

## **How to Be Accountable with Your Words - excerpt from *Loving Corrections***

I have been longing for a real world, a true world, an honest world. I suspect our survival as a species depends upon us being able to remember what is real. And so, we must also find language that sheds light on the truth, on the conditions that are unfolding, and on what is.

We are in a period of history where it is difficult to speak and sense the truth. In our twenty-four-hour news cycle, the truth is spun and remixed, dramatized, and tweeted. It can be confusing to determine what stories are real, what stories impact our lives, what is worth our attention, and what, once heard, we are accountable for acting upon. Many of us now find our attention directed by social media trends and algorithms. As I write this piece, there is an incredible direct action unfolding, as scientists around the world lock themselves to the doors of their institutions, begging us to attend to the acute climate catastrophe unfolding. But I am watching that storyline be swallowed by celebrity news and other dramas.

Distraction and redirection have become a field of specialization.

Professionals in every field and political distinction are constantly calculating new ways to manipulate us into making decisions that serve their clients, their values, their politics, and their pockets. This focus-grouped messaging doesn't come with a label, even though it's the GMO of communications.

There is also so much complexity of perspective in how human life unfolds—the reality is that there is no single truth. Context is everything. Power dynamics, cultural experiences, class norms, and age can all radically impact what we understand to be the truth.

And then there's the emotionality of language. I have been guilty of using hyperbolic language when caught up in a moment of anger or despair, language that oversimplifies or outsizes the truth in ways that can either reduce or oversell the narrative of what is actually happening.

So how, in these times, do we “speak truth to power,” as our civil rights ancestor Bayard Rustin encouraged us to do? How do we speak honestly about where and how we are right now, and what we actually need to center in our organizing? How do we learn to “be impeccable with our words,” as Toltec wisdom through Don Miguel Ruiz advises in his outstanding text *The Four Agreements*?<sup>[28](#)</sup>

I want to offer some of what I am learning—as a human, as a facilitator and mediator, and as a writer.

### **Fact-check everything.**

Every source of information isn't equal, especially in the realm of social media. Before passing information along, consider the source. Do they have expertise in a relevant field? Is the information well researched? Does it include the voices of organizers actively working on the

issue? What about communities directly impacted by the issue? Is the source a journalistic outlet committed to fact-checking?

### **Speak as precisely as possible . . .**

Especially when sharing information others really need to hear. I remember a poetry teacher telling me to “Write it. Now cut it in half. Now cut in half again.” As a verbose writer in love with words, I struggle with precision of communication. But in both intimate and collective moments of accountability and negotiation, I find it helps to take a deep breath before I speak and to think about what precisely needs to be communicated.

### **Discern.**

Is this the right time for this communication? Is it urgent, or is there time to ask questions and fact-check? If it is urgent—why? Who says so? And who benefits from the information being spread? Do you want them to benefit? Could someone be harmed by that information spreading? Do you want to harm or punish them? Are there other perspectives to consider? What are the potential impacts of this communication? Are those impacts you want to be accountable for?

### **Speak when we are afraid.**

I used to think that if I could not speak without my feelings showing—for instance, speak without a tremor in my voice when I was afraid, or without tears when I felt sad—that I should be quiet, and wait until the emotion passed. But I have been learning that my most powerful words are often accompanied by the release of tears, or the quaking of my gut as fear moves words out of my mouth. When I take the risk of speaking not through or over my emotions but rather in alignment with, or even from, my emotions, I am speaking my truth.

### **Speak truth that allows other truths. Hold strong boundaries against mistruths, lies, and assumptions.**

Not every perspective is equal, nor does every viewpoint deserve to be equally held or considered. None of us holds a definitive truth, and we need to speak with each other in ways that make room for a multitude of experiences. But we must set a standard of not indulging lies and willful mistruths. For instance, any indulgence of denial of the current climate catastrophe is dangerous for us as a species. We need to be clear and consistent in our standards for truth and stop uplifting perspectives that cannot survive a fact-check.

### **Speak from our own experiences.**

We are each responsible for bringing our piece into the great story of our species, which is a long and complex story. Just because something feels true for you doesn’t mean it resonates for everyone. Relinquish control of the collective narrative—we are not meant to dictate and control each other. Live into your truth and allow others to live into theirs.

### **Speak as a body.**

One thing that is helping me in my unlearning of dishonesty culture and cultivating the muscles for honest, accountable speech is really listening to my body as I listen to others, and as I

communicate. The body is often aware of the gap in integrity, whether it is in another or in us—the space between what’s being said and the truth. Start to pay more attention to how your body lets you know that what you are hearing or reading might not be true. I feel it in my belly. I have a good friend whose palms get a little sweaty, and another who feels a twinge in her spine.

**Speak what is kind, necessary, and true.**

I learned this from Buddhism, and it is one of the simplest and most effective tools for accountable speech that I have ever come across. It only works as a balance. Truth without kindness can veer into cruelty. Truth that is unnecessary can cause harm. Kind speech that is unnecessary or untrue is infantilizing, patronizing, and diminishing the person you speak to. Necessary truth spoken without kindness can land as a blow that produces a defensive response, rather than an opening for connection and action. This is just some of what I have learned—and I am still learning. Like many of you, I suspect, I am not just navigating our current culture of communication confusion but also recovering from cultures of politeness, passive-aggressive speech, repressed truths, and the webs of deceit and distrust woven into many of our cultures. Commit to using language in ways that shed light. This is a time when we cannot afford to live in the fog of dishonesty. Our future depends on being able to turn and face what is, and being honest about what we are going to do to survive.

28. [\*Don Miguel Ruiz, The Four Agreements\*](#) (San Rafael, CA: Amber-Allen Publishing), 47.