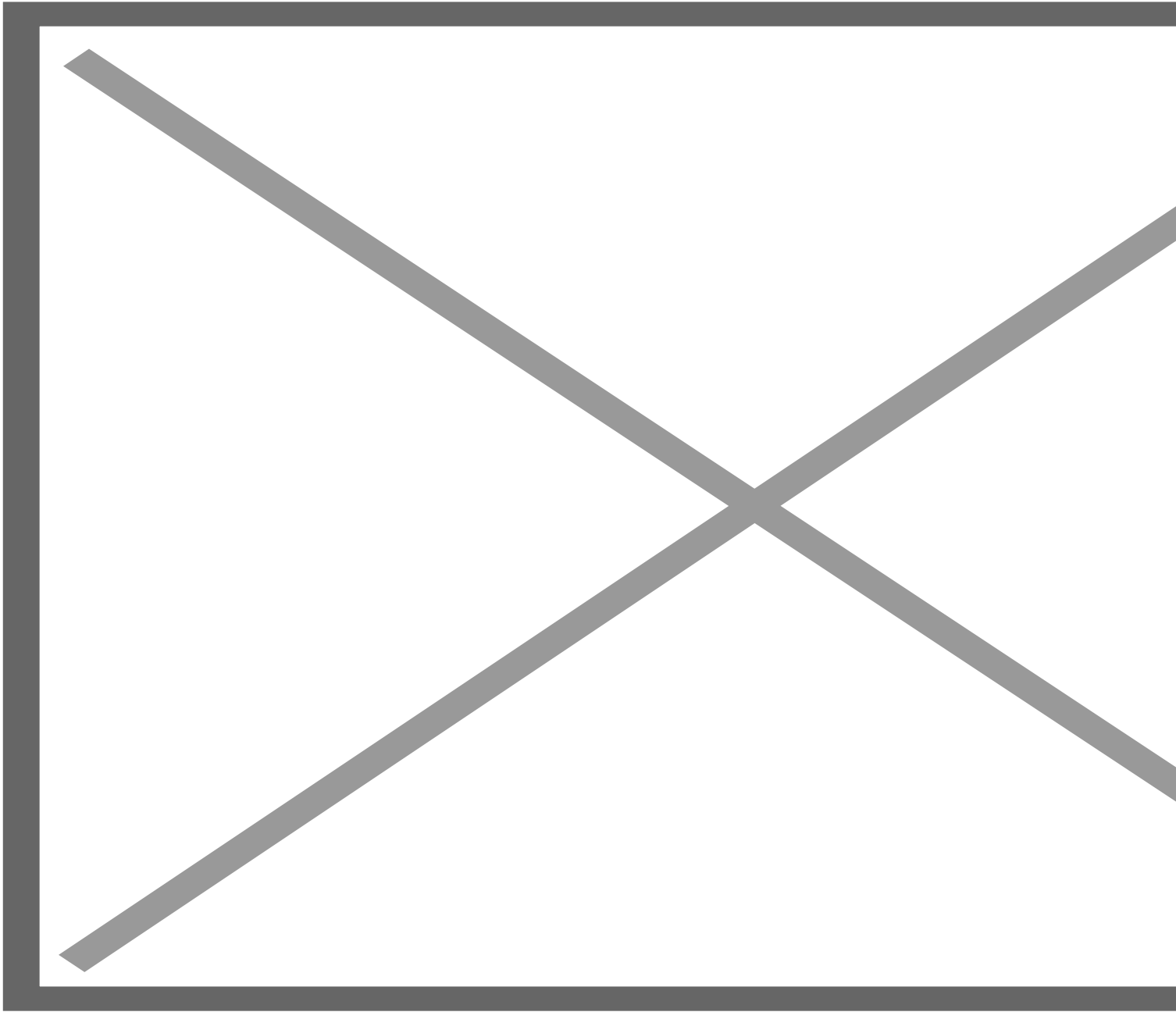


Does it matter what happened?

After years of listening to people tell their stories, I've begun to think that healing depends less on facts than on meaning.

by [Julian DeShazier](#) in the [July 2026](#) issue
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There once was a young man who, against all odds, got himself into college. To say I felt proud would be an understatement. I knew what he had been through, both in his own family and in navigating systems designed to consider him last or not at all. I felt swollen by his achievement, so much so that on the Sunday his community selected him to give his testimony—a mandatory rite in his culture—I moved all arrangements, including my own pulpit duties, to be there.

The moment happened exactly as you imagine: pews of proud faces surrounding this young man with as much love and affirmation and spaghetti and \$20 bills as they could afford. It was beautiful and holy, and a second testimony years later was equally stunning.

Getting to college is one thing; staying there is another. Like thousands of would-be students, he quickly found himself surrounded and overwhelmed by campus life. In September he was “doing well”; by homecoming in October he was doing “really well”; and by November he was a bit swamped, having then to account for the adventures of September and October. He went on academic probation after his first semester—which should probably be called something other than “probation”—and could not recover from the torrent of stress and undone things, a familiar feeling for all of us. In soothing himself he spent all his financial aid, lost his scholarship, and found himself back home.

He felt shame. He felt like a failure. I know all of this because he called on me to help him piece together a world now collapsed. He healed like bones do—unevenly, never quite the same—found himself some work, and decided to move on after a storm that had changed the course of his life.

We spoke less over time, so it was wonderful to receive an invitation from him to give his second testimony, his follow-up; I sat in the same seat as years prior. But what I heard was, well, I remember it almost verbatim: “God took me out of school because I needed to be back home.” My heart sank. I thought, *That’s not true. Why is he saying this?* I was flabbergasted; we’d spent years—not hours, years—working through his failure. I wasn’t even offended. I felt sorry for him that he needed to tell his story this way and that other children in our village would be robbed of his wisdom.

I left there having to remind myself that bones and people heal unevenly. And I have to remind myself when I’m listening to a testimony, or hearing the stories of young men in prison, or going alongside someone unpacking their divorce—whenever I find myself asking, *What really happened?* I have to remind myself that it doesn’t really matter.

That’s hard for me, and probably for a lot of you, because our society is structured primarily on “truth,” where something really did happen and we must now get to the bottom of it. Biblical scholars dispatch historical-critical methods to try to access what the text originally meant. And maybe the only thing conservative and liberal congregations have in common is our pursuit of “the truth of God.” Everybody is fighting over the truth—telling the truth and correcting those lies over there—with the assumption that if the truth wins minds and hearts to our side, the “right thing” will surely happen after that.

We have become zealots for this thing called “the truth.” News channels and influencers of all types brand themselves as truth tellers, and this fight for *facts!* has become an economy of its own. It’s fascinating to watch, and it’s a little beside the point.

That young man had no interest in the truth. In fact, he created a new truth, stuck to it, and then the act of testimony made it suddenly “real.” How could I be mad when I’ve done the same thing countless times? This is the same process we use to piece together the story of our lives. It isn’t about “what really happened”; it’s about our experience of whatever happened. That’s where the hurt happened, and that’s where whatever healing that

may happen begins.

I'm a musician, and a producer betrayed me several years ago, but that's certainly not their version of events. Elsewhere, something happened between another person and me—I'm still not ready to talk about it—and I'm certain we have different accounts of "what happened." Maybe that's not the right starting place. Maybe the questions and logics of our court systems are not the best launching point for the type of reconciliation and healing that Jesus calls for. Maybe I don't need to tell you the truth of what you did; it's more important for you to know the truth of what I felt.

Nosy neighbors need to know "What happened?" But as the battle for truth persists, with more and more lives laid to waste over it, I've begun to wonder if we faith folk are working against our own interests sometimes. Certainly there are flat-out lies that need correcting, and churches have historically been locations for community empowerment through education (we have arguably been at our best in this role), but try explaining to someone you've hurt the truth of "what really happened." Defensiveness may be born out of a need to be on the side of truth, a need that borders on idolatry. We can do that, but we can also stop doing that.

Narratives serve a purpose—they tell the stories we want to tell—and from childhood we are taught that lying is "telling stories." It may be useful moving forward to ask what story we are trying to tell, to ask this when scrolling social media or listening to my mayor or president—or to a young man giving a "false" testimony—or engaging my rational friends who want to know whether I actually believe Jesus was raised from the dead. There's a story there, with a truth both too complicated and too simple to argue against. True or not, there's something more happening, and we may have to change our relationship to "the truth" to make room for it.