

Everybody Lies

RECLAIMING THE LOST ART OF TRUTH TELLING

DANIEL DE ROULET

It has been a bad year for writers, at least when it comes to telling the truth.

This spring, it was Harvard sophomore Kaavya Viswanathan, whose chick-lit novel *How Opal Mehta Got Kissed, Got Wild, and Got a Life* was at the center of a scandal. After initial reports that numerous passages in the book had been copied from two other novels, the young author admitted to “unintentional and unconscious” borrowing from the books, which she had read in high school. The publisher recalled the novel so that Viswanathan could rework the passages in question and an unblemished version could then be republished. But this plan fell apart when additional similarities to other published novels were discovered.

Alfred Doblin, editorial page editor of the *Herald News* in Passaic County New Jersey, accused Viswanathan of committing an “unpardonable” sin for a writer: “Writers—fiction or journalists—are nothing if they do not have a distinctive voice.”

And nothing in the public eye is what one could say James Frey became after his Oprah-selected *A Million Little Pieces* was exposed by the website The Smoking Gun as fiction, not memoir. While the Harvard plagiarist passed herself off as a novelist, Frey was a novelist

posing as a truth-teller. His life wasn’t interesting enough to sell, and what he made up wouldn’t have made even a good novel, so he created an identity and passed it off as truth.

The scope of the problem

Neither of these cases is entirely surprising. What should be more disturbing to Christians is the way in which the frauds defended lying. Margo Hammond of the *St. Petersburg Times* notes that instead of apologizing or even displaying simple shame, Viswanathan went on the *Today* show and there defended her actions as “borrowing,” not stealing.

According to The Smoking Gun, even after confronted with evidence that his memoir was fictional, Frey stuck by his story. He threatened to sue when he was deemed a liar, and called those who uncovered his lies “haters” and “doubters”—that is, he defended himself by counter-accusation. When the website backed him into a corner about his actions, he simply ended the interview, stating, “There’s nothing at this point [that] can come out of this conversation that, that is good for me.”

The strategy taken by both momentary celebrities after being caught in lies seems to follow an approved (or at least

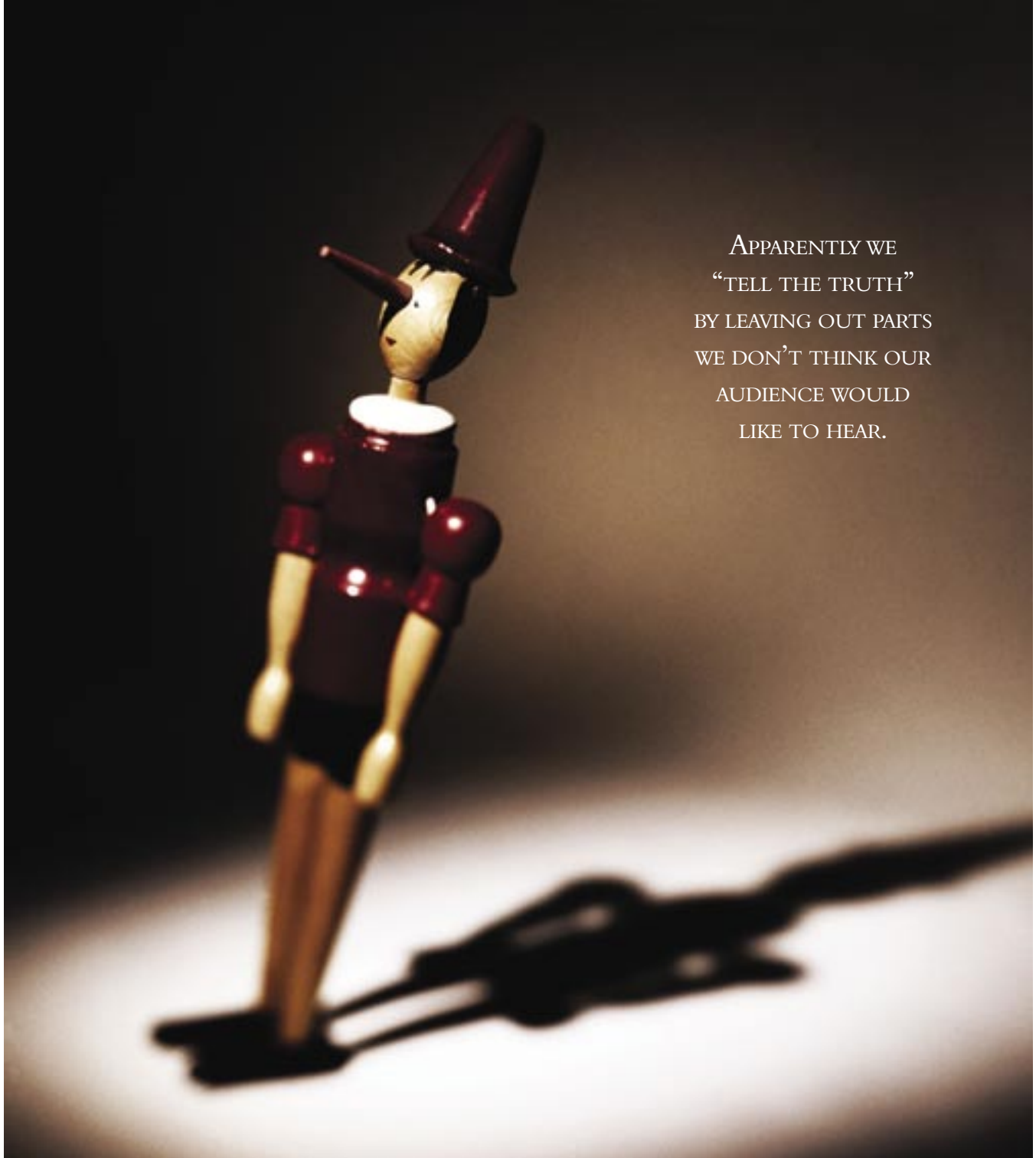
anticipated) pattern of public behavior: engage in wrongdoing; when caught, engage in linguistic gymnastics, accuse your accusers, and eventually refuse to speak about the subject any longer.

Here in the U.S., our current and previous presidents have modeled such behavior—Bill Clinton during the Monica Lewinsky scandal (“It depends what your definition of ‘is’ is”), and George Bush in a number of incidents, from weapons of mass destruction to selective truth telling in deciding which documents to declassify in the case involving CIA agent Valerie Plame.

What should make the church stand up and take particular notice is that both of these national role models—they are such by the definition of their positions—identify themselves as Christians: one as a Southern Baptist, and the other as a born-again evangelical.

Does this affect what the general public thinks of Christians? According to a March 2006 Pew Research Center poll, it does. When asked to give one-word descriptors of President Bush, two of the top five responses were “liar” and “Christian.”

What do we say about those two words in the list? How credible are believers when lying has become an accepted form of public behavior, and



APPARENTLY WE
“TELL THE TRUTH”
BY LEAVING OUT PARTS
WE DON’T THINK OUR
AUDIENCE WOULD
LIKE TO HEAR.

when public figures can be identified as both Christians and liars?

Cultural support for lying

While living a Christian life has always been counter-cultural in nature, the arguments for making lying acceptable in our culture today seem stacked against us. Three seem most prominent and worthy of a Christian response: extreme skepticism, portable identities, and “flexible” truth.

Extreme skepticism—perhaps the root of describing someone as both

a Christian and a liar—can be found in about any television program. One of my doctor-wife’s regular shows is *House*—named for lead character Gregory House, a gifted but malcontented doctor whose motto, unfortunately, is that “everyone lies.” A recent episode focused on the life and mysterious ailments of a fifteen-year-old Christian faith healer who, while hospitalized after collapsing during a church service, seems to heal a terminal cancer patient he encounters and prays for in a hospital corridor.

Dr. House, of course, doesn’t buy it. The plot line concludes with House’s vindication: the patient’s cancer temporarily went into remission not because of divine healing, but because of a virus the boy passed to her when he placed his hands on her head to pray. And the virus was a sexually transmitted disease, the result of behavior he was hiding from his father and the

Daniel de Roulet, is professor of English and assistant provost of learning and assessment at Vanguard University in Costa Mesa, California. He previously taught at North Park University.

congregation. The episode's name? "House vs. God."

The point seems to be not only that everyone lies, but that the most apparently pure are really the most suspect. This, of course, is the premise underlying *The Da Vinci Code*—the film version's poster tells prospective viewers to "seek the truth": the church must have the most to hide and, ironically enough, in making that accusation author Dan Brown doesn't allow facts to get in his way.

The notion of "portable identities" for me finds its roots in Charles Dickens, but most of my students today would immediately point to MySpace.com. In one of Dickens's most famous novels, *Great Expectations*, a lawyer's clerk, one Mr. Wemmick, is so deeply bothered by the contradictions between what he does for a living and the man he wants to be that he creates two identities. His private life is lived in a mock castle to keep out the outside world while selflessly caring for his aged father. At work, he is cold and heartless, decorating his office with what he calls his "portable property"—trinkets of those criminals whom his boss failed to effectively defend.

MySpace has gained most of its press from recent posts by adolescent bloggers who threatened to bring Columbine-like episodes to their own high schools. But ask college students what it's really about, and many will cite the ability to "re-make" yourself. In its negative sense, this new identity may be free from physical realities and the constraints of moral codes. But isn't this really just a more obvious manifestation of what my generation calls the divide between Sunday and Monday? Or a natural response to figures today who claim one sort of public identity but live another in their actions?

Bill Dogterom, chair of the department of leadership studies at Vanguard University of Southern California, sees this behavior as an attempt to "negotiate a peace between rigid truth and the 'flexible' truth they use to accommodate the pressures of their lives."

This notion of a flexible truth is

rarely intentional—certainly not at first. People in our culture "when pressed," states Dogterom, "would claim adherence to the truth—but how that gets worked out seems to depend on circumstances."

Another problem seems to have become part of the Christian political sphere. Its implications are dangerous both in Christian witness and in misdirected Christian action, especially selective truth-telling by Christians. David Marley, author of the upcoming book, *Pat Robertson: An American Life*, suggests that presentations of the truth that are re-designed to appeal to the au-

WHEN CHRISTIANS GET
ELECTED TO HIGH PLACES,
WE SHOULD PRAY HARD THAT
HUBRIS WON'T RULE THE DAY.

dience, depending on the occasion, are now part of American political life, and even Christian political life.

Marley comments that during his presidential campaign, "Robertson appeared on Larry King's show and gave a very political answer about why he wanted to run. A short time later he appeared on TBN and gave this Christian audience a very different, and much more confident, answer. It was almost as if two different people were speaking."

Truth in this sense has become pragmatic. Apparently we "tell the truth" by leaving out parts we don't think our audience would like to hear. What results may not be false, but it certainly cannot be considered the whole truth. Basing our public policies and our private moral decisions based on "selective truth" seems a recipe for disaster. How would God respond to our confessions in prayer if we told him only the truth we thought he wanted to hear?

A Christian witness to the truth

How do Christians respond to a culture that can misidentify falsehood as truth and be distrustful of claims to truth from traditional sources? Here are a

few possible responses:

Distrust quick answers and newly discovered truths. The reaction to *The Da Vinci Code* should be, in a large part, what we witnessed in response to the discovery this spring of the Gospel of Judas. That manuscript was less new discovery than a National Geographic Society marketing ploy, and its contents are of no news to anyone familiar with church history. But few people are, and so, like *The Da Vinci Code*, the Gospel of Judas made a bigger splash than it likely deserved.

But the contents of the Gospel of Judas are not newly discovered, nor truth. Being skeptical of such "discoveries" is not a charge against seeking truth. Instead, it is a reminder that being rooted in the Christian tradition means that we already have truth. The problem is that we don't often enough act as witnesses to it.

Everyone—especially those in high places—is tempted to lie. The truth is difficult, and lies are a way of avoiding the difficult. Lies apparently also make popular news and entertainment. But it's much easier to be fascinated with the scandal of lies than to live your life based on the thrill of the scandal—something that will eventually come out about *The Da Vinci Code*.

That we live in a society of "lies in high places" should surprise no one. Any read of literature should be familiar with hubris, a staple of the ancient Greek playwrights. Hubris is the pride experienced by people who have risen to power—a sense that the moral laws of the universe no longer apply to you. We shouldn't be surprised by the appeal of lies.

When Christians get elected to high places, we should pray hard that hubris won't rule the day. That, by the way, is one of the most remarkable aspects of the character of Jesus: he was offered the world but took the truth and the cross. We would be wise to point in that direction when asked about truth.

Tell the truth when we fail. What seems missing from the current portrait of Christians in the public sphere

CONTINUED ON PAGE 20

Everybody Lies

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 8

is confession of wrong-doing. Dogterom states that the most important thing to remember in his role as a pastor and teacher of pastors “is the public self-correction that I do when caught in a lie, or when I discover that I mis-spoke—whatever the reason.”

The lack of such a commitment is my biggest gripe with our Christian public figures today, and with myself when I get caught up in whatever miniscule moments of power I experience in my corner of the kingdom. Christianity is not about being right; it’s about finally knowing we’re wrong.

In a recent sermon, Mike Meeks, a pastor in Southern California, defined Christian maturity as this: “I’m a quicker repenter than I used to be. Because if being a mature Christian means not sinning, then we have to become awesome actors.”

Our world has many awesome actors, but part of being a truth-teller is to follow confession with repentance. Meeks told the story of what had happened when he became a Christian. He was a college student working in a hotel where he had been stealing towels and sheets and giving them to his friends in the dorms. When he felt God asking him to tell his boss, he did so, confessing the matter and saying he would steal no longer. In the uncomfortable silence that followed, he asked his boss if he was fired. “Hell no,” replied his boss, “you’re probably the only one around here I can trust.”

In the one-liner Bible reading that we have grown accustomed to today, we are fond of quoting our Lord’s statement in John 10:32: “The truth will set you free.” The rest of the chapter, not often quoted, is about the hard work of discipleship and the difficulties of admitting that one is a slave to sin. There are no shortcuts to truth—neither for our writers, nor moviemakers, not politicians, nor for the rest of us. But perhaps, if we Christians recommit to truth-telling, our witness as the only ones around here who can be trusted will speak volumes to a world grown wary of words. □