



# Four Truths of Death

Understanding communication can help you find wisdom.

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“It’s not what happens to you, but how you react to it that matters.”  
— **Epictetus**, Greek philosopher, c. 50 – 135 AD

Psychoanalyst Richard Billow (2021) proposed four aspects of truth in human communication: diplomacy, integrity, sincerity, and authenticity. I’d like to apply this to how we describe our experience of death.

This is a view of death from the viewpoint of the survivor; it is a reflection on loss. It presumes continuity and describes our experience of detachment. This may be of no use in contemplating one’s own death, and it may not assuage grief either but I think discerning communication can be of some use.

Diplomacy is how we behave for the purpose of maintaining the social order, preserving relationships and boundaries. This is our official or obliged response.

Integrity is the degree to which we hold to our belief systems, both personal and public. There is an overlap between integrity and diplomacy but they are not the same. One can uphold one’s belief with or without being diplomatic. Integrity is the strength of your belief.

By sincerity Billow means the quality of your feeling, not whether or not you are truthful in presenting your feeling. That is, the strength of the positive or negative feeling you convey, the depth of one's feeling. For Billow, if you don't feel one way or another, then you're not sincere.

Authenticity is the closest of these four to truth, and it carries the complexity of truth. We're not talking about absolute truth, truth for others, or truth in the world, we're talking about personal truth. What is true for you.

Authenticity is not a question of whether you know what's going on, but whether you can effectively convey what you think and feel. You can be sincerely inauthentic, and authentically insincere.

These four attributes of communication apply to how we interact with each other and communicate with ourselves.

Following these definitions, diplomacy and integrity tend toward the rational while sincerity and authenticity lean toward the emotional, but the lines are unclear. These categories are interesting because they don't split cleanly along intellectual and emotional lines.



## Diplomacy

With regard to death, diplomacy is following social protocol. This takes care of business and creates space for processing personal, practical, and legal matters. A foundation of diplomacy is expected around death both by its serious and emotional nature.

We draw a clear line regarding people's diplomatic obligations. Officials are recognized and we'd like their tasks to be clear and undisputed. These include palliative, funeral, religious, and burial services. Clear boundaries create a helpful emotional structure.

# Integrity

We can have officially or socially defined roles in processing death. These roles create containers for the processing of personal, community, and practical affairs. Those who recognize their roles are charged with executing them with integrity, which is to say fulfilling the spirit of their task.

If you don't know your role or don't know what your role entails, then you cannot fulfill it with integrity. As long as you can describe your role, even if you don't know how to execute it, you can. Lacking integrity is to be indifferent, dishonest, or evasive.

Diplomacy is the task of holding the social container and integrity is how committed you are to holding it. Together they are the executive and intentional parts of the social container. Official roles do not process grief nor is it the task of diplomacy to support it. For example, the autopsy, issuance of the death certificate, and the crematorium require diplomacy and integrity but do not provide space for grieving.

# Sincerity

Sincerity and authenticity are emotional. They support personal change by delivering and receiving emotion.

Sincerity implies a high quality of emotion and the invitation of emotional response. It creates a safe space for being emotional. A sincere person reveals their emotional investment and is receptive to the emotions of others. This makes room for grief but may not involve the feeling of grief. For example, a stranger could act with sincerity even though they have no knowledge of you or the death you're experiencing.



# Authenticity

Where sincerity is the quality of your emotional engagement, authenticity is its content. This separation of commitment versus depth allows a person to repress the truth and still present themselves with sincerity. We all do this to some extent both consciously and unconsciously. We are all only relatively authentic. It is the nature of mind to always be exploring itself. The more you know and reveal about yourself the more authentic you are.

Of these four qualities, it is authenticity that measures the depth of presentation. Whether this is deep or shallow, it is still relative to what you know. You can be authentic and be ignorant. Because these are all relative qualities, they are all qualities we share. Unlike knowledge or experience, which some people have and others don't, everyone can be rated on a relative scale of diplomacy, integrity, sincerity, and authenticity.

# Grief

These relative scales provide a way to locate ourselves in the face of grief. By doing this we can better judge where we'll get support and the support we need.

Grief resides in the depths of authenticity. You can be diplomatic, have integrity, and be sincere without being fully honest about your feelings. If you communicate that clearly, then it does not have to be a problem. But if your goal is to resolve grief, then authenticity is what you're looking for.

We can use these measures to judge the kind of support we'll receive. By stripping out diplomacy, integrity, and sincerity it can be easier to locate authenticity or the lack of it. For example, because my siblings can be diplomatic and sincere without integrity or authenticity, I cannot rely on them for support.

Complex grief is grief tied up with conditions like anxiety, depression, illness, trauma, or distress. It tends not to dissipate and may get worse over time. People with complex grief need support and the first line of support is family and community. But not everyone who behaves with diplomacy, integrity, and sincerity is able to handle grief. Authenticity is necessary but it's not sufficient.



## Wisdom

The essential additional ingredient for processing grief is wisdom which lies outside these four truths. People with compassionate, first hand experience of death are more likely to have it while the inexperienced are not.

There are some places where we expect diplomacy and wisdom to go together, such as religion, therapy, and counseling. This isn't always the case, and the more personal or complex your situation, the less likely the wisdom you need will be diplomatic. We still expect wisdom to be delivered with integrity, sincerity, and authenticity.

With these four truths we can map the resources provided to us, but on this map there needs to be a separate place for wisdom. Wisdom is not relative, it is forthcoming. Essential insight is not something that should be partially offered although we may only partially understand it.

Wisdom is none of these truths and it may not even be true. The value of wisdom lies in its effect. The value of the truths lies in exposing wisdom. By taking away or accounting for these aspects of communication you may be better able to find what you're looking for.

“I give easement and rest now to thee, dear man.  
Come not down the lanes or in our meadows.  
And for thy peace, I pawn my own soul. Amen.”  
— **Prayer of a sin-eater**, (Valjak, 2018)

## References

Richard M. Billow, R. M. (2021). *Richard M. Billow's Selected Papers on Psychoanalysis and Group Process: Changing Our Minds* (Ed. T. Slonim), Routledge.

Valjak, D. (2018). The Macabre Story of Sin-Eaters, *The Vintage News*, at <https://www.thevintagenews.com/2018/08/06/sin-eaters/>