

38. Time for a Reckoning

Perhaps it is time for a reckoning. Almost three years have gone by since I wrote down the first line of this essay. I have already covered the major part of my life as a truth teller and all that remains is a period of ten or twelve years that needs to be elevated – yes, I have to say elevated – to the rank of crowning and concluding achievement.

But what about these years? Why are they important? What do they have to say about me – about truth telling – that hasn't already been said?

Perhaps I can venture an answer along these lines. My being a graduate student over nearly ten years with a couple of these spent cab driving (it bothers me to bring this up now, to mention cab driving even in passing because it is stigmatized to some degree and connotes mediocre ambition and limited intellectual means and yet, on the other hand, I feel it is appropriate to what I'm about to say) was split between grooming myself for professional status and subverting this process. The allure of professionalism was very real to me and oftentimes over the course of ten years I had occasion to imagine myself as the singular and striking and, despite my forty odd years, newly minted university prof. In my heart of hearts I felt an enduring youthfulness that couldn't be matched in the one area that seemed most important to me. Just as had been my experience through all my undergraduate studies, I came across no one who, as a truth teller, outdid me in boldness, outspokenness, and even recklessness.

– And who's ever spoken about it so much?

What if telling the truth about truth telling . . .

– It's his walking the tightrope, Andrew. If he didn't do it this way, he'd be holding onto to a discourse that wasn't pure. It's got to be risked out of fear that fear might get behind it and control it like what happens to so many respectable discourses.

. . . depended entirely upon resisting the pull of professionalism? Wouldn't this then be of utmost significance to my subject?

Of course I realize that raising this question already raises a prejudice *against* professionalism. It already raises it because it is already stealthily or surreptitiously or even straightforwardly present as the answer to this question that is precisely this project. This very personal and particular work that at the same time is trying hard to be one with my career, my path, my trajectory, my errancy, my non-career, my non-professionalism, my valuing

all this – at least for myself – more than any straight-line flight to a well-known and well-defined objective.

– It's all very confusing, isn't it? Prejudice, I mean. Who has it, who doesn't? Nietzsche said it was all out in the marketplace. The educated world I think he meant. Only he wasn't very nice about it and so he showed his own prejudice. He called scholars – imagine them writing about him now – scholarly oxen.

So far the great advantage of telling the truth about myself to myself has been being able to tell the truth about prejudice such that telling the truth about truth-telling is told with the least. Had I used a purely public or conventional voice instead of a more personal or, for that matter, literary voice that is also more than one voice, I would have been forced into serving the ideal of truth that, by virtue of its valuing clarity, coherence, and conclusiveness above comprehensiveness (not that it doesn't value the latter of course), would have prevented me from exhibiting my own prejudice in a way that encouraged it to be not only out in the open but subject to the influence and contrariness of others.

Having said this, I now find myself confronted with a second thought. Though I may be open about my prejudice to all the world and challenge it to no end, there is still nothing in the strictest sense that prevents it from being less a prejudice than whatever opposes it.

– Oh, true heart! You don't back off from telling the truth about the uncertainty every truth-teller carries around in his heart but fails to address.

So far I have let the element of uncertainty ride high in my discourse. Everything that is most dogmatic in my thinking inclines me thus. Clearly it is the case that, by generalizing about uncertainty and therefore rendering my own discourse uncertain, I both refute it by undercutting it and affirm it by including it. But this is only what one out of a hundred thoughts allows me to do. The other ninety-nine put up a solid front as the belief in a certain consistency throughout my life that qualifies me as someone who can speak with absolute certainty about uncertainty and, with an almost god-like view of it, pass beyond the logical and performative contradictions that afflict all others.

– Oh, true heart! You don't back off from telling the truth about the certainty every truth-teller carries around in his heart but fails to address!

Most of the time then I'm with my prejudice. But not in the sense that I feel I'm in the wrong or being arbitrary. On the contrary, it is more like living my whole life with the idea that my pre-judgements are continually being confirmed.

– Well, this is interesting. I suspect that anything that can be said about professionalism's being at odds with truth-telling must be viewed under this light of its being a prejudice like all others.

With my thoughts coming to me ninety-nine percent of the time as confirmed pre-judgement and only one percent of the time as unavoidable prejudice, I know in my heart of hearts that characterizing my thought in general as prejudice never seems quite convincing. Never seems entirely right because never entirely removed from a desire to exalt myself as openness and comprehensiveness. How am I to tell the truth about this if I don't incline the other way by telling the truth about where I am as position, as proposition, as polemic, *as case against professionalism in truth-telling?*

– Andrew, don't look so upset.

– I've good reason to look upset. I've spent thirty years being a professor and don't want to go out thinking I've been wasting my time.

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