

## Truth: The End of Our Work

King Fellow Address

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By

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The annual King-Haggar event is an important ritual in the life of our University. From Gupta College of Business, Neuhoﬀ School of Ministry, Constantin College and the Braniff Graduate School of Liberal Arts we assemble as a Faculty Body to celebrate the ideals and ambitions of our work.

The *work* I have in mind is our intellectual life. . . . And the *end* . . . which we boast we strive for . . . is the truth.

To get started, let me presume, for the purposes of this evening, that there are two levels of truth: The first is familiar. We want to be sure that what we believe and what we say fit the facts. We tend to think that things are a certain way and not otherwise, and we want to get it right. Even when a situation of interest is fuzzy and undetermined, we want be clear that it is fuzzy and not fixed in a determinate way. Let's call this first level of truth: "*fact-of-the-matter truth*."

Falsity and error are enemies of *fact-of-the-matter truth*. We find ourselves in *error* when what we believe or what we say just doesn't fit the facts. Error is common enough, and no one is surprised by it – disappointed maybe -- but we accept our fallibility.

*Lying* is another matter. When we encounter lying, we find ourselves face to face with moral turpitude. Disgust and anger are appropriate responses to the discovery that someone has said to be the case what he knows is not the case and, what is more, . . . he says it deliberately with the intention to deceive us. Liars break a trust that is an essential glue of the human community. Trust is a big part of being truthful.

The third way to offend the trust that's presupposed in our dealings with *fact-of-the-matter truth*. It is elegantly described by the American philosopher, Harry Frankfurt, in a very little book that had a decent run as a best seller. We encounter it in what is euphemistically called "humbug," "hogwash," or "bull" . . . but which more properly and correctly is known as *bullshit*. Now this indelicate and offensive locution is a good name for the sort of talk that is spoken by someone who has no concern for the *truth-of-the-matter* while he talks on, trying to sway us to his point of view

The bullshitter speaks with callous indifference to the *truth-of-the-matter*. Any natural inclination he once had toward veracity has been shelved. . . . "Saying what is true . . . saying what's false . . . what's the difference?" . . . His central intention is to pull his listeners into his enterprise. For him, the value of a statement is whether it suits his purpose. The only thing that such a person tries to hide is that "the truth-value of his statements is of no [particular] interest to him."

His sin is his indifference to veracity. And yet, he plays on our deeply rooted tendency to trust that truth is as much a live issue for him as it is for us. His game would be up were we to realize "that his intention is neither to report the truth

nor to conceal it.” In order to enlist us in his purposes, he has to hide from us just how callously indifferent he is to the truth-value of the things he must say in order to win us to his purposes.

I am guessing that university life is not altogether innocent of such violations of *fact-of-the-matter truth*. If we betray truth – whether by the simple flat-out denial of what we know is true or by the insidious indifference to truth, then our game is up. We have broken trust with those who look to us for the truth. We betray the trust of those who would join us in the work of the university . . . which is, at its core: *the search of the truth*.

There is a second notion of truth, one that take us deeper. We’ll call it “*truth-as-witness*.” In the fundamental sense, finding the truth is not a matter of discovering the facts lying there like diamonds waiting to be unearthed by the diligent employment of our sophisticated methods. Fortunately, coming to truth is a much more interesting and wondrous activity. I believe we all sometimes experience such interest and wonder in our lively encounters with the truth, even if we don’t have the words to describe it. I’d like to take a stab at describing it.

What I am going to say may sound odd, but is not idiosyncratic or original on my part. It belongs to a tradition passed along from the ancient Greeks, through medieval thinkers, and on to post-modern philosophers of our own day. The basic idea is that the things and events of reality reveal themselves. They offer up to us the complex lines and veins and phases of their intelligibility.

Let me use a metaphor. Imagine that the intelligibility of a thing is like an artist’s painting of a landscape. In order to “read” the painting, we scan the scene, we pick out and relate the parts that make it up. We catch the subtleties of line, color, shade and shadow that the artist has put in play. The artist put all these elements there -- just so. If we approach it with visual intelligence, then as we view it, the painting appears to us as what it is. It all comes together. We have an insight. We’ve taken it in as “one thing” – “this place.” It speaks to us. And we, in our viewing, read off what it says.

Coming to the truth of the things that we study is similar. The complex intelligibilities of these objects are there. They enact their identities. Like players on a stage, they sing it out. We, for our part, encounter their “words” by virtue of our well-honed intelligence. Years of disciplinary investigation have given us the ears to hear. Part of learning to listen involves learning to express what we have heard. We translate the language of reality’s intelligibility into the language of our arts and sciences. Successful encounters of this sort are moments of truth. Like some kind of miracle, truth springs forth from the encounter between human intelligence and reality’s intelligible structures. And we are its witness.

The “witness” in “*the truth of witness*” has a double meaning. On the one hand, the intelligible objects show forth their reality. They disclose *what-they-are* and *how-they-behave*. They are witnesses. If you like, they tell their own story.

On the other hand, we, with our learned intelligence, are witnesses to reality’s story. We hear it, and we tell it. The language of “*truth-as-witness*” helps us keep in mind the role

that trust plays in our coming to truth. A witness is only as good as his word. Perhaps we could think of *truth-of-witness* as a “hand-shake” expressing the mutual trust between reality disclosing itself and human minds hearing and saying it rightly. If there’s any truth in this figure of speech, then it surely shows why we find bullshit and the lie so offensive.

Before ending, I should say something about teaching. One reason our students come to us is because they want to know more. In this respect, success as a student requires mastering a great deal of information, skill, and technique. But their success would be greater if, by the end of their time with us, they will have learned to play their part as witnesses to the truth.

At its best, our teaching asks our students to envision themselves and the world differently. We ask them to face the reality that a huge part of their dignity as persons lies in their taking up their responsibility to listen and to hear, and to speak the truth. We best succeed at our work when our students learn to go beyond the accumulation of information and the mastery of technique. As teachers, we can inspire this kind of learning.

To become persons who take responsibility before the truth requires growth in the virtue of truthfulness. But there’s a challenge here, because I do not think that, in any ordinary sense of the word, we can *teach* the virtues. The words “teach” and “virtue” stand a lot farther apart from one another than a lot of people think.

I do believe, however, that the natural disposition to veracity can be encouraged. And I believe that the virtue of truthfulness can be modeled or displayed in action. By our

own display of and demand for *care-for-the-truth* in our work and teaching, we professors encourage growth in veracity. And by the conduct of our teacherly professional lives we model the conduct and habits of people who are *at-home* in the “sphere of truth.” And this is a beautiful thing! Something our students will find worth emulating.

To conclude. The end of our work is truth . . . just as it says in the first sentence of the University’s mission statement. It enjoins each of us to play our part. It also calls us, as a university, to encourage one another in our efforts to see and to hear and to give expression to reality as it discloses itself to us, each in our own disciplines and fields of interest. I think that at the University of Dallas we do a pretty good job of it already. But as an old friend of mine says: “Good is good enough. But better is better than good.” Enough!

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Sources: Bonaventure, *De reductione artium ad theologiam*; Harry G. Frankfurt, *Truth and On Bullshit*; Hans Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*; Robert Sokolowski, *Introduction to Phenomenology* and *Phenomenology of the Human Person*.