

The Cat Is on the Roof

BY MARK MATOUSEK

*Why is it so hard to speak the truth
to those we love?*

Two weeks ago in a church garden, I risked losing one of my dearest friends by telling him the truth. We were meeting for coffee and casual conversation, but after months of wrestling with unspoken feelings and private pain, I'd allowed my conflict to escalate to the point of turmoil. I had a choice now: to speak in hopes of resolution or to retreat into semi-truthful semi-intimacy with someone I loved more than that. I took a chance and let it rip.

It was disastrous. My grievances had been festering for too long for me to air them without a dreadful stink, so when I finally blurted out my jumbled litany of complaints, my friend felt, understandably, judged, blamed, and completely furious. The harder I tried to make my point, the more defensive he became, until we found ourselves at a painful loggerheads, mutually disgusted into silence. After a quarter-hour of trying and failing to bridge the awkward gap between us, I shook his hand and left him alone in the garden.

Afterward, I thought with frustration about how hard it is to tell the truth, especially to those we love. Not the factual truth—that's relatively easy—but our own subjective, ugly truths, the twisted metal of our feelings. I thought what a waste of contact it was that we should be forced to euphemize, cover up, misrepresent, and bite our tongues in order to keep the peace, compromising truth for diplomacy. I wondered, moreover, what one was supposed to do with everything that went unsaid.

The trouble seems to begin with a childhood fall from innocence, that awful moment when you realize that



everything you know and think and feel and *are* will not be welcomed by the outside world—that, in harsh terms, the act of growing up socially depends on the sad understanding that most of the world is not even vaguely interested in the whole story. To survive, most of us learn to have at least two selves—one polite, the other silent, tucked away deep where its wayward, inappropriate, truthful voice will not cause trouble. Luckily for me, I had an outlet—I was a writer. I had a place where I could tell the truth, if only to a piece of paper, where my selves could confess anything without fear of punishment. To me then and to me now, the urgent need to cut through darkness by telling the truth is what has fueled the constant desire to write.

Monologue isn't enough, though. As grown-ups we long to speak without veils, but problems of tact and self-judgment—as well as ethical doubts about when, where, how, and

to whom the truth should be told—hold us back. We know that profound intimacy is impossible without telling the truth, but telling the truth seems to be a major threat to this same intimacy. Often with those I love, I'm caught between wanting to be loving and wanting to be honest, without a clue how to marry these contradictory goals. I've noticed that a residue of alienation forms between people when too much is left unsaid; friends, lovers, family drift apart or face the doubly hard work of backtracking to sniff out the unspoken truth, the moment when communication was lost by omission. My question is: Can such lapses be avoided? Do we share truths that may damage, or does love demand reticence and evasion? When the truth involves someone else's behavior, do we practice tough love, or do we aspire to non-interference? God knows that in careless hands the truth becomes callousness, hostility, even hatred. Is there, then, a policy for telling the truth in an enlightened way?

The Buddha thought so. On the subject of right speech, that master of the great silence recommended that three vital questions be asked before saying anything. First, is the statement *true*? Second, is it *necessary*? Third, most crucially, is it *kind*? If the statement falls short on any of these counts, the Buddha advised that we say nothing. What a quiet, civilized world it would be if such principles were actually put to use. How little would ever be said at all with such exalted standards in place! Pure as the Buddha's protocol may be, how-

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The Naked Eye

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ever—and appropriate in a monastic setting—this is not a path that most of us with big mouths and call waiting are likely to embrace.

Of course, in truth-telling (as in all things) the stress must be placed on interdependence, consideration of the other's needs in (at least) equal measure to one's own. But otherwise these requirements are not as straightforward as they appear. Take kindness. What is kind to me may be painful to you, and vice versa. As for necessity, it's mostly irrelevant. Technically speaking, almost nothing we say is necessary. Besides, how can I possibly know what's necessary for you, what will help at any given moment, when my own needs are often a mystery? Yet this simultaneous awareness of both parties' requirements is what skillful truth-telling seems to require.

Looking back at what happened in the garden, for example, I realize that I had not considered at all whether my "truth" was necessary to my friend in that particular moment. Had I paid closer attention, had my timing been better, my tone less threatening, he would probably have been receptive to my feelings. We would have understood each other, and although the solution to our conflict might not have been found immediately, there would have been sharing rather than attack and withdrawal.

Such is the perfect vision of hindsight, and of spiritual mastery. In the world I live in, however, where consciousness is a trial-and-error affair, where I am not the master of myself or of most situations I'm in, where motives are rarely pure, and true and false are frequently hard to distinguish, where perception is subjective (and in this world of illusions, projections, appearances, I am moved by emotions and subconscious forces to say and do things before I've chosen to)—where, in other words, I often make a big, fat mess—the Buddha's criteria and the ideals of perfect behavior are mostly out of reach. An earthier protocol for telling the truth is needed. Which reminds me of a story I heard.

A guy comes home from work one day, and his wife says, "The cat is

dead." He gets upset and tells her that next time she's got to work up to news like that. First she must tell him that someone left the window open and the cat got out. Then when he's taken that in, she can tell him that the cat's on the roof. Next she should say that the cat took a nasty fall. Then finally, when he's digested the whole scenario, she can tell him that the cat is actually dead.

Two weeks later, the guy comes home from work and opens the door. His wife comes over, takes his hand, and says, "Your mother's on the roof."

People are fragile; we require special handling. I'm coming to see that it's less important to blurt out the facts than it is to protect each other's

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feelings. What matters is keeping the objective clear, speaking the truth for healing's sake, whether healing means closeness or separation. Secrecy is not, finally, an option between people; truth demands confession, if only to oneself, for freedom's sake. Scriptures affirm this as a sacred law; having witnessed with amazement the magical effect that saying the unsayable can have in the right circumstances, I know this to be true. It matters only how it's done.

As for my friend, we'll see. This morning I wrote him a letter saying more fully, and with more tact, what I had hinted at so aggressively in the garden. We may or may not continue our friendship; either way, I've learned an important lesson. And dropping the envelope in the box, I felt better.

Contributing editor Mark Matousek is the author of a memoir, *Sex Death Enlightenment* (Riverhead).



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