

# TRUTHSPEAKING

## Background and Context

Teacher and writer Tamarack Song (2004) describes “Truth Speaking” as the practice of stating, “clearly and simply what one thinks and feels. There is no judgment or expectation, no disguise of humor or force of anger. The manner of speech is sacred, because it wells up from the soul of our being rather than from our self-absorbed ego.”

When we truth speak, we let go of our fears about how the other might interpret or react to our words. We simply speak our thoughts and feelings with utter honesty, absent any filtering, and, in so doing, experience a measure of freedom. Note: Just the fact that you might pass a day without saying anything to others that would be judged as an outright lie does not mean that you have necessarily practiced truth speaking, **because truth speaking, at its core, is about not betraying—not lying to—ourselves.**

Song learned about truth speaking when he lived among wolves: “When my words were not my Truth, the Wolves ignored them and listened instead to the Voice of my Heart. They could hear it [my heart] because their communication did not rely upon words. They knew that the Heartvoice spoke nothing but Truth—they could read me like a book.”

Song contends that all of us know truth speaking.... We simply have forgotten it. If you would like a clinic in truth speaking, talk with a child on a regular basis. With children there is no filtering, only speech issuing forth in the now. The child speaks in full integrity with his feelings. He laughs, he cries, he speaks. . . living his truth moment by moment without needing to explain, justify, or rationalize. Indeed, we get derailed from truth speaking anytime we get tangled up in shame and guilt and pleasing others and judgment and competition and control and fantasy and regret—which is to say: Most of the time!

## Check In

“What is true for you right now?” Ask it and mean it. Ask it and then go inside for the answer: What is true in you head? What is true in your body? What is true in your heart? Though many of us have long forgotten how to speak from this place of child-like ‘presence,’ we can recover this ability. Pause now and ask yourself, “What is true for me in this very moment?” Really stop and ask the question: “What is true for me in this very moment?” Can you do it? Are you ready to know the truth?

## Activity One: Speaking in the NOW

Sadly, in our conversation we often get bogged down in the past (a great place to experience shame and guilt!) and the future (the locus of most of our fears!). However, life only occurs in the present—in the eternal now. The past is over; it no longer exists. And the future is an illusion; it will never exist. Indeed, the so-called “future” is only experienced as *present* moments. The real tragedy is that when we spend time speaking about the past or the future, our attention is drawn away from the present moment—the only moment that is real. So, experiment with speaking in the present, eschewing past tense verbs (e.g., did, was, had) and future tense verbs (e.g., will, going to).

One way to do this is to stand face to face with a friend or partner. Make eye contact and begin to speak about exactly what is happening in the present moment—stream-of-consciousness-style. This guarantees that you will be speaking in the present tense. Your speaking might sound something like this: I am looking at your eyes. They are brown. You are smiling. Now I feel a slight flow of air. You are still smiling. I am wondering what you are thinking. I feel a tinge of anxiety like you will judge me as stupid. Now, I am noticing that my feet are warm. Now I am feeling tension in my neck. I see a picture on the wall behind you. I am hearing the sound of my voice, wondering how this voice of mine sounds to you . . . . The idea is to stay in the present, removing all filters and resisting the temptation to go into analysis (which takes you into your head and away from the present moment). After five minutes, switch; you become the listener and your partner speaks in the present moment.

This simple practice can snap us to life—being in the present is always invigorating—and it invariably creates a sweet bond between the speaker and the listener. The net effect of this practice is something like a gravity that pulls one into the present from a prior focus on the past, the future, or, most likely, a myopia of intent and thought that neglected the present and presence.

### **Activity Two: Cursing as a way of Avoiding Truth Speaking**

Sometimes we use violent language to cover up the truth. For example, we may lash out with “Fuck you!” On the one hand, you might say that expressing anger with “fuck you” is speaking truth. But “fuck you” is a ruse. . . . If we are to truth speak the challenge is to say what is true beneath the “fuck you.” In the case of “fuck you,” what is true? What is the upset? Is it, “I don’t agree with you.”? What about “Go to hell”? What is the truth? Is it, “I won’t do it.”? What about “This class sucks?”

Write rite down your most frequent expletives and then consider the circumstances that elicit these words. Next, pair up to talk about the truth that lies beneath your most-used expletives. And if you do not curse, consider the fact that cursing mangles the truth into a stock phrase, while the absence of cursing may simply mangle that truth into silence.

In sum, instead of being honest, cursing is often a ruse for speaking what is really true.

### **Activity Three: The Lie of Complaint; the Truth of Commitment**

You know what it is like to be around someone who is always complaining. When they start complaining perhaps you contract and withdraw because being in the presence of such a person drains your energy. Complaining is like a huge “no” to possibility; it is dispiriting. On the positive side, you have probably noted that when you are the one doing the complaining you often feel alive, animated, even passionate—and passion is the juice needed for transformation.

Complaining, in reality, is a tragic expression of care/passion—i.e., there is a deeper truth below the complaint—for we only complain about something when we care about it. As R. Kegan and L. Lahey (How the Way We Talk Can Change the Way We Work, 2001) observes, “Beneath the surface torrent of our complaining lies a hidden river of our caring for that which we most prize or to which we are most committed.” The challenge, counsels Kegan & Lahey, is to look under our complaints for there we will find our convictions and commitments. Yes, our complaints, while expressing what we won’t stand for, have a silver lining: They tell us what we most want—what we are ready to stand for!

The practice here entails catching yourself in complaint mode and using this to point you toward what you deeply care about. So, take the following “open” sentences:

- I am sick and tired of \_\_\_\_\_
- It bugs me that \_\_\_\_\_
- Nobody seems to care about \_\_\_\_\_
- It pisses me off that \_\_\_\_\_

And then pair up and change your complaint language into commitment language. See examples below for how this is done.

- “I am sick and tired of coming home to kitchen sink full of dishes” *becomes* “I care about and am deeply committed to order and cleanliness.”
- “All people do around here is talk around each other backs” *becomes* “I care about and am deeply committed to open, direct communication.”
- “I am always the last one to know everything” *becomes* “I care about and am deeply committed to being part of the team and being kept up to date on what’s happening.”
- “It bugs me that Marie seldom does her homework” *becomes* “I care about and am deeply committed to Marie’s success.”

Shifting from the language of complaint to the language of commitment means, in effect, that we shift from a passive to an active stance in our relationship with ourselves and life in general.

#### **Activity Four: "If You Only Had Five Words"**

You have, no doubt, heard the expression “Less is more.” This seems counter-intuitive. How could less be more? Think about people you have encountered who speak few words but offer wisdom. Compare them to those who ramble and rattle on in seemingly endless prattle. This exercise, dubbed “the 5-word-response game” (or, “If You Only Had Five Words”), illustrates the power of terse, lean responses to questions.

The rules are straightforward: sit facing another person and simply take turns asking and answering each other’s questions. The questions are based on what it is that you would like to know about the other person. Now, here’s the interesting part: The responses to each question must be given in five words or less.

In doing this exercise, most people experience more intimacy and depth—more truth speaking—when restricting their responses to a mere five words. Less really is more!

## OUT-OF-CLASS FIELD STUDY: TRUTHSPEAKING

Tamarack Song wrote a short book on *Truthspeaking*. The title is self explanatory. Really, it is. If you want to know what Truthspeaking is about, you don't have to read the book; just read the title. Why, then, the book? Because bad habits die hard, and, according to Song, when it comes to words, we have the bad habit of using too many of them. Perhaps it is this ruckus which leaves us living in a country of the deaf (to alter an old saying). For, as Song says, "There is no Truthspeaking without Truthlistening."

In this exercise, you will speak—that is, you will *Truthspeak*. Yet, the emphasis is not on the "speak," but on the truth. Here is an easy way to do this. ***Start with a vow of silence.*** Inhabit what this means. What will it be like to make this vow, to not speak, to use your mouth instead for breathing when the words would normally come. Make this vow of silence, and then make this one qualification: ***I will not speak, unless I speak my truth.*** This exercise is easy. You've got nothing to lose but small talk:

A. Truthspeak for one day. That is, do not speak unless you speak your truth.

**B. Compose a response piece to this experience.**