

Go Set a Watchman: Let Him Declare What He Sees
A Sermon Towards Radical Honesty
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[Writing in the NYT, book critic Michiko Kakutani, reminds us that] “ We remember Atticus Finch in Harper Lee’s 1960 classic, To Kill a Mockingbird, as that novel’s moral conscience: kind, wise, honorable, an avatar of integrity who used his gifts as a lawyer to defend a black man falsely accused of raping a white woman in a small Alabama town filled with prejudice and hatred in the 1930s.

“As indelibly played by Gregory Peck in the 1962 movie, he was the perfect man — the ideal father and a principled idealist, an enlightened, almost saintly believer in justice and fairness. In real life, people named their children after Atticus. People went to law school and became lawyers because of Atticus.”

“Shockingly, in Ms. Lee’s long-awaited novel, Go Set a Watchman, set amidst the roiling racial turmoil of the 1950’s, Atticus is an unrepentant racist who once attended a Klan meeting, and who says things like “The Negroes down here are still in their childhood as a people.”

“The depiction of Atticus in Watchman makes for disturbing reading, and for “Mockingbird” fans, it’s especially disorienting. Jean Louise is shocked to find, during her trip home, that her beloved father, whom she idolized and who taught her everything she knows about fairness and compassion, has been affiliating with raving anti-integration, anti-black townies, and the reader shares her horror and confusion. How could the saintly Atticus suddenly emerge as a bigot? The reader, like Scout, cannot help feeling baffled and distressed.”

This once adoring daughter even calls her father a “double-dealing, ring-tailed old SOB” when he ask her : “Do you want Negroes by the carload in our schools and churches and theaters? Do you want them in our world?”

And with that, a multitude of gasps were heard throughout the land, a million hearts broke, and crisp hardcover books slammed in righteous literary indignation on Atticus’ behalf. How could she? Well, I, for one, am so glad she did. The truth can hurt, but it can also set us free.

It’s important to reiterate that Watchman was written first, but rejected by Harper Lee’s publisher, who encouraged her to write a more focused story from young Scout’s point of view. This tells us something significant – Watchman

represents Lee's initial impulse on how to present her father and her world. It's not an after-thought or revision. It's her truth.

Moreover, Lee was a devout Bible-ist. She read scripture everyday and studied it diligently. The title of her second book is no random choice. It is, in fact, a direct quote from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah, in a passage that could be a prophecy about the turmoil of roiling race relations in the American South.

This turmoil is foreshadowed by Atticus in a passage from Mockingbird: "There's nothing more sickening than a white man who'll take advantage of a Negro's position. Don't fool yourselves – it's all adding up and one of these days we're going to pay the bill for it. I just hope it's not in you children's time." (Watchman confirms that this hope has been dashed, right up to the present)

The corresponding passage from Isaiah 21 includes these lines: "As whirlwinds in the South pass through; so it cometh from the desert, from a terrible land. A grievous vision is declared unto me; the treacherous dealer dealeth treacherously, and the spoiler spoileth; I was bowed down at the hearing of it; I was dismayed at the seeing of it."

"My heart panted, fearfulness affrighted me: the night of my pleasure hath he turned into fear unto me. Prepare the table, watch in the watchtower, eat, drink: arise, ye princes, and anoint the shield." "For thus hath the Lord said unto me, 'Go, set a watchman, and let him declare what he seeth.' And The watchman said, 'The morning cometh, and also the night: if ye will enquire, enquire ye: return, come.'"

Jean Louise returns like rolling thunder on a train track from New York City. She comes, she enquires, as that menacing whirlwind passes through her gracious Alabama landscape. It is a grievous vision, and her own father is a treacherous dealer. No longer the tomboy Scout, this woman with intelligence and moxie sets a watchman and declares what she sees – hypocrisy, racism, hate, evil. It is painful, bewildering and revelatory for her. At one point she cries: "God in heaven, take me away from here. God in heaven, take me away."

We may long for young Scout's innocence, but I'd argue that grown-up Jean Louise is a far better role model for us in these troubling times of Black Lives Matter pushback, white fragility and privilege, and the need to self-interrogate and look systemic racism boldly in the eye.

In 1 Corinthians, Paul writes: "When I was a child, I reasoned like a child. But when I grew up, I put away childish things." This is the journey of Scout, this is the journey of each of us, when we agree to open our adult eyes to the world as it is, not as we wish it to be.

What does this mean - to see the world through adult eyes, see ourselves and our nearest and dearest, or society at large, our leaders, in the mirror clearly,

especially when it comes to the bloat of apathy and privilege, the pock marks of prejudice and violence , the scourge of “truthiness,” or the menacing specter of mental illness or addictions?

A couple years ago, I listened to Patrick Kennedy’s compelling book, A Common Struggle, written with my friend, Stephen Fried. As difficult as it was for him to summon the courage speak truth to power, he gives us an honest and unblinking look at his past, present and future as an addict with chronic mental health issues. He opens the Kennedy skeleton closet and lets all the truth waft out.

Not surprisingly, the reaction of his fabled, notoriously secretive family has been mixed. Maria Shriver said, “Good for him.” Teddy, Jr. issued a statement rebutting his brother’s depiction of their father and their mother and a family life pickled in alcohol and denial. The truth can release us, when we view it with adult eyes...even after it had once trapped us in a cage of our own making. Ask any recovering addict like Patrick.

Do you remember the provocative game from your youth called *Truth or Dare*? I’d submit that when it comes to living authentically, we can only choose truth AND dare, like Jean Louise Finch or Patrick Kennedy, or so many others.

Indeed, to be open, honest, and un-photoshopped in a culture based on curated selfies, conspiracy cults, domination and deceit is a courageous gesture. And, if we will not dare to move beyond our own comfort zones in order to be brave and honest, who will? Who, like Jean Louise, will stand on the watchtower to declare what they see, and, in doing so, risk unanimous popularity, risk relationships, in order to speak truth to power in our wounded, morally muddled world? Go Set a Watchman? Indeed...the watchman is us.

I’m not advocating that we employ a method of aggressive, bullying tweets akin to a verbal missile launcher. Telling the truth is not about blasting people away or belittling them nor is it about *pablamizing* everything so that it is universally digestible.

I’m talking about a creative and compassionate honesty that risks pain and loss, but is ultimately *healing*. The psychotherapist Brad Blanton calls this “radical honesty,” the poet bell hooks knows it as “a powerful, but gentle, agent of self-recovery”; and the minister Frederick Buechner simply proclaims it, “telling the truth with love.”

As you may have gathered, I’m what you might call a “straight-shooter,” and I’ve certainly suffered my share of negative flak for being direct. Once I was advised to “soft pedal issues to make them more appealing.” But I wonder: is that what ministry is about? What activism is about? What I want my life to be about? No.

Perhaps *diplomacy* in the form of soft-pedaling is a necessary component of human relations and politics. Nevertheless, we treat people as invalids, enemies, and specters, when we tell polite or casual lies, purvey fake news, or beat around the bush in order to shield them and ourselves from the truth.

Brad Blanton is more direct in his book, Radical Honesty: "People are fed up with doublespeak, phoniness, pretense; they are hungry for authenticity and truth. Telling other people the truth works. It's that simple. Telling the truth, compassionately, with as much clarity and as little anger as possible, and by using "I" statements, breaks down barriers, even if it hurts temporarily, because then you can relax and stop being so guarded. It's liberating for everyone."

(Caveat here – I would not recommend this approach with rage-aholics or anyone who would be prone to meet your honesty with violence.)

The key to Blanton's method is to stick around for the repair required after an episode of real, radical truth telling. It doesn't work in an e-mail or through texting, on the telephone or twitter, even in a letter, making it hopelessly out-of-sync, I realize, with our technologically-obsessed culture. Zoom is our face-to-face right now, limited as it may be.

But, I believe, it's worth it, because this type of creative, radical honesty allows us to grow, it strengthens our faith and our compassion. It both emboldens and humbles us in our endeavors. It is, in many ways, a seat-of-the-pants adventure that keeps us truly vibrant and evolving, with our adult eyes wide open.

We live in a society that is shriveling up from an abundance of half-blind watchmen, and with it, a squinty-eyed view of the world, seen through the mirror dimly. If something is true for us we must first examine that truth, and then trust that truth, speak it with an adult voice, freely and kindly, (on the trail or patio, around the kitchen table, and in this Sanctuary), even in the face of blistering ignorance coming from the mouths of people we care for or love.

These are curious and strange times. I would not have foreseen lifting up former President George W. Bush as a clear-eyed watchman, but so he is. Breaking with long-standing protocol, Bush has made sharply pointed comments about the state of America without referencing President Trump by name. Obama took a similar stand elsewhere.

"We've seen our discourse degraded by casual cruelty," Bush told attendees of a forum entitled "The Spirit of Liberty: At Home and In the World." "At times it can seem like the forces pulling us apart are stronger than the forces binding us together," "Argument turns too easily into animosity. Disagreement escalates into dehumanization." "Bigotry seems emboldened," Bush went on. "Our politics seems more vulnerable to conspiracy theories and outright fabrication."

We have been taught to be afraid of our honesty, but we can not afford to be afraid as we heed President Bush's cautionary tale. [The writer M. Scott Peck suggests that] People who are honest and open "do not slink around in the shadows. They do not have to construct new lies to hide old ones. They need not maintain disguises or keep their distance."

So I ask you: will you pledge to take small steps to stand in the open, eye-to-eye, among the living, and dare to set a watchman on your shoulders, without shame or apology, courageously and compassionately naming what you see and feel and believe?...today, on Election Day, and thereafter when the soul of America will need the Balm of Gilead from each of us.

As the Rev. Victoria Safford tells us: "This awakened eye is intentional; a conscious eye, a willful eye, and brave, because to see things as they are, each in its own truth, will make you very vulnerable. It is persistent, holy, world-transforming work."

A cherished friend of mine (we'll call him Dan) can attest this process of vulnerability, honesty, and transformation first hand. Not long ago, he chose to "un-friend" two people on Facebook that he had known and loved for decades. These people had been like family to him and his partner of 34 years.

But when they espoused views that homosexuality and gay marriage were wrong (but that they loved my friend and his partner dearly and were not "judging") Dan could not keep silent. He came to see the truth of this situation with adult eyes and with an open heart and knew he had to walk away. I applaud his brave decision.

Perhaps we relate to this story and know how difficult it can be to disengage from the people we love, even when they sit across from us, passing the mashed potatoes and espousing points of views that we find repugnant and just plain unacceptable. We avoid, we anguish, we dread, we grieve.

Or, perhaps, we make attempts at an honest response. "Please do not use those demeaning words in front of me." Or, "I find that comment about gay people or women offensive." Or, "I don't agree with that view of gun control or reproductive rights or immigration."

"No, your Confederate flag or Proud Boy patch or swastika bumper sticker isn't OK with me. Yes, All Lives Matter, but right now, we are talking about Black Lives and how *they* matter, and I am not going to shut up about it."

And we hold our breaths. Will this be the end or an opening? Yet, what is the price of staying silent, or closing your eyes to shut out what you see? This is a process. It's not always easy; in fact it can be quite painful, but also extraordinarily liberating for it leads to authenticity regardless of the outcome. We must try.

As Laura Hershey reminds us in her poem, *Telling*,
“Those with power can afford
to tell their story or not.
Those without power
risk everything to tell their story
and must.

Someone, somewhere
will hear your story and decide to fight,
to live and refuse compromise.

Someone else will tell
her own story,
risking everything to be real.”

At the end of Watchman, Jean Louise, who has risked much to be real and confront Atticus, can not, does not, abandon her father, saying to him, “Sometimes I think I love you very much.” With great pain, outrage, and confusion, she has come to see him not as a God or hero, but as a flesh and blood man with moral failings, enabling her to see herself in her own complexities and contradictions, too.

And how does Atticus respond? He says he’s proud of her for standing up for what she believes, even if he doesn’t agree. “He tells her: “I certainly hoped a daughter of mine would hold her ground for what she thinks is right – stand up to me first of all.” This is a redemptive moment for them both and an inspirational one for us – she has set her watchman and declared what she sees and is not completely rejected by him either.

This journey of risk and radical honesty, of declaring what we see with whole-sight, has been for them, and can be for us, in the words of songwriter Lui Collins, “a baptism of fire.”

This baptism of fires, Collins tells us, “ is all happening within; illusions burning like tall grass in a wild and restless wind. But they’re coming down around us and we’ll be rising up. Like a church bell resurrected, ringing loud and true...the only way out is through...the only way out is through.”

What will you risk to be real? Take the journey through. Blessed be, Blessed we, and Amen.

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