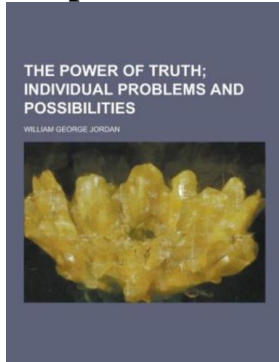


THE POWER OF TRUTH: INDIVIDUAL PROBLEMS AND POSSIBILITIES

By William George Jordan - First Published 1902

Chapter 1: The Power of Truth



TRUTH is the rock foundation of every great character. It is loyalty to the right as we see it; it is courageous living of our lives in harmony with our ideals; it is always—power.

Truth ever defies full definition. Like electricity it can only be explained by noting its manifestation. It is the compass of the soul, the guardian of conscience, the final touchstone of right. Truth is the revelation of the ideal; but it is also an inspiration to realize that ideal, a constant impulse to live it.

Lying is one of the oldest vices in the world—it made its debut in the first recorded conversation in history, in a famous interview in the Garden of Eden. Lying is the sacrifice of honor to create a wrong impression. It is masquerading in misfit virtues. Truth can stand alone, for it needs no chaperone or escort. Lies are cowardly, fearsome things that must travel in battalions. They are like a lot of drunken men, one vainly seeking to support another. Lying is the partner and accomplice of all the other vices. It is the cancer of moral degeneracy in an individual life.

Truth is the oldest of all the virtues; it antedated man, it lived before there was man to perceive it or to accept it. It is the unchangeable, the constant. Law is the eternal truth of Nature—the unity that always produces identical results under identical conditions. When a man discovers a great truth in Nature he has the key to the understanding of a million phenomena; when he grasps a great truth in morals he has in it the key to his spiritual re-creation. For the individual, there is no such thing as theoretic truth; a great truth that is not absorbed by our whole mind and life, and has not become an inseparable part of our living, is not a real truth to us. If we know the truth and do not live it our life is—a lie.

In speech, the man who makes Truth his watchword is careful in his words, he seeks to be accurate, neither understating nor over-coloring. He never states as a fact that of which he is not sure. What he says has the ring of sincerity, the hallmark of pure gold. If he praises you, you accept his statement as “net,” you do not have to work out a problem in mental arithmetic on the side to see what discount you ought to make before you accept his judgment. His promise counts for something, you accept it as being as good as his bond, you know that no matter how much it may cost him to verify and fulfill his word by his deed, he will do it. His honesty is not policy. The man who is honest merely because it is “the best policy,” is not really honest, he is only politic. Usually such a man would forsake his seeming loyalty to truth and would work overtime for the devil—if he could get better terms.

Truth means “that which one troweth or believes.” It is living simply and squarely by our belief; it is the externalizing of a faith in a series of actions. Truth is ever strong, courageous, virile, though kindly gentle, calm, and restful. There is a vital difference between error and untruthfulness. A man may be in error and yet live bravely by it; he who is untruthful in his life knows the truth but denies it. The one is loyal to what he believes, the other is traitor to what he knows.

“What is Truth?” Pilate’s great question, asked of Christ nearly two thousand years ago, has echoed unanswered through the ages. We get constant revelations of parts of it, glimpses of constantly new phases, but never complete, final definition. If we but live up to the truth that we know, and seek ever to know more, we have put ourselves into the spiritual attitude of receptiveness to know Truth in the fullness of its power. Truth is the sun or morality, and like that lesser sun in the heavens; we can walk by its light, live its warmth and life, even if we see but a small part of it and receive but a microscopic fraction of its rays.

Which of the great religions of the world is the real, the final, the absolute truth? We must make our individual choice and live by it as best we can. Every new sect, every new cult, has in it a grain of truth, at least; it is this that attracts attention and wins adherents. This mustard seed of truth is often overestimated, darkening the eyes of man to the untrue parts or phases of the varying religious faiths. But, in exact proportion to the basic truth they contain do religions last, become permanent and growing, and satisfy and inspire the hearts of men. Mushrooms of error have a quick growth, but they exhaust their vitality and die, while truth still lives.

The man who makes the acquisition of wealth the goal and ultimatum of his life, seeing it as an end rather than a means to an end, is not true. Why does the world usually make wealth the criterion of success, and riches the synonym of attainment? Real success in life means the individual’s conquest of himself; it means “how he has bettered himself” not “how he has bettered his fortune.” The great question of life is not “What have I?” but “What am I?”

Man is usually loyal to what he most desires. The man who lies to save a nickel, merely proclaims that he esteems a nickel more than he does his honor. He who sacrifices his ideals, truth and character, for mere money or position is weighing his conscience in one pan of a scale against a bag of gold in the other. He is loyal to what he finds the heavier, that which he desires the more—the money. But this is not truth. Truth is the heart’s loyalty to abstract right, made manifest in concrete instances.

The tradesman who lies, cheats, misleads and overcharges and then seeks to square himself with his anemic conscience by saying, “lying is absolutely necessary to business,” is as untrue in his statement as he is in his acts. He justifies himself with the petty defense as the thief who says it is necessary to steal in order to live. The permanent business prosperity of an individual, a city or a nation rests finally on commercial integrity alone, despite all that the cynics may say, or all the exceptions whose temporary success may mislead them. It is truth alone that lasts.

The politician who is vacillating, temporizing, shifting, constantly trimming his sails to catch every puff of wind of popularity, is a trickster who succeeds only until he is found out. A lie may live for a time, truth for all time. A lie never lives by its own vitality; it merely continues to exist because it simulates truth. When it is unmasked, it dies.

When each of four newspapers in one city puts forth the claim that its circulation is larger than all the others combined, there must be an error somewhere. Where there is untruth there is always conflict, discrepancy, impossibility. If all the truths of life and experience from the first second of time, or for any section of eternity, were brought together, there would be perfect harmony, perfect accord, union and unity, but if two lies come together, they quarrel and seek to destroy each other.

It is in the trifles of daily life that truth should be our constant guide and inspiration. Truth is not a dress-suit, consecrated to special occasions; it is the strong, well-woven, durable homespun for daily living.

The man who forgets his promises is untrue. We rarely lose sight of those promises made to us for our individual benefit; these we regard as checks we always seek to cash at the earliest moment. "The miser never forgets where he hides his treasure," says one of the old philosophers. Let us cultivate that sterling honor that holds our word so supreme, so sacred, that to forget it would seem a crime, to deny it would be impossible.

The man who says pleasant things and makes promises which to him are light as air, but to someone else seem the rock upon which a life's hope is built is cruelly untrue. He who does not regard his appointments, carelessly breaking them or ignoring them, is the thoughtless thief of another's time. It reveals selfishness, carelessness, and lax business morals. It is untrue to the simplest justice of life. Men who split hairs with their conscience, who mislead others by deft, shrewd phrasing which may be true in letter yet lying in spirit and designedly uttered to produce a false impression, are untruthful in the most cowardly way. Such men would cheat even in solitaire. Like murderers they forgive themselves their crime in congratulating themselves on the cleverness of their alibi.

The parent who preaches honor to his child and gives false statistics about the child's age to the conductor, to save a nickel, is not true.

The man who keeps his religion in camphor all week and who takes it out only on Sunday is not true. He who seeks to get the highest wages for the least possible amount of service, is not true. The man who has to sing lullabies to his conscience before he himself can sleep, is not true.

Truth is the straight line in morals. It is the shortest distance between a fact and the expression of it. The foundations of truth should ever be laid in childhood. It is then that parents should instill into the young mind the instant, automatic turning to truth, making it the constant atmosphere of the mind and life. Let the child know that "Truth above all things" should be the motto of its life. Parents make a great mistake when they look upon a lie as a disease in morals; it is not always a disease in itself, it is but a symptom. Behind every untruth is some reason, some cause, and it is this cause that should be removed. The lie may be the result of fear, the attempt to cover a fault and to escape punishment; it may be merely the evidence of an over-active imagination; it may reveal maliciousness or obstinacy; it may be the hunger for praise that leads the child to win attention and to startle others by wonderful stories; it may be merely carelessness in speech, the reckless use of words; it may be acquisitiveness that makes lying the handmaid of theft. But if, in the life of the child or the adult, the symptom be made to reveal the disease, and that be then treated, truth reasserts itself and the moral health is restored.

Constantly telling a child not to lie is giving life and intensity to "the lie." The true method is to quicken the moral muscles from the positive side, urge the child to be honest, to be faithful, to be loyal, and to be fearless to the truth. Tell him ever of the nobility of courage to speak the true, to live the right, to hold fast to principles of honor in every trifle—then he need never fear to face any of life's crises.

The parent must live truth or the child will not live it. The child will startle you with its quickness in puncturing the bubble of your pretended knowledge; in instinctively piercing the heart of a sophistry without being conscious of process; in relentlessly enumerating your unfulfilled promises; in detecting with the justice of a court of equity a technicality of speech that is virtually a lie. He will justify his own lapses from truth by appeal to some white lie told to a visitor, and unknown to be overheard by the little one, whose mental powers we ever underestimate in theory though we may over-praise in words.

Teach the child in a thousand ways, directly and indirectly, the power of truth, the beauty of truth, and the sweetness and rest of companionship with truth.

And if it be the rock-foundation of the child character, as a fact, not as a theory, the future of that child is as fully assured as it is possible for human prevision to guarantee.

The power of Truth, in its highest, purest, and most exalted phases, stands squarely of four basic lines of relations,—the love of truth, the search for truth, faith in truth, and work for truth.

The love of Truth is the cultivated hunger for it in itself and for itself, without any thought of what it may cost, what sacrifices it may entail, what theories or beliefs of a life-time may be laid desolate. In its supreme phase, this attitude of life is rare, but unless one can *begin* to put himself into harmony with this view, the individual will only creep in truth, which he might walk bravely. With the love of truth, the individual scorns to do a mean thing, no matter what be the gain, even if the whole world. He would not sacrifice the sanction of his own high standard for any gain, he would not willingly deflect the needle of his thought and act from the true North, as he knows it, by the slightest possible variation. He himself would know of the deflection—that would be enough. What matters it what the world thinks if he have his own disapproval?

The man who has a certain religious belief and fears to discuss it, lest it may be proved wrong, is not loyal to his belief, he has but a coward's faithfulness to his prejudices. If he were a lover of truth, he would be willing at any moment to surrender, his belief for a higher, better, and truer faith.

The man who votes the same ticket in politics, year after year without caring for issues, men, or problems, merely voting in a certain way because he always has voted so, is sacrificing loyalty to truth to a weak mistaken, stubborn attachment to a worn-out precedent. Such a man should stay in his cradle all his life—because he spent his early years there.

The search for Truth means that the individual must not merely follow truth as he sees it, but he must, so far as he can, search to see that he is right. When the Kearsarge was wrecked on Roncador Reef, the captain was sailing correctly by his chart. But his map was an old one; the sunken reef was not marked down. Loyalty to back-number standards means stagnation. In China they plow today, but they plow with the instrument of four thousand years ago. The search for truth in the angel of progress—in civilization and in morals. While it makes us bold and aggressive in our own life, it teaches us to be tender and sympathetic with others. Their life may represent a station we have passed in our progress, or one we must seek to reach. We can then congratulate ourselves without condemning them. All the truths of the world are not concentrated in our creed. All the sunshine of the world is not focused on our doorstep. We should ever speak the truth,—but only in love and kindness. Truth should ever extend the hand of love; never the hand clenching a bludgeon.

Faith in Truth is an essential to perfect companionship with truth. The individual must have perfect confidence and assurance of the final triumph of right, and order, and justice, and believe that all things are evolving toward that divine consummation, no matter how dark and dreary life may seem from day to day. No real success, no lasting happiness can exist except it be founded on the rock of truth. The prosperity that is based on lying, deception, and intrigue, is only temporary—it cannot last any more than a mushroom can outlive an oak. Like the blind Samson, struggling in the temple, the individual whose life is based on trickery always pulls down the supporting columns of his own edifice, and perishes in the ruins. No matter what price a man may pay for truth, he is getting it at a bargain. The lying of others can never hurt us long, it always carries with it our exoneration in the end. During the siege of Sebastopol, the Russian shells that threatened to destroy a fort opened a hidden spring of water in the hillside, and saved the thirsty people they sought to kill.

Work for the Interest and advancement of Truth is a necessary part of real companionship. If a man has a love of truth, if he searches to find it, and has faith in it, even when he cannot find it, will he not work to spread it? The strongest way for man to strengthen the power of truth in the world is to live it himself in every detail of thought, word, and deed—to make himself a sun of personal radiation of truth, and to let his silent influence speak for it and his direct acts glorify it so far as he can in his sphere of life and action. Let him first seek to *be*, before he seeks to teach or to do, any line of moral growth.

Let man realize that Truth is essentially an *intrinsic* virtue, in his relation to himself even if there were no other human being living; it becomes *extrinsic* as he radiates it in his daily life. Truth is first, intellectual honesty—the craving to know the right; second, it is moral honesty, the higher to live the right.

Truth is not a mere absence of the vices. This is only a moral vacuum. Truth is the living pulsing breathing of the virtues of life. Mere refraining from wrong-doing is but keeping the weeds out of the garden of one's life. But this must be followed by positive planting of the seeds of right to secure the flowers of true living. To the negatives of the Ten Commandments must be added the positives of the Beatitudes. The one condemns, the other commends, the one forbids, the other inspires; the one emphasizes the act, the other the spirit behind the act. The whole truth rests not in either but in both. A man cannot truly believe in God without believing in the final inevitable triumph of Truth. If you have Truth on your side you can pass through the dark valley of slander, misrepresentation and abuse, undaunted, as though you wore a magic suit of mail that no bullet could enter, no arrow could pierce. You can hold your head high, toss it fearlessly and defiantly, look every man calmly and unflinchingly in the eye, as though you rode, a victorious king, returning at the head of your legions with banner waving and lances glistening, and bugles filling the air with music. You can feel the great expansive wave of moral health surging through you as the quickened blood courses through the body of him who is gladly, gloriously proud of physical health. You will know that all will come right in the end, that it *must* come, that error must flee before the great white light of truth, as darkness slinks away into nothingness in the presence of the sunburst. Then, with Truth as your guide, your companion, your ally, and inspiration, you tingle with the consciousness of your kinship with the Infinite and all the petty trials, sorrows and sufferings of the life fade away like temporary, harmless visions seen in a dream.