

TRUTH – November 2005

— By Richard L. Kiniry

Knowledge can make life difficult. In my youth I was on my way to a really cushy job as a Catholic priest. Then the Church educated me and the religion didn't make any sense. I had to bite the bullet, take a chance and find another, less secure life.

Actually, life is a process in which uncomfortable knowledge kicks us in the teeth. We discover our parents can't make everything right, other children can be cruel, one and one can't be made into 3, family prejudices prove to be ugly and untrue, and sex turns out to be fun and dangerous.

Do we have an ethical responsibility to always accept and respond to the truth? Does truth take moral precedence over revelation, faith and noble feelings? Yes, but. All life is personal and each of us puts together a sense of self that (sort of) makes us secure. That personal world is a mix of experiences, assumptions, beliefs and facts. The truth may not be the most important issue on any particular day.

We all eventually learn to put knowledge in its place. As we put together a life, there are certain things we just can't hear. We can lock away family secrets and maybe not suffer psychological problems as a result. But we can also decide not to read the contract that accompanies our credit cards and suffer the consequences. Mostly we avoid facts that don't fit the safe world we construct for ourselves - I'm not fat, I'm just big-boned.

More seriously, we can refuse to accept the facts that conflict with our prejudices about other ethnic groups or social classes. And of course, religion too often offers excuses to avoid the truth.

But we ought to at least be in dialogue with uncomfortable truths. The day may come when we can face up to a truth and change our lives. After knowing for years about the inhumane ways animals are treated, one day you might stare down at your Big Mac and be unable to eat it. After reading another article about global warming, you might junk your car and buy a bicycle. After reading enough about the inequality of the education system, you might use a quarter of your income to support a private school for children in North Philadelphia.

It does seem that we rarely face up to truth. Humankind has spent so many millennia pretending that their self-interest was the truth, that the truth has become what most people believe. So, the truth of evolution is up for a vote, and war brings peace. But avoiding truth can offer new opportunities. Denying the facts of engineering allowed medieval builders to dream of taller and taller building. After the truth of gravity formed cracks in buildings, the builders had to invent flying buttresses and as a result we have magnificent cathedrals.

Truth will always win in the end but after truth kicks human beings in the teeth, we have our turn at twisting that truth into a new truth. Truth, knowledge, the facts are a given. Human imagination and creativity can take what is and make it better. We are in a dance with truth and neither leads all the time.