



It Wasn't the Recipe That We Needed:
A Round Table Conversation on Testimony, Authenticity, and AI
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Jennifer Watley Maxell: Hello everyone. Jennifer Watley Maxell here with our friends, Elizabeth Lynn Andrew Yeager, Marthame Sanders. And we are engaging in part two of a conversation about all things communication — AI, images, the written word, all of these things — and how does the way that we are engaging information, or we're not engaging information, affect us in terms of us becoming moral people in the world?

Which is why I think testimony is so important in our Christian tradition. It's something that I grew up in, where we would have testimony services, and people would come in, and people just talked about the goodness of God in their lives, what God did for them: "This week, I woke up and my back hurt, and it doesn't hurt anymore, and God is good. God is a healer." And I think we've gotten away from what I think was thought of as almost, like, rudimentary experiences of this shared storytelling.

I know Zora Neale Hurston has a quote that she says, "If you don't tell your story, they'll kill you and say you enjoyed it." And I think, right now, we are in a time where there is a battle going on for who gets to narrate the story, who gets to tell the story. Banning books out of schools is because certain people don't want certain stories to be out there. They want to limit knowledge and experiences, and what people have to say about how they have lived in this world. This idea of story and storytelling is so important and crucial to us culturally, as well as people of faith. But I think also the ways that we are intentional with capturing those stories, and not just capturing it in terms of, I think, the written word, privileging. I think it's important to capture them written, but I think the oral tradition is so important. And I think more and more we have gotten away from that. I think the more we have professionalized ministry, the more we have gotten away from the oral traditions and handing down stories through generations.

Quick illustration: my grandmother passed in June, and she was known far and wide for her banana pudding. Her banana pudding is legendary. And, like, five, six years ago, she wrote down the recipe. She gave it to several of those of us in the family. I made this stuff, like, three times. It was horrible. It just was not her banana pudding, but I followed the recipe to a T, and it just didn't work. So maybe about three years ago, we were all together for Christmas. About eight of us in the family sat down with my grandmother, and she walked us through the experience of making the banana pudding. And what I can say is there was so much in the experience that wasn't written down in that recipe.

So this past weekend I was in DC with my daughters and my aunt, and a bunch of us were together, so we decided we're going to recreate this banana pudding. Now that we had done it with my grandmother, we were able to get it right. It wasn't as pretty as hers. It wasn't perfect, but we got the flavor, the essence. When you put it in your mouth, you were like, "Ah, that's Gran's banana pudding." It wasn't the recipe that we needed. It was the experience, the embodiment, that image being transferred through oral tradition that really made the recipe come alive. And I think that's the thing that's at stake now. It's not just the words. The words are important. I agree with you 100% that we need more words, because I think the more words we have, the more experience we're allowed to communicate and to share with one another.

Elizabeth Lynn: Yeah. Jen, your testimony about testimony reminds me of a pretty good way in which words can furnish our imagination and our conversation about what we give to our communities. I've worked in the field of philanthropic studies. I've taught about giving and serving in American culture over time. And for a long time, folks who are professionally engaged in that quite often liked to talk about the things that we can give as time, talent, and treasure. So you can give your time volunteering; you can give your talent serving, say, on a board and sharing your wisdom as an accountant or a lawyer or something like that; and you can give your treasure, your money. And then over the last, I'd say, 10 or 15 years, folks have started wanting to add a fourth "T" to that, and that is testimony, that giving your truth — another "T" — your testimony to society is a crucial way of contributing and expressing your values in your community, and impressing those values on others.

So having that word furnishes our imagination for what we can give. It makes that case that an enhanced and nuanced vocabulary of attention to our common life is crucial. We have the act of testimony. We also have the word "testimony" that can find its way in and, kind of, revolutionize how we're thinking about what we give to others.

Marthame Sanders: The other thing, and I love about your story, Jennifer, is the way that community comes into it. So it's the experience. Absolutely. I'm such a fan of experiential learning. I think it's really the only way to learn. And it wasn't just you, it wasn't just your grandmother. It wasn't just reading the words on a page. It was in the act of doing it together.

And to me, that connects the dots back to something we kind of dropped along the way, which is the whole AI piece. One of the downsides of AI, and there are a lot of downsides to AI, is that it keeps us from being engaged in community. We like to see ourselves as self-sufficient, and if we can't do something, rather than ask somebody who is good at that to do that, we turn it over to AI, and get them to do it. I see this all the time in my field of work in production. People get AI-produced videos, they get AI-produced clips, all of that kind of stuff, and it runs at about a C+ level. Like, you would probably get a passing grade, but it's not good. And the reality is when we engage in that community piece, particularly around this conversation around AI, it makes the final product better, but it makes us better people, I think, ultimately.

Andrew Yeager: Let me add another "T" to the conversation that made me think of, and that's trust. Because when you bring up the issues of AI in journalism — and we have so many conversations about what AI means for our field and what I-AI means for the audience — one of the themes that seems to come up is that, when an audience or a listener or a viewer is consuming that content, they're not necessarily against AI content, but they want a human involved. They want a human to have had some part of the process. And I think that's really telling, because AI is very good at some tasks, exceptionally good, but there's something about our nature that we've got to connect, and we've got to connect with other humans. And words are one of a great way of doing that.

Jennifer: Andrew, I think you're really drilling down on something. It's the authenticity. So there's, kind of, this discussion going around, like, everybody is using, like, these AI-generated flyers. And what's interesting is, no matter who you are, no matter what you look like, no matter what your church context, no matter, all the flyers look exactly the same. Like, the first couple of people that did these AI flyers, it was like, "Ooh, ah, oh."

And now it's just like, "Oh gosh." They're perfect, though. You know? Like, it's this lighting, but there's no fingerprint. And I think to your point that the fingerprints are indicative of not just kind of our human

touches on the thing, but also the *imago dei*, that we can trust that there is God in this. We can trust that there is Spirit in this, and Spirit in us connects with Spirit in the other. That has value, and we're able to be secure in that.

One of the articles that we looked at was titled something like "Can AI Lead You to God?" or something like that, and... But for me, the question always comes back to, again, that *imago dei*. How does the *imago dei* get edited out? You've got the sermon, but there's no Spirit. You've got the image, but there's no authenticity. And I think that's what we react to when we see, like, some of these AI-produced things. Like, the beat is there, the colors are there. Like, yeah, it's perfect, but it's not. Doesn't hit the spot.

Marthame: I think this is also body of Christ stuff, that we're better in community than we are in our little silos. So in a context that I work in with production as p- as a part of a team, we have different areas of expertise, and we've realized at certain points that we make a better product when we are giving each other constructive feedback and honest feedback and are bringing our own eyeballs and earballs and expertise to things.

Part of it is what AI brings to the table is a speed. And I don't think we need everything as quickly as we think we do. I think there is an intentionality to slowing down and taking that time. The perfect example for me is transcripts. AI can do a C+ job on a transcript of our conversation. It's going to need those human eyes, kind of, to Andrew's point, to look it over and see that it gets everything right. There are professional transcribers who will get everything right; it just takes longer. Do we need a transcript of a 20-minute conversation in five minutes? I don't think we do.

Elizabeth: Oh, I don't know. Yes. As somebody who's done a fair amount of qualitative research in my life and interviews, and also has done a lot of summaries of qualitative data, there's something to be said for getting a summary that you then look at and consider in relation to what you heard and find ways to bring out the human voice in, but it frees you to do other things. So I don't mind cutting down on some of that labor. I welcome technology in some ways, always, into my life, but I love the tie to authenticity, and how do you know it's authentic, and how much we as human beings crave that.

So there are movements among younger people seeking the authenticity of an actual record, as opposed to whatever the word is for music online...

Marthame: An mp3.

Elizabeth: An mp3. Thank you. See, my vocabulary is not adequately furnished to talk about your work, Marthame. But there are signs that younger people are moving away from an entirely digital relationship to one another and trying to be in person more. Wow. When we talk about faith communities, that's something that we have a chance to be, at least in the non-pandemic times, in person with one another, and to be talking together about the testimonies we hear, and able to engage them, investigate them, investigate our own responses, and seek meaning in conversation with one another. So that takes me back to my favorite word, which is "conversation", and the need for that as a core part of how we engage with words.

Andrew: L-Let me offer maybe a related idea that your comments sparked with me. And just let me say for the record that I am definitely on team transcript, but I'm thinking about AI in general and the tasks that some of us are using. They're very efficiency focused. They're very much taking that grunt work,

and offloading it on someone else. But when I think about relationships, and when I think about conversations within good relationships, they're not efficient. Whether you're talking about a relationship with a friend, a parent-child relationship, a relationship with God, they're not efficient processes. And for me, who tends to be very left-brained, that's frustrating, but I also see that I'm not going to get that value and the benefit of community if I'm expecting it to be an efficient process that AI gives me. I've got to be willing to be uncomfortable, with my words, and how I engage in order to get to something more meaningful and deeper.

Jennifer: I'll say my fear with AI. I'm team transcript. What struck me, though, is I agree with what Marthame said, in that he didn't say we didn't need transcripts. He said, "I don't know if we need a transcript in five minutes." That, for me, is the hinge.

And what makes me think that is, when we look at the call of Jeremiah, the call of Jeremiah says, "When I formed you in the womb, I knew you. I gave you identity, call, and purpose." Purpose is intrinsic to who we are as human beings. And if your purpose is to be a transcriber and now AI is doing that, how then are you as a purposed individual finding ways to live your purpose in the world? And while we talk about authenticity, it's not just the rubbing up against somebody else's humanity, their authenticity, but it's also our ability to fully manifest our purpose, and do the thing that we are called to do in the world. And I'm wondering how AI then also affects that. Is AI limiting some of the ways that we are called to show up and be in the world? Is AI reducing opportunities for us to show up fully in terms of being human for one another and relating to one another in terms of communication? If you're a writer, is AI taking away some of that opportunity for us to fully develop?

I don't know the answer, but those are the types of questions for me that make me wary of AI. Like everybody else, I use it because I have to. I don't even have a choice. If I were to Google something, it's AI, right? So I don't even have a choice anymore. But I'm very hesitant, because I think in a world where we need more humanity, it seems like all these tools are working against us to diminish our humanity and to diminish our ability to show up for one another and to be our full selves.

Elizabeth: Okay. Just to offer an alternative reading of this shift away from certain kinds of tasks. But one of the most interesting pieces that I have read recently about how AI is impacting higher education, and what that might mean, is this piece that was in the *New York Times*. It was a college professor who was pointing out that we have assumed that writing is the highest form of critical thought, but this is really an assumption without evidence that has taken hold of the ways that we test students in colleges.

So we have the written exam, and we have the paper at the end of the semester, or every week in a lot of courses. And this professor was arguing that there's evidence that critical thought is best formed in speaking, in using words in speaking rather than writing them.

Marthame: That tracks. Yeah.

Elizabeth: Yeah. And so he's really arguing for the value of having to return to oral exams, because we can no longer trust the written word the students are providing. This is a moment to question some really silly cul-de-sacs that we have walked into. And while I am willing to believe there are people for whom transcription has felt profoundly meaningful, I wonder, if one explored that meaning, would there be another way of practicing that activity in this constantly changing world? So I'm going to stay open to some of the possibilities of our labor taking new forms in a world that's always been changing.

Marthame: That's so good, Elizabeth. I think that for me, there's the piece where AI coworkers — which is a weird thing to say, but it's part of our lexicon now — the relationship that develops is deeply troubling, in that we are personifying something that is a piece of software, a piece of hardware, a piece of programming, and it is a very codependent, dysfunctionally codependent, piece of software/programming. If you are engaged in a conversation trying to analyze something with them, they will always find a way to tell you you are right. That is not the kind of relationship we're talking about. As people of faith, it's speaking the truth in love, right? So how do we engage that? And I feel like that's some of what we're doing here, is we're not on the same page, but we love each other, and we're telling each other the truth.