

Then Pilate said to him: “What is truth?”

It's amazing how many things accumulate in one's memory. I recalled out of nowhere recently a moment when I was only 9 years old standing with another boy – when a bedraggled looking dog came along. My friend expressed pity for the pup and suggested we contact the SPCA to retrieve it and save its life. At once I protested: “Don't contact the SPCA – that's the name of the Society for the Protection of Cruelty to Animals.” Of course I was partly right. The Society did deal with abandoned animals – but the P stood for Prevention of Cruelty, not Protection and so I was also very wrong! Which should have cautioned me as I grew up to question my notions of what's true, for while there may be something right in what I say, there may at the same time be something untrue or overlooked or – spiteful.

Which is the wonderful thing about the New Testament Greek word for truth *aletheia*. Its root is *lethe*, which means concealment. But when you place the negative letter *a* in front of *lethe* - resulting in *aletheia* - it means un-concealment. So in Greek the word truth refers to something *unconcealed*, brought into the open, unveiled. But if truth unveils the nature of something otherwise concealed, it also allows that something remains concealed. We never know the *whole* truth. As in my way of defining the SPCA – I was partly right and partly wrong. And that goes for any “truth” I may utter – even if scientifically verifiable. Gene Wilder as Young Frankenstein sends Marty Feldman to fetch the preserved brain of a genius and Marty returns with the brain of Peter Boyle. So things happen beyond our rational intent.

At my age I can look back and describe myself in ways that are truthful or factual – in terms of things that happened, beliefs I held, knowledge I had gained. But in the light of ongoing experiences I can question many of the truths I held back then – not that they are now untrue but that they fell short of dimensions it has taken years to become un-concealed. In other words, over time the earlier truths widen and deepen and even correct themselves – at times almost to seem contradictory to what I thought I knew. Think of the German citizen who voted for Adolf Hitler in 1932.

Which is why some ancient Greek philosopher would be amazed at how cocksure we moderns are about what we think is true. There is no doubt that we have been technically correct, accurate when it comes to building complex weapons, rockets, ferreting out new resources to comfort our lives – but what about what even scientists call unanticipated effects? So many of these achievements are verifiably “true” – we can see the results. But what remained concealed about them was the potential tension, the terror, the displacement, indeed the competitive deceptions they would breed – in other words the *whole* truth about our mismanagement of our world.

The beauty of truth as articulated in poetry, drama, novels – and of course by way of biblical literature – is that it un-conceals what reason and science so often leave concealed: that there is more to reality than manipulable fact. Which is why the Jesus of John's Gospel can say: *If you remain in my word . . . you will know the truth (true things will be un-concealed), and this truth will set you free.*

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