

Notes on Tell all the truth but tell it slant - by Emily Dickinson

While much has been made of Emily Dickinson's reclusiveness—and she was a little... hermit-like in the latter half of her life—the truth is (and that's kind of the point of this poem) that we just don't know a ton about Dickinson's personal life. What we do know: she had a conservative Christian upbringing in Amherst, Massachusetts; was well educated; was close to her family and select friends; and loved tootsie roll pops (okay so we made that last one up). Most importantly (for us, at least), Emily wrote approximately 1800 poems from 1858 to 1865 and bound many of them in tiny booklets called fascicles. Most of these poems—including "Tell all the truth but tell it slant"—were published (starting in 1890) after her death from kidney disease in 1886. She was 56 years old.

In those tiny booklets were small poems of typically short lines, scattered with long dashes that explored big ideas—like, really big. We're talking ideas like pain, death, grief, love, and Truth, with a capital T. And Truth is what this poem is scratching at. So you see, what sense of exploration Dickinson lacked in her daily life she made up for tenfold in her poetry.

To read a Dickinson poem is a kind of exploration. Now hang on a second; put down your pith helmets. It's not at all like reading a travel log that chronicles adventures in different parts of the world. Instead, it's an exploration of the places we can't see, a metaphysical exploration. Before you get too bummed out, we'd say that this works out for us, and not just because we don't have to pay astronomical travel expenses. We can do all the exploring in our minds, which is an adventure Dickinson craved and tried to achieve through poetry. Describing her experience with poetry, she once wrote, "I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off." Hold on to your hats (and helmets), folks. This poem might just blow your mind.

WHY SHOULD I CARE?

You want the truth? You can't handle the truth!. Jack Nicholson made these words famous over a hundred years after Emily Dickinson explored the very same idea in this poem. The truth—for better or worse—is a powerful thing. And while it may have been hammered into your brain at a very young age that telling the truth is one of the most important lessons you will ever learn, growing up you might have noticed that a) sometimes the truth hurts, and-or b) it's better if you carefully consider how to deliver it. Sure you may want to lay down a serious truth smack with an iron hand, but you gotta wrap it in a velvet glove, right?

For example: "Do these jeans make me look fat?" If the answer is "yes," a friend might not let you walk out the door wearing them, but a good friend will also make sure you don't feel terrible about yourself. Maybe he'll respond: "Jeggings are too weird for words. What's the point of fake pockets?" See that? Your friend has successfully delivered the truthful message that the jeans (scratch that, everyone knows jeggings aren't jeans) don't look good on you, but he hasn't called you fat. You just got a dose of some almighty, powerful truth... told slant—that is, not so bluntly that it knocks you out. Because even if we all want the truth—Jack's right—it can be pretty hard to handle sometimes.

This poem is not told in an A-to-B sort of way. It's more of a musing without any particular direction or specific sense of time. In it, Dickinson explores the power of the truth and how best to tell it. The poem opens with instructions: "Tell all the truth but tell it slant—" and winds back and forth around that idea (with a good strong comparison thrown smack dab in the middle of it) for the full length of the poem. Mostly the poem is a meditation on the dazzling awesomeness of

the truth and how to get it across without completely bowling people over or blowing their minds out of their earholes.

Line 1

Tell all the Truth but tell it slant—

Dickinson opens right up with a command. "Hey, you. Do this," she says, and "do it this way." Maybe that's a little bossy or bold for a first line, but she certainly grabs our attention. The first line is basically telling us to tell the whole truth (what, are we on the stand, here?). This probably isn't anything new.

We've all heard our parents or teachers ask us to tell the whole truth before.

What is different is that second part of the line: "but tell it slant—" Slant means, well, at an angle, not straight. So if we were to follow the directions of the first line, we'd be telling the whole truth, but not in a straight-up or direct sort of way.

We should also mention that Dickinson kicks off this poem with two of her signature stylistic choices: capitalized words and long dashes. If you read a lot of Dickinson, you'll notice these two things dominate the page. What exactly their purpose is is up for some debate.

In this line you'll see she's capitalized "Truth," even though it's not a proper noun and it's not the beginning of a sentence. So why bother? We'll have to see how it develops throughout the poem, but it certainly calls attention to the word. Maybe she's using the caps for emphasis—like, heads up, focus here people, pay attention!

The dash has tripped up just about every critic and scholar since the publication of Dickinson's poetry, and your guess as to why she used it so frequently is probably as good as theirs. She often used it in place of conventional punctuation (like a period), though she did sometimes use conventional punctuation, too. The dash, as far as we can tell, works to both punctuate a phrase and propel readers to the next. So, we know to stop or pause at the dash, but it also works as kind of an arrow (just without the pointy tip), ushering us on to the next line.

Line 2

Success in Circuit lies

We get from the first line that we're not supposed to tell the whole truth directly (according to this poem), and this line lets us know how we are supposed to tell it, specifically "in Circuit."

By "in Circuit" we think Dickinson might mean to tell the truth in a roundabout way (not with electricity). Instead of blurting the truth out, you should dance around it gracefully instead (or just shuffle, if you can't dance), and that will deliver the message more successfully.

Notice how Dickinson arranges this second line. She uses an inverted syntax (the rearranging of the normal order of words).

Instead of saying, more directly, "Success lies in Circuit," she flips it around to create a more musical, though more puzzling, sound. And of course, she's doing just what she's talking about. She's not saying it directly; she's dancing around the phrase gracefully as she delivers it. That's some fancy footwork, Ms. D.

"Circuit" is capitalized just like "Truth" is in the previous line. We should add "Circuit" to our VIP words and ideas list for this poem.

Line 3

Too bright for our infirm Delight

Vocab alert: "infirm" means physically or mentally weak. Here, Dickinson uses "infirm" to describe "Delight" (another capped word to add to the VIP list). So delight, in the context of this poem, is a fragile thing.

Dickinson introduces a pronoun in this third line: "our." So we know the poem is told from the first person plural perspective (we, us, our, ours). But who does "our" represent? Does the speaker have a mouse in her pocket (and we're just assuming it's a she, since we have no other evidence). So far we've explored some big, but general, ideas. Our guess is that this is a very inclusive and general "our" that's designed to represent, well, everyone—all of us. That means you, too.

Line 4

The Truth's superb surprise

Yipes. The shock of the truth is too much to handle directly. Kind of like the sun, it's way too powerful to look at directly. This is why you've got to be clever about how you deliver the truth (remember, "Success in Circuit lies—").

Dickinson describes the truth as a "superb surprise," which both sounds nice (because of the sibilance, or alliteration of the S sound—check out "Sound Check" for more) and, well, is nice. We don't have to do a lot of guesswork to consider a superb surprise a good thing. If the truth is a superb surprise, then it seems Dickinson considers it a good thing. If it's a good thing, then why can't it be delivered directly? Well, good or bad, the truth can pack a pretty powerful punch, party people. So regardless of the fact that the truth, in this poem, is considered a positive thing, it still needs to be dealt out in a careful manner.

One last thing before we head on: did you notice any kind of regular rhythm and rhyme to these first four lines? Lines 1 and 3 should sound like daDUM daDUM daDUM daDUM, while lines 2 and 4 are more daDUM daDUM daDUM. Don't worry; there's a method to all this daDUMing madness. Check out "Form and Meter" for more.

As well, notice that lines 2 and 4 have perfect end rhyme ("lies" and "surprise"), while lines 1 and 3 have a very slight slant rhyme ("slant" and "Delight").

Line 5

As Lightning to the Children eased

The first word of this line tips us off that Dickinson is using simile. A simile is a way to compare one thing to another, using "like" or "as." It looks like we're only getting the first bit of it on this line, though. We'll have to keep reading to see how the comparison unfolds. For now, what we do see are more capped words—"Lightning" and "Children." Looks like they're VIPs in a poem about truth, too, but we can't be sure why just yet. Onward,

Line 6

With explanation kind

Now we have the full comparison before us. Dickinson compares how telling the truth in a delicate (and slant) way can make it easier for us to handle is just like how explaining what lightning is and how it works can take the fear out of it for children.

There's also a comparison within a comparison thing happening here. Dickinson's comparing the truth to lightning. Lightning is powerful, bright, beautiful—and also a little terrifying sometimes. Dickinson thinks the truth has a lot of the same stuff going on. She's also comparing the "us" in the poem (presumably a universal "us," as in all of us, even your Aunt Tillie) to children.

Children are sometimes considered innocent (well, maybe until you've actually hung out with a two year old and seen how much damage they can really do), sensitive, and easy to overwhelm. We can see the likeness to "us" and children in the third line with "infirm Delight." We're fragile, too, not unlike children sometimes, especially when it comes to super-powerful things like the Truth.

Truth, here, needs to be dished out in an even-handed way, the way you would hold a child's hand through a mini-lecture on lightning.

Line 7

The Truth must dazzle gradually

If the truth is as powerful as this poem says it is, it's best not to take it all in at once, but instead as Dickinson advises, gradually. Think about some crazy hot sauce. A drop is delicious, but it's powerful. There'd be no way you could take down an entire bottle in a sitting. The truth is kind of like hot sauce that way: tasty, but in small doses.

"Dazzle" has two definitions that make sense in this context. The first is to amaze. The truth is definitely capable of being amazing, especially in this poem where it's put on quite the pedestal. The second definition of "dazzle" is to temporarily blind—you might be dazzled by headlights, or a massive diamond. The truth, in this poem, has been compared to lightning (which, if you stand too close, is also dazzling), so this definition works, too.

Line 8

Or every man be blind—

There you go. If you take the truth in all at once (or if someone gives it to you all at once), you'd be over-dazzled and go blind.

Bad times.

Okay, so maybe you wouldn't actually go blind, but it would be way too much to take in. You'd be bowled over by its awesome be-dazzling power. Boom.

In order for us sensitive humans to "handle the truth" (as Jack Nicholson would say) it needs to be doled out in small bits, and delicately, maybe even in a circuitous way.

Dickinson ends this poem, like many of her others, with a dash rather than a more final punctuation mark, like a period. We'd say that this gives the poem a sense of continuation.

When you use a period, you're shutting the door. The dash suggests that we can keep it open.

We can keep talking about the poem, the truth, whatever. Emily Dickinson was kind enough not to slam the door in our faces, just like she was kind enough not to zap our eyeballs out with some super-awesome Truth bolts.