

THE LEVER AGE OF TRU TH



A sermon by F. Jay Deacon
Preached at Unity Church of North Easton
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It's a political campaign season, and in a political campaign season, the first casualty is truth. But it's worse. What's truth, after all? Some of what passes for truth in the media isn't true at all. An astonishingly high percentage of Fox News viewers went on believing that Saddam's Iraq was behind the attacks of 9/11. But more of the time, we get fed things that are true but trivial; facts, yes, but not in the highest sense *truth*. And we all get lost in a lie. This is the sort of thing a spiritual community has to care about. Sometimes they do. Sometimes, not. As in this story.



Sometimes in the midst, and in spite, of the tenacious force of a public lie, we get some intimation of the strength of truth; at other times we must maintain a wise trust in the durable leverage of truth.



There are moments when you can see the strength of truth. I want to recount such a moment in our own story. This was the time of another great public lie. I've made a personal project out of understanding how it all happened.

Slavery in America was a Southern institution but the whole of the nation was in thrall to it. The few real foes of slavery in the United States Congress were ridiculed and shouted down, branded as

A letter from a slave-holding Methodist preacher in Virginia, addressed in 1851 to Mr. R.W. Emerson in Concord, Massachusetts:

About a year ago I commenced reading your writings. I have read them all and studied them sentence by sentence. I have shed many burning tears over them; because you gain my assent to Laws which, when I see how they would act on the affairs of life, I have not the courage to practise. . . . I sometimes feel as if you made for me a second Fall from which there is no redemption by any atonement.

— Moncure Daniel Conway. *Autobiography: Memories and Experiences*. 2 vols. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1904. I:109,114.

*And from a sermon by
Jenkin Lloyd Jones at All
Souls Church in Chicago,
1905:*

There is a pre-vision that belongs to the faithful heart, a foresight that is born of insight; there is a light of heaven blazing up from within in every soul, and the greater the soul the clearer is the light. . . . The hopeful may . . . be mistaken, but the fact remains that the timid, the faithless, those who are afraid of innovations, whose persistent plea is to tradition and precedent, and who distrust the validity of all lamps except the flickering, smoking, and oftentimes dying lamp of their own experience, — in short, the faithless, — necessarily part company with the . . . more forceful leaders of the world. . . . Those whom the ages unite in calling prophets are . . . they who are buoyed by a faith in the future that seems unwarranted by the facts of the present.

Prophecy calls for sweat and self denial; it summons us to uphill tasks, bids us to die trying.

Do you ask for the sources of prophecy, the spring out of which flow the promises of life that so sustain the soul? The sources of all springs are subterranean. No one can trace

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shrill-voiced radicals. At the intellectual center of this greatly outnumbered Abolitionist movement were, as you must know, our own Ralph Waldo Emerson and Theodore Parker.

But in an effort to maintain peace, the Congress had virtually agreed not to discuss the abolition of slavery. A shameless *Unitarian* president, Millard Fillmore, signed the Fugitive Slave Act into law, forcing the recapture of escaped slaves and their return to the South.

And we really ought to ask: — What was the role of *religion* in this time? We have learned that people will look at the same facts on the ground, or the same religious scriptures and traditions and symbols, and interpret them according to the state and degree of their own spiritual evolution. So:

Theodore Parker and his Transcendentalist friends, along with some Quakers and some anti-Calvinist evangelical Christian followers of the evangelist Charles Finney, formed a vocal religious minority against the evil. From the rest of the pulpits, an ear-shattering silence, or outright support for slavery. The Catholic church told its followers to obey the Fugitive Slave Law. The Calvinists found some divine purpose in slavery, or perhaps some divine punishment. And throughout the South, ways were found — it wasn't so hard, after all — to show that the Bible actually supported slavery, to show that abolitionism itself was the sin. The argument went that it was God's purpose that the superior — which meant white people — should rule the inferior, and with a straight face, Southern clergy preached as much.

There was, in Virginia, a powerful slave-holding Methodist preacher named Moncure Daniel Conway. He, too, preached all this, and saw the institution as benign. For awhile he believed a new idea recently worked out between some handy theologians and some handy scientists that proposed separate divine acts of creation for the separate races, whereby the ones with white faces were actually humans with souls, and the rest were not.

Now, throughout the North, nobody believed in this unique multiple-creation theory. *In theory*, they thought slavery a bad thing — *but not their concern* and not particularly important. They looked the other way as the evil continued unchallenged, and didn't mind that Southern postmasters were permitted and even expected to burn any literature from northern Abolitionists that might pass through their post offices.



And so I want you to note a piece of mail that made it through. Why, after all, would a postmaster in Safford County, Virginia, question a letter from a member of the county's most powerful family — from Rev. Moncure Conway? Still, he might have wondered why it was addressed to the notorious Mr. R. W. Emerson in Concord, Massachusetts.

Quite simply, he wrote:

the river to its beginnings . . .

Prophecy is the unconscious witness of uninvested energy; it is the expression of that potency of the universe back of all our plannings, behind all our arguments, greater than all our schemes.

There is a gravitation of soul as of the atom. . . . There are tides, fixed currents and gulf streams in the ocean of soul as in the waters of the deep, . . . prophetic visions in the realm of spirit . . .

Prophecy witnesses to a divine potency in the universe, the coiled spring at the core of things. Prophecy is not mere long-ing; it is striving. . . . Prophecy is energetic, executive, initiative. There is an element of divine audacity in prophecy. They are the children of God who, fearless of consequences, plunge forward, who take up hard tasks, who break with convention and grapple with the ideal; who dare launch forth in the interest of untried verities, forming new runlets in the tissues of brain for the currents of life to run in. . . .

— Jenkin Lloyd Jones in the sermon, "Faith Reinforced by Prophecy," May 7, 1905

I will here take the liberty of saying what nothing but a concern as deep as Eternity should make me say. I am a minister of the Christian Religion, — the only way for the world to reenter Paradise, in my earnest belief. I have just commenced that office at the call of the Holy Ghost, now in my twentieth year. About a year ago I commenced reading your writings. I have read them all and studied them sentence by sentence. I have shed many burning tears over them; because you gain my assent to Laws which, when I see how they would act on the affairs of life, I have not courage to practise. . . . I sometimes feel as if you made for me a second Fall from which there is no redemption by any atonement.¹

I was touched by that letter before I knew the rest. Three years later, two neighbors of Rev. Conway showed up in Boston. He knew both of them. One was a Captain Suttle, a well-respected Virginia politician and *slaveholder*. The other was Anthony Burns. Anthony Burns, the *escaped slave*, captured under the Fugitive Slave Law and held at the Suffolk County Courthouse in Boston, which had been taken over by the federal government to serve as a jail for escaped slaves. Charles Suttle, his owner, come to demand his return in a kind of mockery of American justice called a hearing rather than a trial because the accused was not permitted to speak and was automatically guilty, an affair that was presided over by a *United States Fugitive Slave Bill Commissioner*. It wouldn't have been the first time our national government was about something you didn't think much of.

By and large the people of Boston were enraged that their Court House, the court house of a free people in a free state, should be used as a prison for a man who, under Massachusetts law, should be a free man, and who, here, in the cradle of liberty, was being held as property.

At Fanueil Hall, five thousand people gathered to hear Theodore Parker challenge his hearers to go down to the court house, immediately, and forcibly rescue Anthony Burns. Among them was a young divinity student who had recently enrolled at Harvard, Moncure Conway of Safford County, Virginia.

I managed to get a copy of his autobiography, where he writes:

The Southern students at Cambridge assembled to offer their sympathy to the owner of Burns. I was notified, but replied that my sympathies were with the fugitive.²

But his mind wasn't settled yet. He went to an abolitionist rally at Framingham and heard Henry Thoreau. He heard the Unitarian minister from Worcester who displayed a facial injury he had received in the failed attempt to rescue Anthony Burns from the courthouse. And then he noted, in his words:

A very aged negro woman named "Sojourner Truth," lank, shrivelled, but picturesque, slowly mounted to the platform, amid general applause, and sat silently listening to the speeches.

Conway watched that scene, where William Lloyd Garrison had just burned the Constitution because it sanctions slavery. And now Garrison invited a young Southern heckler to the stage to speak his mind. Here's how Conway describes it:

The young man complied, and in the course of his defence of slavery and affirming his sincerity, twice exclaimed, "As God is my witness!" [From across the stage Sojourner Truth cried:] "Young man, I don't believe God Almighty ever hearn tell of you!" Her shrill voice sounded through the grove like a bugle . . .³



I found Moncure Conway again later. In Concord, a regular visitor and trusted friend of the Emersons. In Boston, at Theodore Parker's side. And then in Washington, D.C. as minister at the First Unitarian Church,

where his preaching drove the spineless Millard Fillmore — who as president had signed the Fugitive Slave Act in to law — to abandon his specially-cushioned pew and his membership; and I found him in Cincinnati, where he held the Unitarian pulpit there until fearful members in this tense border state drove him out. When he learned that the Union Army had taken his hometown, I found him leading the family's sixty slaves on a harrowing journey to freedom in the North. I found him welcoming his mother, who left the family fortune, and her community and friends and husband, to join her son in the North fighting for the abolition of slavery. And then I found Moncure Conway in London, where he preached at South Place Unitarian Chapel for 33 years.

But my story is not about Moncure Conway. In fact, there were a few other heroes, like Governor Adelbert Ames of Mississippi, who went down from here, whose efforts to conduct a just reconstruction of Mississippi were finally overwhelmed by the force of the national lie — at least for a hundred years.



No, this is about the leverage, in this world, of truth. What was happening within Moncure Conway was happening within others. Visiting Concord to tell the good Mr. Emerson of the deep transformations that Emerson's writings had wrought in his life, he was told, "When the mind has reached a certain stage it may be sometimes crystallized by a slight touch." The Truth was in the air and, one by one, a multitude came to see it.



But maybe you see the problem with this. I mean, what, after all, is *truth*?

So let me tell you what I mean by truth.

I don't mean it in the way that a scientist means it, even though the pursuit of the truth I am speaking of *requires accountability to scientific truth*. Scientific truth is the domain of objective realities that can be detected and

measured, from atoms to brains to rocks, things that can be described in "*it*" language.⁴

Where a society's definition of truth does not include objective, empirical, scientific truth, it is there that scientists and discoverers get burned at the stake. Individual whim, or perhaps the church or the state, decides what is objectively true and to hell with the evidence.

But that is not the sense in which I mean to speak of *truth*. I mean a kind of truth that can be described in "*we*" language and "*I*" language.

I mean the kind of truth Whitman was speaking of when he said

We consider bibles and religions divine — I do not say they are not divine; I say they have all grown out of you, and may grow out of you still.

I mean truth in the way Emerson meant when he said,

*The truth is in the air, and the most [sensitive] brain will announce it first, but all will announce it a few minutes later. . . . [The mind of the morally sensitive person] is righter than others, because he yields to a current so feeble as can be felt only by a needle delicately poised.*⁵

Or think of Gandhi, whose autobiography is entitled *The Story of My Experiments With Truth*. He was finding his way, and he knew it could not be long until the way he was finding would ring true with many others, who would join him. His truth was something that unfolded in a moment of history, in a place among a people, flowing out of a particular encounter. But it was something substantial, because for Gandhi, the only real test of whether it was really the Truth with a capital T was a person's willingness to die for it.

It emerges out of the life of a person, out of the life of a people or a race or the whole world of life. A life of contradictions and disparate parts and you have to make life one

and whole, and so out of your living there comes a new synthesis, new, emergent truth.

My friend Phil Luing wrote these words for me in 1982, and I still have them:

*The God-stuff of which we and our world is made
is old and wise,
so we listen to its wisdom,
and share with it what we have learned
that our God might become
more wise and not grow senile.*

This growing God-stuff, this new Truth: Was it there all along, and it's just that nobody ever saw it? Or is it new? But there it is.



What greater document is there than the one that declares “We hold *these truths* to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness”? Yet already you could rephrase it just a bit and find it even more true. All men? And indeed, only men could vote until 1920 and only men could speak before a legislature. But these words are immortal.

But these immortal words express Truth with a capital T, and so great was the force of it that its 56 signers couldn't know with what pathos and agony the young nation would have to struggle to find its meaning, a struggle that would have to take it through a civil war to free those enslaved under outmoded notions of Truth that many took to be the purpose of God as revealed in Scripture. And even then, it didn't mean you could vote in Mississippi.

Such Truth never really exists *in the abstract*. Its meaning is found in action or it is finally lost to you. In action it grows, deepens, and extends into new realms.

Truth of this kind *sings*. It always does. Just at this moment of history when Moncure Conway was struggling with the meaning and

the action of Truth, many of the hymns in our hymnal were given birth. James Russell Lowell was writing this:

*Though the cause of evil prosper, yet 'tis
truth alone is strong;
Though its portion be a scaffold, and
upon the throne be wrong.
Yet that scaffold sways the future.
New occasions teach new duties, time
makes ancient good uncouth.
They must upward still and onward
who would keep abreast of truth.*

It sings, and it commands. To Gandhi, the proof of a new Truth was that there were those ready to suffer and even die for it. But how can you be ready to die for a *new* Truth? Erik Erikson wrote about Gandhi, a book called, curiously enough, *The Leverage of Truth* — called this quality in Gandhi a mystical blend of detachment and commitment. To be ready to suffer for what is true now, even though it is not a sealed Revelation or the final Insight, even though you know there will be more truth to come — to be willing to die for what is true *now* is to grasp the only chance we have to live fully. Something more may be true for another time and generation, and that truth will be *their* burden. This is ours.⁶

Gandhi knew a moment of truth had arrived, and he understood that the moment of truth comes silently and is suddenly there. But it comes only to those who are prepared for it: those who have lived with facts and figures and factors in such a way that they are ready for a sudden synthesis — like a new revelation. And, Erikson argues, if you act on the inner voice, you will do so with the knowledge that it will involve others, and that others, too, are ready.

“The truth in any given encounter,” says Erikson, “is linked with the developmental stage of the individual and the historical situation of his group: together, they help to determine the *actuality*, i.e., the potential for unifying action at a given moment.”

And that unifying action involves both clear thinking and passion, and it is guided by what is most genuine in yourself and in the others. This is the Truth that points to the next step in the evolution of life and of our lives.



The world changes, moves on to another stage of human consciousness — when two things converge. First, things get bad enough, the collective understanding of who we are and how the world could be seems exhausted, the world and culture we are creating is getting to look more like some kind of hell. And we notice this. We are more conscious. We feel the contradictions. In Conway's day — slavery had been part of human culture for a long, long time, assumed and accepted. Now it appeared in all its brutality and inhumanity. Now, they could see it. Now they understood more the possible grandeur of what it means to be human.

And that's the second thing. You feel the presence of something grand, a new stage of civilization and of human values. You feel a sense of wonder about it, you feel the power of something new unfolding from the old, a confidence in its transformative power that gives you courage. You share in the making of a new time, a new humanity, a new world. You are caught up in something bigger than yourself.

We have arrived at such a turning point. Can you see it, can you feel it? Does it yet animate the life of this congregation, constitute its gospel, and energize its work? Is it the vision that draws you forward?



Jenkin Lloyd Jones calls this kind of Truth *Prophecy*:⁷

There is a pre-vision that belongs to the faithful heart, a foresight that is born of insight; there is a light of heaven blazing up from within in every soul. . . .

Prophecy calls for sweat and self denial; it summons us to uphill tasks, bids us to die trying.

Do you ask for the sources of prophecy, the spring out of which flow the promises of life that so sustain the soul? . . .

Prophecy is the unconscious witness of uninvested energy; it is the expression of that potency of the universe back of all our plannings, behind all our arguments, greater than all our schemes.

Prophecy witnesses to a divine potency in the universe, the coiled spring at the core of things. Prophecy is not mere longing; it is striving. . . . There is an element of divine audacity They are the children of God who, fearless of consequences, plunge forward, who take up hard tasks, who break with convention and grapple with the ideal; who dare launch forth in the interest of untried verities, forming new [streams] in the tissues of brain for the currents of life to run in. . . .

May that quality of Truth
in whose name we gather
command our energies
inform our loving
and guide our living.

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- ¹ Moncure Daniel Conway. *Autobiography: Memories and Experiences*. Boston and New York: Houghton, Mifflin and Company/Riverside, 1904, vol. I, pp. 109f.
- ² Conway, *Autobiography*, I, p. 175.
- ³ Conway, *Autobiography*, I, 184.
- ⁴ For this idea I am indebted to Ken Wilber in his *The Marriage of Sense and Soul: Integrating Science and Religion*. New York: Random House, 1998, pp. 49ff.
- ⁵ RWE, "Fate." In Library of America edition of *Essays and Lectures*, p. 965.
- ⁶ Erik H. Erikson. *Gandhi's Truth*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1969, pp. 411ff.
- ⁷ Jenkin Lloyd Jones in the sermon, "Faith Reinforced by Prophecy," May 7, 1905.