

Telling truths: Held together by the ministering spirit of God

by [Barbara Brown Taylor](#) in the [July 25, 2006](#) issue

For more than 20 years now, I have been in the business of telling the truth that is public. In sermons, Sunday school lessons, prayers alongside hospital beds and ten-minute speeches to the Rotary Club, my job has involved mining some nugget of truth that will ring true for all within the sound of my voice. As often as I have begun with something that is true for me, I have never allowed myself to stop there. My rule for public truth telling is simple: only say “I” when you are reasonably sure that those listening to you can say “me too.” No one needs to hear what you learned about God on your solo trek up Everest. What you learned while walking the dog is far more helpful, especially if your route runs through the neighborhood.

There are several good reasons to follow this rule. In the first place, it provides a helpful check on a preacher’s natural exhibitionism. In the second place, it recognizes the difference between an audience and a congregation. An audience gathers to be entertained by someone else’s peculiar take on the truth, and to talk about it afterward. A congregation gathers to be engaged by the common truth that makes them who they are, and to do something about it afterward.

Coming together for worship, individuals may release their fragile hold on “my truth” for an hour or two in order to explore the time-traveling, ego-rattling, neighbor-loving dimensions of “our truth” instead. As anyone who has ever been part of a congregation knows, this has less to do with being of one mind than it does with being of one body. The deepest truth any congregation has to tell is that those who do not agree on much of anything can still care for one another through almost everything, thanks to the ministering Spirit in their midst.

As gladly as I served the public truth for years, I had a lot of private truth left over. Some of it was petty, some of it was shameful and some of it led me to question the public truth I proclaimed on a regular basis, so I boxed it up and put it in my spiritual basement. Then one day when I was looking for a place to set a new box, I realized

that some of my best stuff was down there, and that going up and down the steps was wearing me out. Soon after that I started writing a memoir, without the least idea how complicated that might turn out to be.

After years of proclaiming what I believed to be true for all, setting on paper what might be true only for me was quite a stretch. I could say anything I wanted to. I could take on any subject, use any kind of language, and I did not have to wrap it up in 15 minutes, either. But when I looked up from the page, no one was there. There was not a single face I could read to find out how I was doing. There was no one to fall asleep when I got boring, no one to laugh out loud when I said something funny. There was no one to nod at me or cross his arms over his chest, no one to give me a review at the door.

Although I was still hoping to say something true about being human before God that other human beings might recognize, I was writing for readers, not listeners, which was how I learned that many of the limitations I had chafed against in the pulpit had served as guardrails for me. Without them, I lost my nerve when the shoulder of the road fell off, when there was nothing between me and the empty air but my ability to keep my eyes on the road. Where was the line between self-disclosure and self-absorption? At what point did confession putrefy into complaint? Should I worry about going places that might not be safe for my readers to go?

Because no one else could navigate the private truth for me, I had to find a different compass from the one I had used before. In many ways, this was less like driving a treacherous road than it was like descending into a dark cave with a frayed rope and a flashlight with half-dead batteries. Mapquest could not help me. I was going to have to feel my way through.

As a clergyperson, I had little practice at this. My public identity had been given to me for so long that I did not know how to begin saying who I was apart from my role. My public commitment to God's truth had been so wedded to serving my church community that I did not know where to begin grabbing hold for myself.

While this may strike some readers as the best possible reason to avoid doing what I did, I think there is something to be said for measuring the distance between public and private truth from time to time. Corporate truth can become a flotation device that keeps us from testing the depths of the soul's truth, just as looking to others to tell us how we are doing can become a substitute for facing God on our own.

The lucky few may discover that their truth is all in one place, while others of us cover the distance with our bodies, prostrating ourselves like Buddhist pilgrims face down on the holy ground. Either way, the saving truth is that few of us are as noble as we hope or as fraudulent as we fear. We are human, is all, held together both in public and in private by the ministering Spirit of God in our midst.