

Robert Louis Stevenson

The Truth of Intercourse

A Modern Rewrite with Contemporary Commentary
Based on the original essay of 1879

Note on the title: In Stevenson's time, "intercourse" meant human interaction, how we talk, relate, and live with one another. It does not mean sex.

Why Read This?

Because most conflicts don't come from evil intentions, they come from bad translation between two minds. Because we live in a world of texts, emails, DMs, and "receipts," where it's easier than ever to be technically true while still being relationally false. And because Stevenson gives a surprisingly modern idea: real truth in relationships isn't just factual accuracy. It's creating the right understanding in the other person.

"Truth in human relations is hard to seize, and harder to communicate.", Robert
Louis Stevenson

1) “Just Tell the Truth” Sounds Simple. It Isn’t.

There’s a popular idea that goes like this: “Telling the truth is easy. Lying is hard.”

Stevenson says that’s backwards, at least when we’re talking about truth between people.

A lie can be quick. You can toss out something messy and half-made and walk away. But truth is a different animal. If you want to speak it, you have to do two hard jobs: first, you have to find it. Second, you have to say it in a way that lands correctly in another person.

Even in “simple” areas like measuring a room or drawing a map, getting exactness takes instruments and patience. But human truth is harder than that. A mountain stays put. A person’s face changes every second. A relationship changes every week. What you meant yesterday might not be what you mean today.

Core idea

- Truth in relationships is not a trivia fact.
- It’s an accurate description of something living, shifting, and emotional.
- That makes it harder to know, and harder to say.

Modern mirror

- We communicate more often, faster, and in smaller fragments (texts, reactions, short voice notes). Speed is the enemy of precision.
- Online culture rewards “hot takes” and “clapbacks,” not careful truth. The incentives push us toward inexactness.
- Even when we’re being sincere, we’re often speaking while hungry, stressed, rushed, or defensive, basically measuring with a shaking hand.

2) The Worst Lies Aren’t Fake Facts. They’re Fake Selves.

Stevenson draws a line between two kinds of “truth.”

One kind is basic factual truth: “I went to this place.” “I read this book.” “I did this thing.” That kind of honesty matters in certain situations, money, safety, legal stuff. But in everyday friendship and love, Stevenson says something sharper: a person can tell lots of little factual lies and still be “honest” in the way that matters most. And a person can avoid formal lying, never utter a provably false sentence, and still be a lie from top to bottom.

What Stevenson means

- You can be technically accurate and still be emotionally false.
- You can present a face that doesn't match your real feelings.
- That kind of falseness poisons intimacy, because the other person can't actually meet the real you.

This is what he calls “truth to sentiment”, truth to your actual feelings and intentions. Not “blurting everything out.” Not “being brutally honest.” He means: don't fake your heart.

If you say “I'm fine” when you're not, if you act warm while you're secretly resentful, if you perform loyalty while you're quietly undermining someone, that is the kind of lie that breaks relationships.

Modern mirror: curated identity

- Social media makes it easy to build a polished version of yourself: funny you, productive you, political you, spiritual you, fitness you. That isn't automatically bad. But it can become a mask you can't remove.
- “Personal branding” at work can teach people to sound sincere while staying emotionally hidden.
- Dating apps can reward a version of you that gets matches, not the version that would build a life.

3) Most of Life Is “Writing”: Saying What You Mean Is Skilled Work

Stevenson makes a move that feels surprisingly modern: he says the hard part of “literature” isn't putting words on paper. It's putting the right meaning into another mind.

If you've ever sent a message that sounded normal in your head and came out rude, cold, or scary on the other side, you already know what he means. We understand this problem in obvious places: writing a serious letter, drafting a legal document, giving a public speech. But Stevenson says we forget that the same problem fills ordinary life. We live by conversation. We live by explanation. We live by clearing up misunderstandings. Most people are doing “literary labour” every day, whether they notice it or not.

Core idea

- Being understood is not automatic.
- Communication is an art with failure built in.
- The better you are at it, the more freedom and closeness you can have with other people.

He points out something else: public speakers actually have an easier job than you do in an argument with someone you love. A politician can rely on a familiar script. The topic has been talked about a thousand times. But you, trying to explain why you snapped, or why you went quiet, or why a harmless comment hurt you, you might be dealing with a feeling that doesn't even have a good name yet. You might have to invent language for it. That's hard.

Modern mirror: texting is writing under pressure

- A huge amount of modern life happens in writing: Slack, email, texts, DMs, comments, group chats. Even our friendships run on written fragments.
- Writing is slower than speaking, but it also has a special danger: it removes tone, face, and timing, the things that soften meaning.
- That's why minor conflicts can explode after a few messages. You're trying to do "literature" with a blunt instrument.

4) Your Body Tells the Truth Faster Than Your Words, and Screens Steal That

Stevenson gives an important comfort: not all truth depends on perfect wording. Humans have other channels, a change in the voice, a look in the eyes, a gesture, a blush, tears, a laugh that doesn't quite fit. Sometimes those signals carry the heart's meaning more directly than a paragraph ever could. They can stop a misunderstanding before it grows.

He tells a story that still hits today. He once wrote a letter to a friend that nearly caused a quarrel. Later, face to face, he repeated the same "worst" points, and even added worse, and yet it didn't feel unfriendly. The body's tone changed the meaning.

Core idea

- Words alone are often a bad tool for intimacy.
- Tone, timing, and presence carry meaning that text cannot carry.

Modern mirror: the “text war” problem

- Many modern fights are “text wars”: two people trying to solve an emotional problem in a medium that strips emotion out.
- Read receipts, typing indicators, and “seen” can turn silence into a weapon, or a panic trigger.
- Video calls help, but they still flatten the room: you can’t feel someone’s presence the same way.

A practical upgrade Stevenson would probably approve of

- If the conversation is about feelings, try to move it one step closer to the human body: from text → voice note → call → in person.
- Not because text is evil, but because text is low-bandwidth.

5) Some People Can’t Express Themselves. Others Choose a Mask, and the Mask Becomes a Prison.

Stevenson is unusually kind here. He says: it’s sad when someone can’t read faces or voices. But it’s also sad, maybe in a quieter way, when someone has almost no visible signals at all.

Some people don’t show much on their face. They don’t gesture. Their voice stays flat. They don’t have the habit of explaining themselves. If you’re close to someone like that, you often have to learn them slowly through their actions, not their words. Those relationships can still be real. But they may feel “uphill,” because confidence needs a sense of freedom, and it’s hard to feel free when you’re constantly guessing.

Then Stevenson turns the knife. The most unfortunate person isn’t the quiet one. It’s the person who has trained themselves to look like something they’re not, who uses fake tone, fake expressions, “face tricks”, until nobody can read them.

Stevenson’s metaphor

- Your body is like a house with many windows.
- Through those windows you show yourself and invite people in.
- But the masked person replaces the windows with stained glass: beautiful, impressive, but opaque.
- People may admire the performance, yet the person inside remains alone.

Modern mirror: the “irony armor” and the “brand mask”

- Some people live behind irony: everything is a joke, everything is sarcasm, nothing is admitted directly. It looks cool, but it blocks closeness.
- Some people live behind competence: always capable, always fine, always productive. That can be admirable, and also isolating.
- Some people learn masking as survival (work culture, trauma history, being punished for emotion). Stevenson’s point isn’t to shame them. It’s to name the cost: intimacy becomes almost impossible.

6) “Yes / No” Is Not How Human Truth Works

Stevenson says something that will make sense to anyone who has ever had a relationship argument: you can answer questions without lying and still fail to tell the truth.

Why? Because the truth in human life usually isn’t a single clean fact. It’s a shape. It’s a pattern. It’s a feeling with reasons tangled inside it. That’s why he distrusts simple, courtroom-style questions like “Do you forgive me?” or “Is it still the same between us?” or “Do you understand me?” Those questions demand a clean answer, but the real experience is messy. Forgiveness isn’t a switch. Relationships are never “the same” after time passes. Understanding is never complete.

So how do we get closer to the truth? Stevenson says: often we need many attempts. We circle a topic. We try different words. We miss, adjust, miss again. After an hour of back and forth, we finally land one real meaning.

Core idea

- In human talk, you rarely “hit the gold” with one sentence.
- Truth often arrives by repeated approximation, like aiming many arrows until the target is revealed.

Modern mirror: the trap questions

- “Are you mad at me?” can mean: Are you angry? Are you disappointed? Are you tired? Do you feel unsafe? Do you want closeness or space?
- “Are we okay?” can mean: Are you leaving? Are you judging me? Do you still respect me?
- In text, these questions become even sharper, because we can’t see the face that would soften them.

7) The Cruellest Lies Can Be Silent, and “Truth” Can Be Weaponized

“The cruellest lies are often told in silence.”, Stevenson

Stevenson attacks a comforting fantasy: that if you avoid saying false sentences, you are a truthful person. Sometimes the worst betrayal is not what you say. It’s what you refuse to say. A person can sit in a room, say nothing, and still leave behind damage: coldness, disloyalty, quiet contempt.

He points out a very human tragedy: people lose relationships because, at the critical moment, they can’t bring themselves to speak, out of pride, fear, or shame.

Then Stevenson makes an even stranger claim: sometimes a person can tell “the truth” and still lie. How? By giving a piece of truth in a way that creates a false picture. A fact can be technically accurate and still be unfair, because it acts like a smear. It becomes a character attack when it’s used without context or without the balancing truths that would change its meaning.

Stevenson’s key distinction

- Truth-to-facts = saying accurate statements.
- Truth-to-sentiment = conveying the real feeling and meaning of the situation.
- Both matter, but in relationships, truth-to-sentiment is often the deeper form of truth.

“Truth in spirit, not truth to letter, is the true veracity.”, Stevenson

Stevenson says the goal isn’t to speak like a machine. The goal is to convey a true impression to a human being. We are not talking to God, he says, we are talking to someone with moods, fears, and history. To tell the truth well, we sometimes need tact: not to hide reality, but to help reality arrive intact.

Modern mirror: receipts, screenshots, and “technically true” cruelty

- Online, it’s easy to “prove” a point by showing one screenshot, one quote, one clip. The fact might be real, yet the impression can be totally false.
- In group chats, silence can be punishment. Leaving someone on read can be a kind of social violence.
- “I’m just being honest” is often a cover for: “I want to say a hurtful thing without paying the social cost.”

Stevenson also notices that people, especially women in his era, were judged as “less truthful” because they used social tact. His point isn’t that lying is good. It’s that in human relationships, tact can sometimes be the path to a truer outcome, because it protects the relationship while still pointing toward the real feeling.

8) It Takes Two to Speak Truth: The Listener Is Part of the Truth

“It takes two to speak truth, one to speak and another to hear.”, Thoreau (quoted by Stevenson)

Stevenson borrows a line from Thoreau and builds his argument on it. Truth isn’t just something you send. It’s something that has to be received.

A tiny amount of anger, he says, changes the acoustics of the room. The ear becomes hungry for insult. Suspicion turns neutral words into threats. That’s why, after a big fight, even friendly sentences can land badly. People carry themselves at a distance, ready to break the fragile truce.

Then Stevenson says something bold and practical: to speak truth, there must be moral equality, or at least mutual respect. If one person has power and the other has fear, conversation becomes fencing. People stop telling the truth because truth isn’t safe.

Modern mirror: power and “psychological safety”

- At work, people often don’t tell the truth upward. They manage impressions to survive. That isn’t always cowardice, it can be realism in a power imbalance.
- In families, kids often learn to hide. Not because they’re bad, but because honesty feels like it triggers punishment or shame.
- Online, the “listener” is sometimes a hostile crowd. People don’t speak truth, they speak for protection.

Stevenson also notices a painful loop. Parents, or anyone with authority, often hold onto an old picture of someone, formed in childhood or during someone’s worst years. Then they selectively notice facts that confirm the old picture. And once a person feels permanently misjudged, they give up trying to explain themselves. Why bother speaking truth to someone who already decided who you are?

9) In Close Love and Friendship, Truth Can Be Easy, and Also Fragile

Stevenson says: with chosen friends, and even more with lovers, truth is often easier. Not because we become perfect speakers, but because shared life creates shared context. A hint is enough. A look is enough. Even “yes” or “no” can glow with meaning, because the relationship fills in the background.

In the deepest relationships, Stevenson says, speech is sometimes almost discarded. People communicate by presence, by touch, by the body’s language. That’s his romantic point: love can outrun words.

But then he turns serious. It’s exactly in these close relationships, where we most want safety, that we must fight hardest for truth. Because once doubt enters, everything becomes evidence against you.

Stevenson’s dark insight

- When someone starts to suspect betrayal, the past stops being proof of love and becomes proof of deception.
- Your best memories become ammunition against you: “So you were lying the whole time.”
- In that state, you can’t argue your way out. You’re pleading before a deaf tribunal.

Modern mirror: suspicion culture and constant surveillance

- Phones can turn love into investigation. People check “last seen,” location sharing, follows and likes, who watched whose story, how fast someone replies.
- We can collect endless “facts” and still miss the truth of sentiment.
- When anxiety drives the interpretation, every fact becomes suspicious. Stevenson would say: that’s the acoustics problem again, anger and fear distort hearing.

Still, Stevenson is not cynical. He says: in strong affection, these moments are worth weathering. They can end well. Why? Because the real defender isn’t your clever explanation, it’s the love that still exists inside the other person. The advocate is in their own heart.

But he asks a hard question about shallow relationships. If the connection is thin, if people don’t deeply know or love each other, how much truth can we realistically exchange? He says we’re all partly “incompris” (misunderstood). We fawn and posture, trying to do right and doing it wrong. We catch a friendly glance and hope it means more than it can.

His moral (and it’s surprisingly hopeful)

- If you want your heart understood, practise understanding other hearts.
- In human feeling, the gentle judge is the most persuasive speaker.

Summary

Stevenson in 10 plain sentences

- 1) Truth in relationships is harder than people pretend.
- 2) Being “factually correct” isn’t the same as being truthful as a person.
- 3) The deepest lie is to fake your heart while living close to others.
- 4) Communication is skilled work; most of life runs on it.
- 5) Bodies (tone, face, presence) often convey truth better than text.
- 6) Simple yes/no questions can’t capture emotional reality.
- 7) Silence can be a lie, and “true facts” can be used to mislead.
- 8) The goal is a true impression in the other person, truth in spirit, not just letter.
- 9) It takes two to speak truth; a hostile listener makes truth impossible.
- 10) To be understood, practise understanding, be a gentle judge.

*Based on Robert Louis Stevenson’s essay “Truth of Intercourse” (1879),
from his collection Virginibus Puerisque.
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