

SPEAKING CANDIDLY

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In her essay “Women and Honor: Some Notes on Lying,” Adrienne Rich says that the possibility of life between people is dependent on speaking the truth.² But what are the implications of speaking truth when one is engaged in relationships across differences in power?³ This is the question that Pat White’s paper on teaching honesty raises for me. She rightly notes that when we take candor to be a valuable sort of truthfulness we might want to encourage in students, then our task can seem especially difficult. I have three selves who want to speak candidly in response to White: the moral philosopher, the puritan, and the educator. The central point they jointly make is that, in the present social conditions of enormous inequities across many different dimensions, teaching candor as a form of honesty may be a task of morally heroic proportions.

The moral philosopher in me first wants to clarify an ambiguity about candor that threatens to mask the import of our discussion. On the one hand candor may be taken as a virtue, an achieved virtue, that entails good judgment about the appropriateness (moral?) of the time, place, and degree of openness with which we express our thoughts, feelings and attitudes — in which case most of the problems I worry about may disappear. Alternatively, if we have in mind the *practicing* of candor, which presumes that persons have not yet acquired the sound judgment we aim for in candor as an *achieved* virtue, then the learning of candor, the practicing of candor we are being urged to encourage, has potential for causing serious harm and my worries are to the point.

The value of candor, as White sees it, is that it gives us a glimpse into someone else’s way of seeing the world, it allows us to know where we stand with the person, and helps us to feel at ease. My worry is that both getting a glimpse of another’s picture of the world and knowing where we stand with them can also make us feel ill at ease with them, or worse, it can wound us. We can be hurt at our recognition of the diminished moral status we have in their world view, it can cause us to feel fear. Specifically, I am concerned that when we encourage students to practice candor, we may in fact increase the harm done to those whose situation anti-sexist and anti-racist policies are designed to remedy.

How might we cause harm? How might candor make matters worse? Here I can only point out two ways in which candor has the potential to increase harm: (1) it may deepen the dilemma of repression and abuse of subjugated groups, and (2) it may lead us to inadvertently sanction wrongdoing. Let me explain.

First we need to recognize that there is already in operation what we might call an “economy of candor,”⁴ whereby some groups, the privileged, those belonging to dominant groups, feel freer to be candid about all sorts of matters than do those students who have been marginalized, silenced and subordinated. Those who are in a position to decide who can be candid, when, about what, and with whom are not those who have the most to suffer from increased candor.

Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic document a “time-warp”⁵ aspect to racism that makes candid speech on the matter a danger. They note that we may readily recognize the racism of other times and places (often only after decades and centuries), “but that of our own time and place strikes us, if at all, as unexceptional, trivial, or well within literacy license.”⁶ We systematically fail to see many forms of bias, discrimination and prejudice within our own dominant narrative. Challenges to the

dominant narrative that deviate too markedly are dismissed as “extreme, coercive, political, and wrong.”⁷ When we do see racism and sexism, we significantly underestimate the amount of it, and the harm of it.

Anyone who has tried to discuss racism knows that, in fact, talking often makes matters worse because there are such different perspectives on how much racism there is. Little blatant racism takes place in the presence of those of good will, so they tend to underestimate it, while those who suffer it report more of it. But also, people have different sensitivities to the subtle nuances and code words that are the guises of racism and sexism. Those who are victimized become sensitive to these, while the sympathetic majority have to work hard to acquire this knowledge that comes easily to victims.

There are other reasons why we might expect candor to make matters worse. The dominant depictions of minorities are so negative that many who internalize them become demoralized, blame themselves, and cannot speak up vigorously on their own behalf.⁸ Further, the expense of candor in the past precludes the stigmatized from participating effectively. And finally, when they do speak up, minorities have little credibility, they are not listened to, we do not credit them.⁹ Thus there are lots of reasons for thinking that the efforts to encourage candor, on these matters at least, will perpetuate the present economy of candor not upset it.¹⁰

The other danger is that we will inadvertently sanction wrongdoing. If any of the above description rings true, it is because we are, with racism and sexism, on what Chesire Calhoun calls the “frontiers” of moral knowledge.¹¹ When we are dealing with issues on the frontiers of moral knowledge, that is, in situations where we cannot be sure that our moral knowledge is shared, a context in which moral ignorance can be seen as occurring at the social and not just the individual level, then there is the following additional complication. If we want to encourage candor, then I am assuming that we will need to eschew blame. However, if we do eschew blame then we will automatically condone the expression of morally questionable thoughts, feelings and attitudes.¹²

The puritan in me now wants to say that the insistence that we be “pure in thought, word, and deed, as of now” is not wholly misplaced. When we recognize how easy it is to sanction wrongdoing by default on the current moral frontier, then the puritan’s concerns make sense. This insistence stems in part from a frustration with those who fail to see racism and sexism as serious moral issues and not simply matters of etiquette, political fashion, or yet another annoying school policy. The puritan in me is quieted if we grant that racism and sexism are *moral* matters, that speech is indeed a form of moral *behavior*, and that *thoughtless* speech can cause serious harm to others.

Of course, White is right to remind the puritans that, however honorable our intentions, this sort of insistence does often encourage only defensiveness and hypocrisy. We can’t compel moral goodness: we need to nurture it. In this regard adopting, as White suggests, a certain generosity toward human frailty and mistakes is a more likely route to success.

The educator in me recognizes White’s concerns and I can see, upon reflection, that in an educational context candor might have pedagogical value. If we cannot be open about our mistakes, it is unlikely that we will have much opportunity to correct them. If we discourage candor in schools, education risks losing much of its transformative value. It may be, despite all the dangers, that we need to allow more candor about these illicit thoughts and feelings.¹³

But we do need to recast the question. We need to ask, “How can we *safely* practice candor with respect to our morally questionable thoughts and feelings?” How can we help students to deal honestly with their morally questionable attitudes and feelings without increased harm to others?

The educator in me says that, to successfully teach candor, we will need to do more than show generosity for human failing and offer a richer array of possibilities for human flourishing. As I see

it the challenge for the educator who would encourage candor is at least a fourfold one. We must:

First, avoid hubris in thinking that candor, talk and dialogue will allow much correction of serious systemic ills such as racism and sexism.¹⁴ Inasmuch as I was the one who wanted to recognize the instrumental *pedagogical* value of candor, I direct this advice more to myself than to White.

Second, recognize that capacity may be more salient than responsibility. Educators who have the responsibility to encourage candor may not have the capacity to deal with it on the moral frontier. Even if we think that all teachers are obliged to assess and expand their own capacity for this work, many will not yet be capable of it.

Third, we need to note the enormous difficulty involved, not simply from the point of view of the logic of moral language, but the *emotional* difficulty associated with this work. Many who are skilled at peace work still find the task painful. Listen to Cindy Cohen, a Jewish woman, committed to peace work with Palestinian women:

It was good to meet Feryal, but soon I came to see how much baggage I was carrying. I was terrified of her: terrified of the anger which I imagined she would feel towards me as a Jewish person.... There was a visceral desire to keep her at a distance.... It was the terror of fueling anti-Semitism which began to paralyze me as I grappled with the history of the founding of the state of Israel, which I was learning from the Palestinian women. I was afraid not only of betraying my people, I was afraid of betraying my grandparents, these particular people who nurtured me, who, no longer alive, live on in me.¹⁵

Fourth, finally, we must not lose sight of the fact that candor is only one aspect of honesty, and honesty, as White reminds us, ought to be constantly balanced by other ethical values.

Thus, even while encouraging candor we might want to pass on the teaching of the Sufis who advise us:

to speak only after our words have managed to pass through three gates. At the first gate, we ask ourselves, "Are the words true?" If so, we let them pass on; if not, back they go. At the second gate we ask, "Are they necessary?" At the last gate, we ask "Are they kind?"¹⁶

¹ I wish to thank Cindy Cohen and Ann Diller for helpful discussions of the issues raised in this commentary.

² Adrienne Rich, *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence, Selected Prose, 1966-1978* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1979), 194.

³ This way of putting the question comes from Cynthia Cohen, "Removing the Dust From Our Hearts: A Search for Reconciliation in Palestinian and Jewish Women's Narrative," *NWSA Journal* (Fall 1993).

⁴ I am indebted to Cynthia Cohen for this phrase.

⁵ Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic, "Images of the Outsider in American Law and Culture: Can Free Expression Remedy Systemic Social Ills?" *Cornell Law Review* 77, no. 6 (September 1992).

⁶ Delgado and Stefancic, 1278.

⁷ Delgado and Stefancic, 1279.

⁸ For an account of the demoralization of women see Sarah Hoagland, *Lesbian Ethics* (Palo Alto, California: Institute of Lesbian Studies, 1988), and Kathryn Morgan, "Women and Moral Madness," in *Feminist Perspectives: Philosophical Essays on Method and Morals*, ed. L. Code, S. Mullett, and C. Overall (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988).

⁹ There are other factors at work that Delgado and Stefancic also note. Much racism and sexism is a matter of interpretation, and when we have the option we will tend to choose the more comfortable interpretation over others, viz. the one which reduces our guilt and the need for corrective action. Also, we forget how to see racism. We think it is a function of vicious-

willed individuals, we know that neither we nor our friends act against conscience in a vicious-willed way, and so we generalize the wrong lesson from the past: we think that racism has virtually disappeared.

¹⁰ For a fuller defense of this view and discussion of related matters, see *Words that Wound*, ed. M. Matsuda, C. Lawrence, R. Delgado and K. Crenshaw (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1993).

¹¹ Chesire Calhoun, "Responsibility and Reproach," *Ethics* 99, no. 2 (1989).

¹² Barbara Houston, "In Praise of Blame," *Hypatia* 7, no. 4 (Fall, 1992).

¹³ For a fuller discussion see Chesire Calhoun, "Responsibility and Reproach." Calhoun has some pertinent remarks which also show why we cannot simply not blame and correct.

¹⁴ Delgado and Stefancic coin a new fallacy to cover this mistake; they call it the "empathic fallacy." Delgado and Stefancic, 1261.

¹⁵ Cynthia Cohen, *A Passion for Life* (unpublished manuscript).

¹⁶ Quoted from Eknath Easwaran in *The Sun*, issue 203, November 1992, p. 40.
