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TRUTH IN LOVE

Words Really Do Matter: *Say What You Mean and Mean What You Say*

By Parris J. Baker
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The Hatter opened his eyes very wide on hearing this, but the only sound coming from his voice said, “Why is a raven like a writing desk?” “Come, we shall have some fun now!” thought Alice. “I’m glad they’ve begun asking riddles. I believe I can guess that” she added aloud. “Do you mean that you think you can find out the answer to it?” said the March Hare. “Exactly so,” said Alice. “Then you should say what you mean,” the March Hare went on. “I do,” Alice hastily replied; “at least – at least I mean what I say – that’s the same thing, you know.” “Not the same thing a bit!” said the Hatter. “You might just as well say that ‘I see what I eat’ is the same thing as ‘I eat what I see’!”^[1]

When I entered the dissertation writing (and re-writing) phase of my doctoral program, my committee chairperson, Dr. Helen Petracchi, associate dean for Academic Affairs and associate professor in the School of Social Work at the University of Pittsburgh, shared with me a simple guiding principle that she acquired from her mother, an English teacher, for the construction of my dissertation: Say What You Mean and Mean What You Say. Words are important and words really do matter!

Like most doctoral students, I smiled receptively and nodded submissively, while thinking all the time, “Thank you for your wisdom, but I just want to complete the damn dissertation!” Yet, two decades later, I am still guided by that simple phrase. Moreover, I regularly use the phrase as a framework in academic advising and for public policy analysis.

Though I don't believe he was encouraged with the same words, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. repeatedly confronted and challenged American policymakers and elected officials "to say what you mean and mean what you say." In his final, prophetic speech, "I've Been to the Mountaintop,"[2] Dr. King contested defiantly: "Now about injunctions: We have an injunction and we're going into court tomorrow morning to fight this illegal, unconstitutional injunction. All we say to America is, 'Be true to what you said on paper.' If I lived in China or even Russia, or any totalitarian country, maybe I could understand some of these illegal injunctions. Maybe I could understand the denial of certain basic First Amendment privileges, because they hadn't committed themselves to that over there. But somewhere I read of the freedom of assembly. Somewhere I read of the freedom of speech. Somewhere I read of the freedom of press. Somewhere I read that the greatness of America is the right to protest for right. And so just as I say, we aren't going to let dogs or water hoses turn us around, we aren't going to let any injunction turn us around. We are going on.[3]

The next day, April 4, 1968, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated.

Dr. King recognized the vestiges of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness were increasingly being replaced with the historic and nascent veneration of violence, the continuous denial, or the redefinition of democracy, and that the powers of the polemicists were strengthening systems of racial oppression and injustice. The anointed demigods of the day, from Bull Connors and George Wallace to Ron DeSantis and Donald Trump, are akin to malignant carcinogens that are constantly mutating, that is, revising, deleting, or rearranging the concepts of character, race, and truth (CRT), justice, democracy, and citizenship.

So apparent were the truths of "all men are created equal" and "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" that the Founding Fathers missed the obvious inconsistencies of the phrase, "We hold these truths to be self-evident." Their worldview evidently filtered through the prism of prosperity; wealth acquired through the enslavement of black and brown bodies.

The exact meaning of "these truths to be self-evident" is unknown. Dr. Jeff Thompson,[4] proposed that when the verbal and nonverbal messages are dissimilar, the true meaning of the communication can be interpreted by applying the three Cs of Nonverbal Communication: Context, Clusters, and Congruence. Understanding communication in context requires several important factors: an assessment of the environment the communication took place, the history of the persons involved in the communication, and the relationship status (social position occupied) and role (the behavioral and attitudinal expectations) of each person. It is important not to interpret the

meaning of nonverbal signals but to look for clusters of signals that can be interpreted as having very similar meanings. Congruence, when present, will demonstrate a direct relationship between what is said and the nonverbal attitude, affect, and behavior that follows. Simply put, what you say and what you mean will agree.

From the birth and development of the United States, our nation has wrestled with the semiotics of independence, truth, and democracy. Once again, the United States' experiment of democracy is on full display. "For truth to be truth requires vulnerability, demands sacrificial courage, and steadfast integrity. Not the same thing a bit!" said the Hatter. You might just as well say "We hold these truths to be self-evident" the same as "We hold these self-evident truths." It is a matter of perspective and words really do matter.

Marguerite Annie Johnson, better known to all of us as Dr. Maya Angelou, offered this insight: "When someone shows you who they are believe them the first time. This is one of the hardest life lessons I've tried to follow, but it is sage advice."

[1] Lewis, Carroll. 1832-1898. (2000). Quote found in Chapter 7: A mad tea party. In *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. Peterborough, Ont.: Broadview Press,

[2] King, Jr. Martin Luther. "I've Been to the Mountaintop." In support of the striking sanitation workers. April 3, 1968, Mason Temple, Memphis, TN.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Jeff Thompson is an adjunct research scientist, Department of Psychiatry, Columbia University Medical Center, and the New York State Psychiatric Institute.

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