

TO BE PERFECTLY HONEST

One Man's Year of Living Truthfully Could Change Your Life. No Lie.

ALMOST



PHIL CALLAWAY

Author of *Laughing Matters*

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Details in some anecdotes and stories have been changed to protect the identities of the persons involved.

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*For all who lived near me during this wonderful,
traumatic year. Especially my forgiving friends.
I did not make my friends; my friends made me.*

CONTENTS

Prologue: The Truth Dare	1
1 Starting Blocks	5
2 The Lost Art of Confrontation	15
3 How to Tell the Truth and Still Have a Place to Sleep	29
4 With Friends Like These	45
5 A Wretch Like Me	54
6 Looking for a Sign	65
7 Angels for Christmas	82
8 Chasing Money, Chasing Grace	96
9 A Thawing, Outside and In	111
10 My Judgment Day	125
11 Up and Away	142
12 Insomnia, Mormons, and More Angels	162
13 Safe at Home	179
Epilogue: Life After the Truth Experiment	188
Discussion Questions: Talking About Telling the Truth	192
Notes	210

The Truth Dare

Some phone calls change your Saturday; some your entire year. When my editor called, he couldn't have known he would accomplish both.

"I've had an idea for a while," said Ron. "It will make for a great book, and you're just the guy to write it."

I'm human. I was flattered.

"Is it about understanding women?" I asked. "About being sensitive to my wife's needs?"

"Why?"

"I'm good at those things, Ron. I am most excellent."

"Are you telling the truth?"

"Uh...why do you ask?"

"Well, that's what this book is about: complete and total honesty. I want you to see if you can tell the whole truth and nothing but the truth for an entire year."

"I'm sorry," I said, "you're breaking up on this end." (I pretended to hang up, and judging from the prolonged silence, he thought I had.) The truth is, as my Native American friend Roy likes to say, I had reservations.

For some, a lieless year would be an easy assignment. Their

natural habitat is the truth. Not me. I lie for a living. Oh, I'm not a used-car salesman or a politician. Nor do I write copy for bank advertisements. It's worse. I am a humorist. I stand in front of audiences and tell stories. These stories are 99 $\frac{3}{4}$ percent true—at least as far as I can remember. But sometimes I add just enough salt to keep a tale savory, just enough falsehood to keep people interested. Some of the things I describe may not technically have happened, but they might just as well have.

After pretending to get back on the line, I leaked all this information to Ron as if he were my priest. He seemed to listen attentively, though he could have been working a crossword puzzle, texting his wife, or reading e-mail. I told him the assignment would be complicated by the fact that I have been a chronic fudger all my life. Most people don't know this because I have become so adept at it. I fudge that I'm fudging.

And to be honest with you, I learned it at church. The church my family was part of seemed to reward falsehood. Nothing seemed to be more important than a person's outward appearance, so from an early age, I learned to fake my faith. Whenever anyone asked, I'd claim that I'd been having my devotions. I'd sing "I love to tell the story...of Jesus and His love" when I would sooner have had my eyebrows plucked by spider monkeys than talk to anyone about God.

Our church embraced an impossible system of rules, which was rigged to render you miserable, no matter what you did. Ignore the rules and you were guilt-ridden. Follow them to the letter and you ended up either self-righteous or sporting a nervous twitch. As a result, I bathed my answers to adult questions in what they preferred to hear.

"What have you been up to, Philip?" The truthful answer was, "When I haven't been coveting or gossiping, I've been lusting. And, honestly, I kind of enjoy all three." But instead I'd say, "Just struggling to memorize the gospel of John, brother."

Ron quite enjoyed hearing my confession, and instead of being discouraged by it all, he was more convinced than ever that I was the perfect author for the project. I mentioned once again that history did not weigh in on the side of my success. “My ancestors were horse traders, Ron. They sold slow animals then got out of town fast.”

“You’re our guy!” he said, and we hung up.



I still wasn’t sold on the idea, but I couldn’t stop thinking that I would love to read such a book.

If someone else wrote it.

Following someone’s yearlong experiment in telling the truth wouldn’t just entertain me, it may change my thinking and—if the author were honest, vulnerable, and wise—inspire me with hope. I mentioned the book idea to friends who have known me for years. I said, “I am considering taking a truth vow.” Without exception, their eyebrows shot up to their bangs, though one said, “Isn’t that a bit like giving up arson for Lent?”

Yeah, sort of. But that didn’t stop me from accepting the challenge. And in no time I encountered the first major drawback. Having shared openly that I was now solely a truth-telling individual, I found that some of my friends insisted on getting a straight answer to things they’d wondered about since fourth grade.

“So,” one asked, “do you remember in 1983 when we rented *Rocky III* and I bought taco chips and root beer and you said you’d pay me back later?”

“I’m not sure. Is that the one with ‘Eye of the Tiger’?”

“Did you pay me back?”

“Probably not,” I said, handing him five bucks. I hadn’t written a word, and already I was out of pocket. How much would all this honesty cost me?

Other questions troubled me even more, like could I stay happily married while being completely honest with my wife? Would people pelt me with ethical dilemmas? What are the side effects to subjecting myself to sodium Pentothal injections for a year? How honest should I be in a book about my struggles with faith, family, and the challenges of life?

In the end I agreed to write this book for the same reason some people watch NASCAR on television. I was eager to see what would become of me. Would my life change? Would I crash?

“You sure I can’t write about my expertise in understanding women?” I begged Ron during our next phone call.

“Nope,” he replied. “Come on, Callaway, you can do this. Tell the truth and shame the devil. Besides, I want to read it.”

And with those words, the most intriguing year of my life began.

AUTHOR’S NOTE

This book is a work of fact. I have, however, taken two liberties. First, I engaged in minor chronological adjustments. Second, a handful of names and minor details were changed so that I may continue to live in peace and go out in public without incident in the small community I call home. I suppose a nomadic lifestyle would be ideal for an author. You could breeze into town, point out people’s inconsistencies and hypocrisies, then hightail it out of there before they discover how inconsistent and hypocritical you are. The first draft of *To Be Perfectly Honest* contained all the actual names and places, and it was really quite fun. But I realized it’s like a Wal-Mart greeter pointing people to Target. Not smart.

Starting Blocks

A lie is an abomination unto the Lord,
and a very present help in trouble.

—ADLAI STEVENSON

Day 1. Things are going excellently well. Have yet to tell a half truth, skirt the perimeter of a lie, or fudge at all. Haven't lusted, coveted, stolen, or even entertained an angry thought. The dog is licking my face, though. It's time to open both eyes and get out of bed.

Day 2. Summertime. Breakfast-on-the-front-deck time. My wife, Ramona, lavished her love on me by preparing a peanut butter on rye and waiting until I finished munching before kindly entreating me to cut the grass.

"No problem," I said, then realized I'd uttered my first lie. So I amended my previous statement.

"I'm sorry. It is a problem, but I'll do it."

She grinned and rolled her eyes. "This is gonna be a long year, isn't it?"

Cutting grass does not offer a chance to lie about anything, but you can break several other commandments while chasing a lawn mower. The one about coveting, for instance. My neighbor Neil

keeps his grass tourist green, like a refurbished Disney cartoon. He frames his yard with a perfectly rounded hedge, and the diagonal lines in his lawn are ruler straight, like Wrigley Field. How does he do this? With GPS?

Mowing my lawn is also a recipe for anger, and not just anger at myself for not moving the stupid garden hose before I ran over it. For some reason repetitive behavior brings out the worst in me. While my mind is on autopilot, it rarely steers me toward the “whatsoever things” of Scripture.¹ Instead, I think of people who wronged me back in elementary school or a nasty note that arrived last week. I think of seeking vengeance on my enemies, of pouring weedkiller on their lawns or damaging their reputations with anonymous leaflets dropped from light aircraft.

Some people have imaginary friends. When I cut the grass, I have imaginary enemies. I fabricate conversations in which I deliver brilliant responses to their accusations. More than any place else, it is my own backyard where I have to wonder: am I even a Christian?

What I need is a diversion, and sure enough...

Two men are coming up the walk, sporting suits and ties. It's Saturday, for Pete's sake. I power down my Briggs and Stratton. The visitors have nametags and introduce themselves and offer me their scriptures. Try as I might, I can't resist the thing that is welling up inside me. I know I shouldn't, but I do. I stretch out my hands—not to take the book they are offering, but to do some fake sign language. I point to my ears and shake my head and mouth the word “deaf.”

“I guess he's deaf,” says the smarter one. They smile, frown, then walk away.

I think they know I can hear. (The headphones from my iPod might have tipped them off.)

I'll bet they're talking about what a complete pagan I am. A guy who is such a hard-core liar that he doesn't even need words. A guy who is so beyond hope that even if I applied for membership and

confessed and had references, they would deny me entry into their church.

How will I ever make it even one day without lying? I've already lied and it's only Saturday. At least everything I've written so far is true.

Everything except the part about the Mormons. While it's true that I was mowing my lawn on a Saturday and thinking terrible things, I imagined the part about acting deaf and dumb, which I'm sure would really be fun. What a tragedy to have such a great story roadblocked by the truth.

Is it too late to start over on this book project? Why not? Tomorrow can be day one.

Day 1b. Nothing much to report. A really good day. I had a horrible canker on the inside of my lip, and it hurt like a shark bite when I talked. Perhaps that helped. No lies today. Church was quite good, the worship music a nice blend of old and new. The sermon was brief but meaty.

Afterward, Henry asked me to head up the adult Sunday school department, and I said, "No. I can't." That's all. I didn't concoct an elaborate excuse involving illness, death, or a son's imaginary tuba recital.

I'm really optimistic. I think this project is doable.

Day 2b. An acquaintance from the Deep South sent me an e-mail. I asked if he had any good possum recipes. He asked if it's cold where I live. "It's warm now," I told him, "but in the winter, the men huddle around in a tight circle, holding our children on our feet." He didn't get it. I guess he's never seen *March of the Penguins*.

Is it a lie if you're obviously joking? This could be a long year if it is.

Day 3. Living truthfully delivers clear benefits, like not having to keep my lies straight. I told my buddy Regi about my truth project, and he asked if it was okay to tell others about it. He meant

people who have known me through the years, people who may want to contact me with questions. I told him sure, it was no problem.

“Are you really going to do this?” he asked.

“Of course I am.”

“Will you tell the absolute truth about anything I ask you?”

“Of course I will.”

Regi said we should get together for coffee. Should be fun, though there are things I’d rather not talk about. What if he asks about the time—? Naw. He wouldn’t dare. But I wonder: when a friend asks you about past events, can you just say, “Pass,” like you’re a baseball player testifying before Congress?

Days 4, 5. Very little to report. Told nothing but the truth and barely flinched.

Day 6. Saw a Jerry Seinfeld quote: “I think that people who read the tabloids deserve to be lied to.”

Day 7. My mother-in-law asked if I’d like to come over for supper. Questions like this one can be problematic. Rather than answer immediately, should I ask her to rephrase her question? And what will I say if Ramona asks, “Sweetheart, do the horizontal stripes on this outfit make me look husky?”

And it’s not just family either. I have friends who are starting to ask hard questions. Do I tell a friend who struggles with his weight that when he walks past, it looks like two leopards are wrestling in his pants? Certainly not. All truth is not to be told at all times. And frankly, who has time to answer everyone’s questions with a lot of detail? So maybe I should change the message on my answering machine: “I’ve reached that time of life when I’ve decided to make some changes. If you don’t hear back from me, I guess you’re one of the changes.”

I’ll give it some thought.

Day 8. Great sermon today, but suddenly my mind did a right turn, and I was thinking about all the fun I like to have on the

phone. Will my truth vow prohibit me from playing jokes while using a Chinese accent?

Day 9. Got a Facebook friend request today from an East Coast romance novelist I met two years ago at a writers' conference. At the time, she confessed that she'd had a dream about me. As she described it, with her hypnotic blue eyes dancing, the dream sounded straight out of one of her novels.

It took a full month to purge her dream from my head. What was I doing listening to it? I accepted her Facebook friend request, though. One never knows. It could present a good witnessing opportunity.

Day 10. If I am to tell the unpolished truth and live with complete integrity all year, must I pay back those I have wronged or cheated in the past? Does this mean apologizing to fellow golfers who thought I beat them fair and square, when in truth I cheated? How many years back does one go? Isn't there a statute of limitations on this sort of thing? My entire year could be spent confessing past sins.

At the very least, I'll make things right as God brings them to mind. I decided to pray about it, and God immediately brought to mind my friend Arlen. Twenty years ago I didn't pay him back for a lunch, so I called and agreed to dinner and golf.

I'll kill two birds with one stone.

Day 11. I sent an e-mail notice to some friends telling them about the book project. "I cannot tell a lie for 365 days," I wrote. "Ask me anything. Hook up the wires and tweak the dials."

Big mistake. Seems some of them forwarded my note to others, and questions have been arriving all day.

My brother Tim wrote: "Since you're sworn to honesty all year, do you or do you not owe me money?"

I told him the truth: "No." And reminded him of the hundred dollars he still owes me from when we were kids and he was forever offering me quarters to bug off.

Ellen asked, “Do you honestly think you can be that honest that long?”

I admitted: “I have my doubts but am opting for optimism.”

Jane (whom my wife baby-sat many years ago) wondered if I still listen to ABBA. “You got me hooked as a child!” she charged.

I wrote her back: “Mamma mia! Does your mother know about your problem? I thought you were writing to say, ‘Thank you for the music, the songs I’m singin’. Thanks for all the joy they’re bringin’.’ But no. Do I take the blame? I do, I do, I do, I do, I do. Knowing me, knowing you, it’s the best I can do. Soon I hope you’ll be as good as new.”²

Day 12. Our three college kids have flown home to our empty nest for a rare weekend together. We miss our children when they’re away, though the dog doesn’t miss them jumping out of closets and scaring the cookies out of her.

They’re all single, and our daughter, Rachael, has pasted a Bible verse on her door: “Be merciful to me, O God, for men hotly pursue me” (Psalm 56:1).

A little out of context, methinks.

Day 14. Had devotions this morning. Honest.

Day 15. I was asked to pray in church today. Quite an honor. I thanked God for our church; the people in it; the music; the fellowship; the health to be here, far from hunger and persecution. And then I realized I wasn’t praying to God at all. I was praying to the people, hoping to impress them. “Wow, that Callaway sure is a good pray-er, we should have him pray more often! Every Sunday, perhaps.”

My truth vow is starting to give me Pharisee’s Itch.³

“Amen,” I said, a little too abruptly. And sat down.

Day 16. I wonder if missionaries from the church based in Salt Lake City, who ride mountain bikes and wear backpacks and travel

in pairs, ever come to our sleepy community. I wonder what I'd say to one if I ever had the chance.

Day 17. My friend Regi and I went out for coffee. "Isn't grace a wonderful thing?" I observed. "Aren't you thankful that our sins are forgiven, that nothing we've done can be held against us? Grace is something we need to give thanks for and practice too, don't you think?"

Regi grinned widely and said, "So you're gonna tell the truth, eh?"
Regi is Canadian.

"Yup."

"Do you remember when I asked you how you recorded such crystal-clear copies of the Sherlock Holmes TV shows they ran on PBS?"

"I think so. Yes, I do."

"You said the reception was real good that week. Did you copy them illegally?"

I coughed nervously. "Yes, I did."

"I thought so."

"I'm sorry. I will get rid of them."

The rest of our time went well. Still, I wonder if some other time he might bring up the other things I've been worried about. One can only hope he's forgotten.

Day 18. I decided to read up on the doctrines of the missionaries who didn't visit while I was mowing the lawn. I looked up their church on the Internet, watched some YouTube debates, and couldn't resist sending an e-mail just for fun:

A week ago I had a visit from two of your young men while I was cutting the grass. They were dressed very sharply and were very kind to me. Regrettably, I was not kind to them. In fact, I pretended that I was deaf (maybe you've heard

about it). I would love to find some way to apologize to them. Are you able to suggest a way I can contact them? Feel free to send them by. I'll be kinder to them this time. Thanks so much. I live in...

Will I have to stop this kind of joking? Probably.

Day 19. I picked up a copy of *Time* magazine during the time I usually reserve for devotions. It said, "There is no other single force causing as much measurable hardship and human misery in this country as the collapse of marriage."⁴ God doesn't speak to me often through news magazines, but I almost heard an audible voice telling me to ask Ramona out to dinner.

She said there was already something cooking.

"Throw it out, cool it down, or freeze it, baby," I said in my best Harrison Ford/Indiana Jones imitation. "My engine's revvin'."

She snickered. Her cheeks flushed. The whole evening went very well.

I wore a fedora; that helped.

Twenty-seven years we've been married. It has been an adventure, to say the least. Ramona deals with sporadic seizures that throw her out of commission for a week each time they take hold. Thankfully, they've been rare as possum recipes lately, but they keep us on our knees, aware that we don't control much that really matters.

Day 21. Cut the grass and no Mormons showed up. I have something I'd like to try on them. It would make for a great story.

Today I received an invitation to speak at a public-school teachers' convention coming up in the spring. They must not know I'm a Christian. Have I been hiding it under a bushel that thoroughly? Should I tell them before or after I arrive? What will I say when I speak? "Our educational system is broken, and today I'd like to talk

about bringing back three items: moral absolutes, prayer, and Scripture memorization”? Will the sound man slowly turn down the PA system, or will they all rise up in unison and pelt me with atheist textbooks?

What shall I title my talk? “Daniel in the Teacher’s Den”?

I once spent a week preparing to speak at a couples’ retreat—some pretty good stuff on marriage and child-rearing—only to arrive and discover the conferees were single.

Note to self:

- a) Know your audience.
- b) Update life insurance policy and will.

Day 22. Church had just let out when a woman came up to me in the foyer. She told me she thought I was pretty hot and that she wanted to be the mother of my children.

I said, “Whoa, honey! Cool it! I’m almost fifty; you’ll give me an angina attack.”

All these years I’ve been married to her and still these surprises.

Day 23. Was going to read a C. S. Lewis book to expand my mind and strengthen my faith. But decided to play Pac-Man instead. I was doing quite well at it, navigating the maze, gulping dots, tossing back little blue creatures, confident about reaching my highest score ever, perhaps scaling the seventeenth level.

Then the stupid power went off, and there wasn’t a storm in sight. We’ve paid our utility power bill. Surely God wouldn’t plunge the whole town into darkness just to teach me a time-management lesson, would he?

I groped my way into our dark bedroom and sat down on a hardback book. As I picked it up, the lights flickered and power was restored. I was holding a copy of *Mere Christianity*. I briefly considered hurrying back to my study and trying to reach level thirteen, but wondered if God might employ lightning this time.

Honest Confession #1

Already I've been reminded that I am proud, mischievous, and evasive. I came to faith in Christ precisely because I am a broken person who does not naturally lead a disciplined, honest, and humble life. And if you think things are bad now, it hasn't even been a full month yet.