

Commentary: Why straight talk is hard to deliver but so necessary

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Tamir Kalifa Demonstrators gather at Austin City Hall for a “March for Truth” rally demanding an independent investigation into the Trump administration’s possible ties to Russia on June 3.

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We now live more and more in a world of alternative facts. True straight talk about matters that are crucial to living good, satisfying, fruitful and socially responsible lives is hard to come by.

Perhaps it has been so ever since our Declaration of Independence declared as “self-evident truths” that “all men are created equal . . . with certain unalienable rights” and “that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.”

These words still mean different things to different people. We waited close to century for the Emancipation Proclamation to begin to make the first truth seem not patently false. And 150 years later, it still takes courageous voices to assert the first truth in declaring that “black lives matter.”

Truths are hard to look at, accept and promulgate because they are often not comforting or bring only cold comfort. Truth forces us to confront our shortcomings and see the failings of our society. It is easier to live with illusions.

Poet William Carlos Williams was a doctor serving working-class patients in New Jersey. His deep feelings for their human suffering living lives with no way out made him write in a poem that it is difficult to get the truthful news “from poems, yet men die miserably every day for lack of what is found there.” Truth told can help, even save us.

I long have had Williams’ poetry in my heart, so I was not all that surprised to read in Vietnam veteran poet and writer W.D. Ehrhart’s essay on “Korean War Poetry in the Context of Twentieth Century War Poetry,” that from World War II onward American soldier poets look at war realistically. They “wrestle with the horrors and ambiguities of war.” And they mourn that human beings never learn what they should have learned during past wars.

Soldier poets give us truths about our wars. Even our truly “good war” — World War II — is “butchery and mayhem and stupidity and madness” for those involved. With Korea, Vietnam and later military ventures, “anger, rage and despair” about the aims of our use of armed force become conspicuous.

Ehrhart declares, much like Williams, that poems are the only places where soldiers can tell the truth. Why? Because, as he explains elsewhere, very few people read poems. A best-selling novel will sell hundreds of thousands of copies. A hit film will have millions of viewers. But “our best Pulitzer Prize-winning poets are lucky to sell 4,000 copies.” In other words, you can tell the truth if no one is listening.

There is a crying need for more straight talk — and it need not be offensive. Take, for example, the tragic stabbing death of UT student Harrison Brown on campus on May 1. In class later that week, I asked my students if they felt safe on campus. They all said “yes.”

I told them that they shouldn’t feel safe. The “we’re safe” mantra of the administration lulls them into thinking that an easily accessible campus in the middle of a major urban area is as safe as a backyard in a gated community. In reading about the violence the day Brown was stabbed, students thought it was all some kind of social media make-believe and did nothing to alert nearby students to the danger. If they had not been made to feel unrealistically totally safe, they would certainly have responded differently.

Likewise, when UT student Colton Tooley came to campus on Sept. 28, 2010, fired an automatic weapon into the air at nobody and then committed suicide, he was called a shooter — and the central administration praised the SWAT teams for making the campus secure, even though they came onto campus well after any killing that Tooley could have done if he truly had been a “shooter.”

Little has been done to institutionalize two campus safety truths in faculty, staff and students: the danger signals that might prevent tragic suicides like Tooley’s; and the ease with which anyone intent on violence can do real harm on campus if we are not on the lookout for warning signs.

Parents and their children all know that one of the truest forms of love is tough love. The truest truths, too, are tough truths.

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