

TELLING IT LIKE IT IS

Ken Olson

“The preacher pulls the little cord that turns on the lectern light and deals out his note cards like a riverboat gambler. The stakes have never been higher. Two minutes from now he may have lost his listeners completely to their own thoughts, but at this minute everybody is listening, including even himself. ...Who knows what this time, out of the silence, he will tell them? --Let him tell them the truth.” So wrote the novelist, pastor, and theologian, the late Frederick Buechner. Some of us know the feeling.

Those who tell lies are often popular. Those who tell things as they are, not so much. For instance, Socrates, the Greek philosopher whose sole ambition was the discovery and promotion of truth. He roamed the city of Athens nearly 25 centuries ago, relentlessly asking questions about the good life. Always candid, he said, “I am too honest to be a politician and live.” Those unsettled by Socrates’ inquiries finally put him on trial for disturbing the city’s tranquility (he did), being an atheist (he was not), and “corrupting the youth.” He responded with an apology --the Greek word did not mean “I’m sorry” but “a strong defense.” All this was recounted by his disciple Plato in a dialogue now seen as one of the treasures of western civilization.

Socrates told the court, “I am a sort of gadfly, given to the state by God. The state is a great and noble steed who is tardy in his motions owing to his very size and requires to be stirred into life. I am that gadfly ...and all day long and in all places am always fastening upon you, arousing and persuading and reproaching you,” adding that, for that task, “You will not find another like me.” For his impertinence he was found guilty and sentenced, neither to hard labor nor solitary confinement, but to death. He filed no appeals; instead, he drank the hemlock poison, convinced that evil will not triumph --ultimately, that is-- over a person securely bound to the truth.

Jesus said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life.” He was brought before Pontious Pilate, who cynically asked, “What is Truth?” --and crucified it. We, too, face the choice of what to do with truth. What does it mean to be on the side of truth? That is the underlying issue of ...well, almost everything.

Donald Trump, in a way completely unlike previous presidents, is incapable of accepting facts or truths he doesn’t like. Every day, in almost every way, he tells it

like it is not. It was Republican Anna Navarro who first said, “If his lips are moving, he’s lying.” Given his track record of some 40,000 demonstrable lies while in office, who would hire him to work for any farm or business? (And who would be fool enough to trust him to be in a room alone with someone’s young daughter?)

Trump has said many times that we are at war, i.e. “a war against enemies within” –and even labeled those who differ with him as “traitors,” thus deserving of a possible death sentence. (In contrast, President Reagan used to say, “The person who agrees with me 80% of the time is a friend and ally, not a 20% traitor.”) Trump thinks he can create new realities out of thin air by proclamation or by putting a Sharpie to a map: The Gulf of America. In similar fashion, Trump renamed protests and First Amendment rallies as insurrections, so he could deploy masked agents to use armed force.

Thus, perhaps you remember him employing militaristic images directed against fellow Americans, gleefully posting an AI-video of himself wearing a crown while piloting a fighter jet emblazoned with “King Trump” to bomb/dump excrement on protestors. He thought it was hilarious but didn’t realize that it was a perfect illustration of just how “full of it” he is --and of what he thinks of free speech and democracy. In the blunt but accurate assessment of this insanity by one Jamie Ford, “Only in MAGA-world do retired folks, teachers, clergy, students, nurses, union members at the No Kings Day rallies get called ‘terrorists’ while The Proud Boys who smeared ##### on the Capitol walls get called ‘Patriots.’” --And receive pardons.

But lots of us can still call a spade a spade ...at least, for now.

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