

Friendly Truth to Power

by Nancy Hicks Marshall

It is a tricky balance for Friends to speak truth to power, to stand up against abuse of power as we also seek “that of God” in persons we believe to be corrupt. Recently, I wrote a novel called *A Dry Hate*, which allowed me to explore this dilemma from a range of perspectives. It tells the story of a young lawyer working to end a string of false arrests by a corrupt sheriff’s department in Arizona.

As Friends, we seek to behave as if we really believe in the equality of all persons. In a spiritual sense, we know that all people are equal in God’s eyes. We know we should treat each other with respect. In *A Dry Hate*, I depicted a deputy sheriff who eventually reveals his egregious abuse of power – and his repeated acts of disrespect and mistreatment of Latinos and social justice activists – when he gives testimony as a witness for the prosecution against a group of Latinos and activists. The protagonist of this story is a Quaker lawyer defending her client against this abuse of power. At the same time, she attempts to treat her opponent – a deputy sheriff, the prosecution’s main witness – with decency, which is part of Friends’ testimony.

Friends seek a single standard of truth, which we often refer to as our “testimonies of simplicity and integrity.” In my novel, one of my goals was to show this clearly: abuse of power is its own thing. It does not reside in any one person. Thus, we can speak truth about the abuse of power – we can speak truth to power – without disrespecting the person performing that abuse.

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When we seek to speak truth to power, we need to know the truth. The truth in every instance includes a myriad of details. In legal disputes, it includes the written laws and regulations for all officeholders and for particular jobs. For example, if a school principal tried to get a teacher out of the classroom during class hours – let’s say for a

cup of coffee – leaving students unattended and lacking instruction, the principal and teacher would both be violating the terms of their employment, the regulations defining the responsibilities of their offices.

Virtually every job or office is defined in part by a set of written laws and regulations. When Friends seek to speak truth to power, it is our job to learn what those requirements are, and if they are being violated, try our best to bring such abuses to light.

For example, it is completely outside a deputy sheriff’s job description to raid a factory that is rumored to be hiring undocumented workers. It is also completely outside the job description, and a violation of its written oath of office, to arrest people because of their opinions or their skin color or their editorial vigor or any public comments they make at public meetings. A sheriff is also obligated by law to provide a monthly accounting of expenditures, and to make written requests for certain items outside the department’s approved budget. I mention these examples to show the kinds of details we need to learn in order to speak truth to power best, to speak the truth that includes accurate information regarding the matter at hand.

But in speaking truth to power, we also need to seek to understand “that of God” in each person. It’s generally easier to find that of God in the poor, the oppressed, a defendant wrongfully jailed. It’s not as easy to remember and believe in that of God in our opponent, the one abusing power.

I’m as susceptible as anyone to the temptation to hate the sinner, badmouth the bad guy, rub it in if I win, or try to expose another person’s flaws and wrongs with a flair of self-righteousness. But this is the very spot where we as Friends expect more of ourselves. Even when trying to make our truth prevail, to achieve a victory for equality, fairness for an abused victim, we need to do all we can to avoid abusing or humiliating our opponent.

This is our challenge. While trying to ensure that the truth comes out in a trial or an argument or at the polls, we must treat our apparent opponent with respect and civility, even as we try to expose actions that violate human rights.

In writing *A Dry Hate*, I tried to explore that of God in a variety of people: the Deputy Sheriff, his son, a

knowledgeable but somewhat clueless professor, and both undocumented immigrants and naturalized citizens. I tried to imagine what it was like to be these people. It behooves us to pause amid all the stridency and consider the challenges in each person's life and to consider whether we can find relationships even with the most difficult people.

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I frequently feel angry or overwhelmed. I am not always very good at simplicity or integrity. Yet I am surrounded by examples that inspire me. My girlfriend, when confronted by someone who was angrily alleging fraud at the polls, responded, "You would be a perfect person to work at the polls. You can help make the system better." Or my pal in the community garden who asks everyone – old and young – to say how they felt about voting. And he encourages all

of us to applaud any person who comments on whether they plan to vote, no matter what the opinion.

To speak truth to power about the abuse of power and to find that of God in everyone – these are hard. But these are our work as Friends.

Where do we begin? Most of us already know the answers: Take quiet time, meditate, seek spiritual guidance, and simply declutter our minds from the din around us. Become better informed about issues that concern us. Work locally or nationally. Affirm each other's efforts, sometimes with Friendly feedback. If we work to stay spiritually grounded, we will stay better able to speak truth to power. ❖

Nancy Marshall was first exposed to Friends at an AFSC service project in Mexico. While teaching high school history, she served as a Guardian ad Litem in the Juvenile Court and defended a young activist wrongly jailed for "disturbing the peace." She volunteers in a local community garden and on the Board of the Bolivia Quaker Education Fund. She is a member of Phoenix Friends Meeting and has written several books, including A Dry Hate, (available at Nugget Press, Ingram, and Amazon). She is available for presentations online or in person if feasible.



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