If the truth were told: Fox TV's 'Moment of Truth'

by Andrew Root in the August 12, 2008 issue

Earlier this year the Fox network, showing either the effects of the writers' strike or the signs of social decay, offered a gem of televised exploitation—the kind that repulses you but you can't help watching. The game show *The Moment of Truth* features contestants who have previously answered questions while attached to a polygraph and then, in front of a TV audience, have to answer some of the same questions, with the polygraph "voice" indicating whether he or she is telling us the truth. Early on the questions are humorously embarrassing ones, such as, "Have you ever admired yourself in the mirror?" But the show moves on to penetrating personal questions like, "Have you waited to have kids because you doubted that your wife is your lifelong partner?"

The contestant who answered yes to that question shocked his wife—but he answered truthfully, according to the polygraph. It's hard to know whether to cheer or shudder when a contestant answers such questions correctly. After a while you start to feel sorry for the contestants, recognizing that they have put themselves in a situation in which the so-called truth can only expose some of their deepest secrets.

Some may see such truth telling as positive. Last Christmas I was given a book by Stephen Arterburn called *The Secrets Men Keep*: *How Men Make Life and Love Tougher Than It Has to Be*, the premise of which is that godly men should never keep any secrets and should always be willing to tell the truth. If so, then *The Moment of Truth* is doing God's good work, exposing lies and standing for truth.

But is it? Watching the show reminded me of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's reflections on truth telling written when the German theologian was in prison for conspiring to overthrow Hitler in the final years of the Third Reich. Over several years Bonhoeffer was interrogated numerous times, and after returning to his cell he would contemplate what was truth and what was a lie. In December 1943 he worked on an

essay titled “What Does ‘Telling the Truth’ Mean?” (The unfinished essay was eventually published in English in the volume *Ethics* and can now be found in *Conspiracy and Imprisonment*: *1940-1945*, volume 16 in Fortress Press’s Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works series.)

Bonhoeffer considers the case of a young boy who is asked by his teacher, in front of the other pupils, “Is it true that your father often comes home drunk?” In fact, the boy has a number of recollections of his father coming home drunk. But sitting in the class, under the accusation of the teacher and the stares of his classmates, he can only deny his father’s drunkenness. Bonhoeffer remarks, “One could call the child’s answer a lie; all the same, this lie contains more truth—i.e., it corresponds more closely to the truth—than if the child had revealed his father’s weakness before the class.”

Bonhoeffer goes on to state even more boldly, “It is the teacher alone who is guilty of the lie.” How can this be? For Bonhoeffer, truth is not about an objective utterance that can be judged right or wrong. Rather, truth exists in a web, a context. Truth is something determined by the encounters that people have. Bonhoeffer points out that we do not assume that parents are obligated to be truthful in the same way children are. (When a preschooler asks, “Where do babies come from?” parents are not obliged to tell them the whole truth.) Children’s world is different from that of parents; it would be untruthful and therefore unfair to use truth to violate the boundary between them.

It is this very boundary that the teacher crosses in Bonhoeffer’s case study. The teacher has no right to interfere in the inner life of the family, no right to use the boy’s pain for his own purposes—namely, to intimidate or humiliate. Truthfulness must uphold this boundary. Those who cross it, even if they have the correct answer, are liars. After all, Genesis’s serpent in the garden was right in saying that if Adam and Eve ate the garden’s fruit they would have knowledge like God does. The deception was not in being untruthful but in using the truth to violate a boundary (in this case, God’s).

“From this we can see immediately that ‘telling the truth’ means different things, depending on where one finds oneself,” Bonhoeffer explains. The problem with television’s *The Moment of Truth* is that it appears to get at the truth, but it cannot do so, for its questions are asked untruthfully. The polygraph has no room for context and cannot respect a boundary. The polygraph offers technical knowledge

about whether a person is telling the truth, but truth is never technical when it is related to the humanity of another.

The question “Is Minneapolis north of Chicago?” is different from “Have you ever thought your wife was an inadequate parent?” The second question is itself untruthful if asked without regard for the person’s life. Indeed, the polygraph doesn’t judge truth as much as it judges doubt. By physiological measurements it can determine (pretty accurately, according to experts) if a person doubts his or her own answer. But truth is not the antithesis of doubt. If I am asked, “Did you take an extra cookie when you were told to have only one?” doubt may surely confirm what the cookie crumbs in my lap suggest—that I am lying. But when the question is, “Have you ever wished you married another person?” doubt and truth are linked. The question touches my broken humanity too deeply for the questioner to assume that I can answer without doubt. The fact that I doubt may be proof of truth, not untruth, for the sliver of my doubt that I have married the right woman forces me again and again to seek for her and to seek for myself. If I maintain that I can never consider such a question, then I have ignored the profundity of her humanity and my love for her.

This brings us to Bonhoeffer’s second point, which is that truth is always concrete and is never a principle: “The truthfulness of our words that we owe to God must take on concrete form in the world. Our word should be truthful not in principle but concretely. A truthfulness that is not concrete is not truthful at all before God.”

The boy in the classroom is stuck: it is true that his father is a drunk, but concretely the father is more than a drunk; he is the boy’s dad. The teacher has used principle as a weapon, forcing the boy to choose between upholding the principle of truthfulness and upholding the concrete humanity of his father and himself. According to Bonhoeffer, the boy answers correctly, for he chooses to honor concreteness by disobeying the principle.

It is this very perspective that led Bonhoeffer to assert in *Ethics*, “It is better for a truthful person to tell a lie than for a liar to tell the truth.” This is so because when a truthful person tells a lie he or she does so concretely (whether in a moment of weakness or in the tension of hiding the truth to protect another). But a liar uses the principle of truth to deceive people, making truth a weapon.

The Moment of Truth TV show examines whether the contestant will violate the principle of telling the truth under the gaze of friends, family and millions of viewers. A question such as, “Have you ever been more sexually attracted to one of your wife’s friends than to her?” is asked. If the contestant says no, he is revealed as violating the principle of truthfulness and therefore is judged to be untruthful. But to say yes does more damage to his wife than does violating the principle of truthfulness. Truth can be told only in concrete situations—because truth is not a principle but a lived reality involving others.

Many of the questions used in *The Moment of Truth* are problematic because they bear no connection to concrete situations. “If you could get away with it, would you cheat on your wife?” is a hypothetical question that has little bearing on reality. In principle one may say, “Never!”—but people who voice strong denials have been known to do such things. Or one may say, “I don’t know, maybe”—yet never concretely do such a thing.

Bonhoeffer’s third point is that untruth is concretely known as untruth because it destroys relationship. “A truthful word is not an entity constant in itself but is as lively as life itself. Where this word detaches itself from life and from the relationship to the concrete other person, where ‘the truth is told’ without regard for the person to whom it is said, there it has only the appearance of truth but not its essence.”

The schoolboy must answer no to the teacher’s untruthful question, for what the teacher seeks is not the truth, which promises liberation, but rather to use the truth to cage the boy and entrap the father. The question, while appearing to seek the truth, aims at humiliation and dehumanization. The boy’s lie is truthful, for in telling it he stands against the dehumanization. By lying he chooses his own and his father’s humanity over the abstract principle of truth.

After hearing your wife admit that she has thought a male co-worker to be more interesting than you are, how could you trust her or any of her co-workers again? Such questions are ultimately untruthful because the answers to them threaten to destroy relationship. When Jesus claims that he is the truth, he asserts that truth is a relationship and part of an encounter, and it can never be seen as a contextless principle that can be used to hurt others. Truth cannot be truth if in its wake people are left isolated, violated and scarred.

Bonhoeffer’s argument has two ramifications. The first is that truthfulness is based in weakness. Whenever truth is used as power it is no longer truth and turns into a lie. When the ten-year-old sister of a seven-year-old boy dances in front of him chanting, “I know something you don’t know,” truth has clearly become a pawn, a currency for gaining power. The girl is concerned not for truth, but for control. To concern ourselves with a truth that is contextual, concrete and relational we must chose weakness over strength. If the teacher really wants to know the truth of the boy’s situation, he must share the boy’s place, must be weak enough to suffer the fullness of the boy’s experience of living with the drunken father.

Only those weak enough to live concretely for others—and in ambiguity—can tell and be the truth. Only a crucified God can bear the fullness of truth. Truth cannot be quantified by a polygraph and judged by a studio audience; truth can be present only when one is willing to be weak enough to suffer with and for another. Bonhoeffer says that the one who “puts a halo on his own head for being a zealot for the truth can take no account of human weaknesses. He destroys the living truth between persons.”

The second ramification of Bonhoeffer’s argument is that truth has to be learned. If truth is contextual, concrete and relational, then it is not self-evident. When a neighbor of ours was kind enough—though two hours late—to bring us a home-cooked meal after the birth of our second child, our three-year-old son opened the door and announced, upon seeing the food, “We already ate. My daddy ordered pizza!” The hurt and disappointment on the neighbor’s face revealed that though our son had spoken factually, he had not yet learned to tell the truth.

A final point that Bonhoeffer raises involves the significance of secrecy. The teacher in his case study is a liar because he neither upholds nor honors the boy’s secret. The teacher has no right to expose it. Truth does not assault secrets but affirms them. Secrecy is not antithetical to truth. The fact that I have secrets does not mean I have violated truth. A secret is dehumanizing and deceitful only when it is used to cover up a concrete act of violation, when it is used to justify dehumanization.

Secrets of shared pain, stray thoughts and deep doubt are mine. They are part of my broken humanity, a shame we all have, a shame of nakedness. My secrets cover my nakedness that I demand be covered, and God concurs by sharing my shame and giving me cover, as God did in the garden after the Fall.

To be human is to be filled with secrets. When a secret cannot be kept it floats beyond the inner life of the person on streams of gossip. When hidden secrets are revealed they destroy relationships by destroying the trust on which relationships are built. This is why gossip is included in the Pauline list of evils. Exposing secrets destroys community by destroying people's trust in one another. Says Bonhoeffer: "The point is precisely that 'truthfulness' does not mean the disclosure of everything that exists."

Perhaps the greatest problem with TV's *The Moment of Truth* is that it believes that truth does mean the revealing "of everything that exists." Questions such as "Have you ever thought of hurting your child?" or "Do you believe that your mother is not very intelligent?" confront the contestant's secret thoughts. They have no correlation with his or her action in the contextual, concrete, relational world. No one, not even the child or the mother, has a right to these secrets if the secrets have done nothing to violate these relationships. If there is no action related to the question, then the question is not a fair one, but one seeking only to pry out contestants' secrets that are their own and no one else's. The great evil is that once a contestant answers yes (or once the answer is shown by the polygraph to be yes), then the secret is set loose, and what was simply a powerless, hidden thought takes on a new reality.

Many of us have had thoughts or feelings antithetical to our deepest desires or wishes, thoughts that when allowed to stay hidden have no power to move us to action. But once they are forced out they can become gremlins that change into scary, destructive monsters. The game show *The Moment of Truth* presents itself as a fight for the truth, but it is actually deadly to the truth, exposing hidden thoughts and urges in a way that strangles truthfulness.