sent an innocent Uriah to his death, is suddenly and self-righteously filled with moral indignation, ready to send the rich man and his lamb-gorged gut to death row. Yet, with David's angry rant still hanging in the air, Nathan tells David, "You are the man."

BodaBook, BadaBoom! Have you ever been witness to a truth told so blunt and clear that all the air is sucked out of the room, and everyone present is holding in what little breath is left in their lungs as they await the impact? You don't know what may happen next. It could be anger or violence or relief or confession, but denial is no longer an option. Kierkegaard said, "The truth is a snare: you cannot have it, without being caught. You cannot have the truth in such a way that you catch it, but only in such a way that it catches you."

I once heard of a woman who when asked to name a person who had in some way been Christ to her answered, “I’m trying to think of someone who told me the truth about myself so clearly that I wanted to kill them for it.” In our affirmation today, we will repeat these words from *A Declaration of Faith*, “In the presence of Jesus who lived out what God wants us all to be, we were threatened beyond endurance. Blinded by our rebellion against our Creator, we killed his Son when we met him face to face.”

David’s power was such that he could have easily just eliminated the messenger, mounted a campaign to discredit Nathan, recruited a team of sycophants to obscure the truth or at least distract the people from it. David could not, according to Nathan, evade the consequences of his misdeeds. He could avoid charges and trials and judicial sentences, but his behavior had established a template that his children and his children’s children would surely follow, eventually unravelling so much of what God had given him. Surprisingly, David acknowledged his iniquity and his dependence on the mercy of God. Listen to the stark confession of David’s psalm, “For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. Against you, you alone, have I sinned, and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are justified in your sentence and blameless when you pass judgment.”

Virginia Wolf said, “If you do not tell the truth about yourself you cannot tell it about other people.” Fearing pain and consequence, we work so hard to avoid confession, and thus, pass by the place where healing and hope begin. David would not avoid the many wounds wrought by his misdeeds, but his willingness to confront the truth opened the way to reconciliation. Thanks be to God for the courage of the Nathans who value truth above consequence.

By 1954, America had become besotted by fear of communist infiltration with Senator Joseph McCarthy fomenting the hysteria by dispensing unsubstantiated rumors and accusations against all manner of civilians, soldiers, writers, artists, government employees, etc. If you had a Social Security, you were number a potential target of McCarthyism. The media savvy McCarthy was a master at masking rumors and lies as truths, trusting fear to be his greatest ally. Careers were destroyed, and lives were diminished without cause. His primary co-conspirator, attorney Roy Cohn, said of McCarthy, "He saw dramatic political opportunities connected with a fight on Communism." Cohn said, "Joe McCarthy bought Communism in much the same way as other people purchase a new car."

However, in an iconic moment during a 1954 Senate hearing, McCarthy's prime platform for his histrionics, an army attorney, named Joseph Welch, listening to McCarthy malevolently impugn an attorney on Welch's team, could no longer abide McCarthy's lies and tactics, tactics McCarthy had used successfully to intimidate and silence most critics. Confronting McCarthy, Welch memorably said, "Until this moment, Senator, I think I have never really gauged your cruelty or your recklessness ... Little did I dream you could be so reckless and so cruel as to do an injury to that lad ... I fear he shall always bear a scar needlessly inflicted by you. If it were in my power to forgive you for your reckless cruelty I would do so. I like to think I am a gentleman, but your forgiveness will have to come from someone other than me."

When McCarthy tried to renew his attack, Welch interrupted him: "Let us not assassinate this lad further, Senator. You've done enough. Have you no sense of decency,

sir? At long last, have you left no sense of decency?” (John Meachem, *The Soul of America*)

Welch offered a decisive word at a critical time; its impact was significant; its lesson timeless. Speaking truth to power. “Have you no sense of decency, sir? At long last, have you left no sense of decency?”

We see so much that is indecent in this moment of time that has been labeled the post-truth era. Too often we slide into the crowd of those who when confronted with the truth shouted, “Crucify him!” To avoid facing the truth about ourselves, our prejudices, our culture, our world, we deflect, blame, assault, impugn, threaten, and lie.

When Jesus said, “I am the way and the truth and the life,” he wasn’t boasting, he was just being clear in saying that if you want to know what is true, it needs to look like him, sound like him. Does it have the scent of decency, of goodness? If it doesn’t, buyer beware. As Dostoevsky’s Father Zosima said, “Above all, don’t lie to yourself. The man who lies to himself and listens to his own lie comes to a point that he cannot distinguish the truth within him, or around him, and so loses all respect for himself and for others. And having no respect he ceases to love.” (Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamozov*)

May the truth set us free. Amen.