Summary of Ted Chiang’s “The Truth of Fact, the Truth of Feeling”

This novella, by Ted Chiang, interweaves two stories to compell the reader to consider “The Truth of Fact, the Truth of Feeling.” Chiang uses contrasting settings of a Tiv culture transitioning from oral to a written literacy, and a near future culture transitioning from written to digital literacy. These tales relate principles and values, derived from our perception of truth, to our use of communication and language.

The main character from the former is Jijingi, who is taught to read and write from a missionary that comes to his village. Jijingi navigates through the rules of writing and learns how written literacy can improve one’s ability to articulate and share exact details. This comes from the missionary’s lessons as, “verba volant, scripta manent” or “spoken words fly away, but written words remain.” While grappling with this new skill Jijingi becomes a tribal scribe for the tribal meetings. He makes the distinction between two understandings of what the missionary refers to as truth. For the Tiv, “there is what’s right, mimi, and what’s precise, vough.” Conflict comes to Jijingi when his tribe is faced with a decision of which neighboring tribe is most closely related to their own. In an attempt to settle the conflict Jijingi uses written literacy and “vough” truth, but his elder corrects him by asking, “Have you studied paper so much that you’ve forgotten what it is to be Tiv?” Jijingi concludes that his elder knows best, and agrees to side with “mimi” truth.

In comparison, the main character of the latter is a nameless father of daughter Nicole, who comes from the generation just before a new technology called Remem revolutionizes communication. Remem is used to record, log, and recall –at will- every experience an individual has applied it to. Nicole’s father writes of his concern with this shift effecting Nicole’s psychology. He argues that since memories fade, tensions and upsets become easier to overcome- “forgive and forget;” yet, having vivid access to those memories will complicate a person’s ability to sustain the same quality of relationships one had without this technology. He focuses on a memory of his own that “spurred him to be a better father.” As he uncovers more of the truth, using Remem, he is shocked at his behavior. His fallible memory positioned him as the victim, in truth he was the offender. This revelation improved his relationship with Nicole, and gave him a more accurate understanding of his own reality.

Both characters improve their understanding of truth through their experiences with literacy and communication. Furthermore, the contrast of the two stories offers insight into the spectrum of what truth means to individuals and cultures at different phases in literacy. Jijingi increased his awareness of written literacy and what was precisely true, while understanding that his culture sided with what was morally right. Nicole’s father increased his understanding of digital literacy and what was precise in reality, as opposed to how he remembered things to be true.

This speaks to our own understanding of human behavior and communication. The literacy we practice not only shapes the way we interact with others, but the way we think we interact with others. Becoming a more literate individual can bring our behavior more closely alligned with true reality.

*Summary by G. James Mitchell*

Chiang, T. (2013). The truth of fact, the truth of feeling. Subterranean Press Magazine. Retrieved from https://web.archive.org/web/20150104225212/https://subterraneanpress.com/magazine/fall\_2013/the\_truth\_of\_fact\_the\_truth\_of\_feeling\_by\_ted\_chiang