THE HUMAN QUESTION
with Sharon Higgins
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Which Truth Is Safe to Tell?

How do our responses to uncomfortable truths shape what people are willing to tell us?

A king with one eye commissioned three artists to paint his portrait. The first artist painted him exactly as he was: one eye. The king had him executed. The second artist had just watched the first man's funeral, so he painted the king with two eyes. The king called him a liar and had him punished. The third artist, having seen what happened to the first two, painted the king in profile, good eye forward. The king loved it and paid him handsomely.

There is a saying: "Speak the truth, but leave immediately after." It makes us smile because we recognize the danger. We praise honesty in principle, yet the person who practices it may still need an exit.

I was taught this as a story about clever perspective: hide the weakness, show the strength. Lately, I think it's a story about four people with problems.

The first artist told the truth to a man with an executioner on retainer. Maybe he misjudged his audience. But misjudging an audience shouldn't be a capital offense.

The second artist lied, and who could blame him? But notice that the king didn't accept flattery either. He could smell it. Flatterers tend to forget that part.

The third artist is the hero of the story, and the one I find most complicated. Everything he painted was true. He simply chose which truth to leave off the canvas. Was that tact, artistic judgment, concealment, or survival? The story doesn't say, and the king didn't ask.

Choosing an angle isn't automatically dishonest. A friend doesn't critique your toast as you stand up to give it. But waiting for the right moment is different from never finding one. Kindness can become a way to spare someone scrutiny they need, and the line between care and concealment is rarely marked.

Then there's the king. He punished the truth, punished the lie, and rewarded the angle. It's tempting to say he wanted honesty, just from a flattering side. But the story tells us only what he rewarded. He may have wanted honesty, or beauty, or obedience, or simply relief from looking at something he disliked.

What the story does show is that the four were not equally free. The painters were choosing how to survive.

The king had already set the price of honesty.

Few of us keep an executioner. Our versions of the king's response are quieter. We interrupt. We get defensive. We go a little cold for the rest of the afternoon. Or we simply stop asking that person what they think. Nobody is punished, exactly. But the next portrait comes back in profile.

Many of us will recognize ourselves in more than one of these roles. For a long time, I shot from the hip. If I was right, I said so plainly. In time, I learned that being right about something does not settle how, when, or why to say it. Later, I learned that compassion is not the same as softening. Sometimes it means staying with someone while they face something painful. That is why this story stays with me. I once read it as a lesson in perspective. Now I wonder what makes people feel they must hide something to protect themselves.

I have been the first painter, and I have learned to be the third. The harder question is how often I have been the king.

We choose our angles carefully, and we teach the people around us which angles are safe to show us.

Honesty is not cruelty. Truth doesn't excuse humiliation, poor timing, or needless harshness. But discomfort alone doesn't make an observation unkind. And being open to an unwelcome truth doesn't mean agreeing with it. It means letting someone finish, considering what they said, and answering without making them pay for having said it. You can still conclude they're wrong. What matters is whether they would tell you again.

A portrait from the front isn't automatically more truthful than a profile. Every portrait selects. The question is whether the people around us can tell us something unwelcome and still remain welcome themselves.

Who in your life is still allowed to paint you from the front?

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