

Sermon Give Power to Truth

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I remember a time I came home on Thanksgiving break. My mother had gotten her master's in education while I was getting my college degree, and was teaching at a local elementary school. The taxi dropped me off and I walked in just as the release bell rang. Within a nanosecond, I was trapped from the waist down in a seething, screaming ocean of humanity. In my moment of terror, I heard in the distance A VOICE. And that ocean parted like the Red Sea. All the kids sat quietly on either side of the corridor to wait for their buses. I looked down the hall to see my savior and there stood my mom. In all my twenty years, I had never heard THE VOICE. What power! What authority! Where had it come from? Where had it been all these years?! I was amazed and, a little peeved, and relieved. Here was a confident capable woman in charge. Teaching had called forth something from her that motherhood didn't. I was glad too – I wouldn't have been able to hold my own with that voice in charge of me.

My mom was never sure that she was a good mother. But she knew she was a good teacher. When had it happened, this change?

[story about her term paper on Leon Festinger and his theory of cognitive dissonance, and his misuse of the term obverse]

“In psychology, cognitive dissonance is the mental stress or discomfort experienced by an individual who holds two or more contradictory beliefs, ideas, or values at the same time, performs an action that is contradictory to one or more beliefs, ideas or values, or is confronted by new information that conflicts with existing beliefs, ideas, or values.[1][2]

Leon Festinger's theory of cognitive dissonance focuses on how humans strive for internal consistency. An individual who experiences inconsistency (dissonance) tends to become psychologically uncomfortable, and is motivated to try to reduce this dissonance—as well as actively avoid situations and information likely to increase it.[1]”

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cognitive_dissonance

My grandmother Dora was a perfect example. She prided herself at keeping kosher better than anyone else in the family. That was before she had her first taste of bacon. Bacon tasted delicious! Thereafter she decided that bacon could not come from pigs.

Festinger spent a portion of his book introducing the logic of cognitive dissonance. And in his explanation he used the term obverse. Now, the rest of us might use the word opposite, but Festinger wanted to be very precise, and he used the word obverse to illustrate his point in some key sentences. The problem for my mother was, his example didn't make any sense. It drove her crazy. She drove us crazy.

Finally, she put on the coat of power that had been hanging at the back of her closet and wrote her final paper.

She got an A+. Turns out Festinger realized his error and corrected it in the next edition of his book.

The power of the word was a turning point for my mother. She had vested her truth with her power. She had taken the risk – parked all her insecurities and doubts about herself and challenged the wunderkind's grammar and won.

Without the vestment of personal power, the power of the word will be more important than the power of truth. We have to give power to our words or no one will hear our truth.

She had this power. We all have power. But, I know if I had asked her, “Mom, do you think of yourself as a powerful person,” she would have answered “Are you kidding, I can't even get you to clean your room!” I'll bet, that if you asked the men, women and children in this room “Are you a powerful person?” most of us would say, “No.” Bullies have

power, manipulators have power, incredibly wealthy people have power. Anyone who can charge me to do something I cannot do for myself has power. Or hire me or fire me or detain me or make me do something I don't want to.

We forget; we forget that power isn't simply about institutions, or military supremacy, or politics or wealth. Power is more intimate than that. It is a fundamental aspect of how we see ourselves as human beings, how we make sense of our condition, and how we make a difference so that we may live properly in the world.

Power is the ability to be effective, to *do* something, the capacity to maintain ourselves, to affect something or someone or a world of someones. And when you get right down to it, the ability to affect others comes down to the power of the word. We are never more acutely aware of the power of the word than at times of great decisions.

Listening to interviews with voters exiting the polls last Tuesday, I was struck by one voter's rationale for his candidate. He mentioned that the world needs to fear us. I found this eerily reminiscent of the 1950s. The red menace. The urge toward totalitarianism. McCarthyism. I realized that I keep on seeing George McCarthy's face superimposed on the debates.

Why, I thought, does this great nation keep returning again and again to the belief that making others fear us will make us safe? It seems pretty clear to me that making sure others fear us is a sure-fire way to guarantee we will never be safe. Carrying a big stick never works unless you've got someone working behind the scenes with a carrot.

But we don't vote in our own self-interest, do we? What do we vote with? We vote our identities, we vote our moral values. And our values, my friends, are more important than truth.

In the 1950s there was a phrase "speak truth to power." It was made famous by a 1955 book of the same name written by Quakers calling for resistance to totalitarianism.

"Our title, *Speak Truth to Power*, taken from a charge given to Eighteenth Century Friends, suggests the effort that is made to speak from the deepest insight of the Quaker faith, as this faith is understood by those who prepared this study. We speak to power in three senses : To those who hold high places in our national life and bear the terrible responsibility of making decisions for war or peace. To the American people who are the final reservoir of power in this country and whose values and expectations set the limits for those who exercise authority. To the idea of Power itself, and its impact on Twentieth Century life. Our truth is an ancient one: that love endures and overcomes; that hatred destroys; that what is obtained by love is retained, but what is obtained by hatred proves a burden."

https://afsc.org/sites/afsc.civicactions.net/files/documents/Speak_Truth_to_Power.pdf

Among the co-authors was Bayard Rustin. Late research suggests that it was actually Rustin who probably coined the phrase "speak the truth to power." He was a civil rights activist. He was also black, a pacifist, and openly gay. He was arrested for his homosexuality a year before publication. And in an act of monumental sacrifice on his part, and monumental hypocrisy on the part of his colleagues, his name was stripped from the book. The book was heartfelt, principled, and the equivalent impact of placing carnations in the gun barrels of National Guardsmen. The image, the message endures, but its power waxes and wanes with the level of threat our country perceives. George Lakoff, a professor of linguistics and cognitive science, says the truth is not a strong enough antidote to a powerful message, and it is time we learned this. Think of words, Lakoff says. Think of every word we choose and every word we hear as carrying an emotional association. This association is what Lakoff calls a frame.

"Frames are mental structures that shape the way we see the world. As a result, they shape the goals we seek, the plans we make, the way we act, and what counts as a good or bad outcome... You can't see or hear frames. They are part of what cognitive scientists call the "cognitive unconscious"—structures in our brains that we cannot consciously access."

Lakoff says powerful words evoke emotion – we make associations with words: relief, security, take back the night, make America great again. That is a framework, a structure for viewing the world. William Cantwell Smith referred to

this worldview as faith. Lakoff calls it a frame. Moral values evoke emotion. People who understand the power of the word understand how to express their moral values with words that evoke emotion and they use them effectively.

Why isn't the truth enough? Well, think of Festinger's observations. We ignore truths when they don't fit our understanding of the world and how things work. What did David Guggenheim title his documentary on Al Gore's efforts to halt global warming? An Inconvenient Truth. What are we now calling it instead of global warming? Climate change. Because people associated global warming with heat and our winters are just getting more and more fierce.

What are the frames we use to see the world and how things should work? Lakoff posits that, in America today, we interpret things – communicate with each other – through a frame of family values. What's key here is that Lakoff sees two distinct perspectives on family values: the strict father model and the nurturant family model. Think about that for a minute. Making sure there is a strong, strict father in charge means that folks will follow the rules, get their just due and no more and the world will be a better place. Making sure that we are nurturing means that as many people as possible will be taken care of and the world will be a better place. What we are talking about are vastly different ways of viewing how the world works and what is best for us.

Lakoff says we have to understand the frame of reference those in power use to see the world and how things should work. Sometimes, we agree with the frame of those in power. That doesn't absolve us of the necessity of making sure we see and hear their perspective and values in every word they utter and in every deed. We cannot be ignorant of the persuasive power of words or the actions they provoke.

Sometimes we need to resist the frame of those in power. And if we want to resist the message, and do so successfully, we need to make the effort to see and hear their frames and avoid using them. We need to see and hear our own frames, know deeply and absolutely our own values, and use them, express them effectively.

In one way or another, it is our capacity to resist the powers that be when they lead us down paths of ignorance, fear and dominance that defines us as people of faith. Think of the messages of faith: that slavery and death are overcome by conviction. That love endures. That justice will at long last prevail. It is at the core of sacred texts, and at the core of what it means to live out our faith.

"Faith is reason grown courageous." Sherwood Eddy.

The power of faith is courage.

Reason, knowledge, gives us courage.

Power is the capacity to resist helplessness.

This is the great message of faith; that capacity to resist helplessness. Not powerlessness, because there are times and places when we are truly without power, but that does not mean we are weak.

We have reason, we have knowledge, we can do one thing, and we are not alone.

What is it that will make us, that will make me and you, effective in the face of power?

Investing ourselves with power. Believe what faith tells us.

Power does not come solely from money or might – that is what faith tells us.

Power comes from knowing our own values, our own truths, and clearly articulating them. When we articulate them, use words that evoke emotions and our values. Instead of saying climate change is bad, saying I want my children and my children's children to have enough to eat.

Unite with others! These values, this language, stretches across the boundaries of faith.

See what you believe, say what you believe in your own frame, not someone else's – especially not those who don't hold your perspective on life! We cannot persuade someone to a different course who doesn't have our perspective on the world, but we might persuade someone who might have our perspective, but hasn't invested it with their own power.

Hold onto your values, hold on to your allies.

What do we want from ourselves, what do we want from each other?

- Show Respect
- Consistency in the way we see the world
- Thoughtful and often expressed Values
- Clear statements of Belief.

When we change, the world will change.