

## On “To Tell the Truth”

Robert S. Griffin

[www.robertsgriffin.com](http://www.robertsgriffin.com)

The past couple of weeks, a game show from sixty years ago has been part of my life. The episodes from back then are online and I’ve been watching them nightly, typically just before I go to bed. The show, “To Tell the Truth,” which was on in prime time in those years.

The premise of the show is that all three members of a “team of challengers” claim to be a particular individual who has something interesting about him or her--the host of the show reads an “affidavit” that spells out what that is. One of the three is the real person and the other two are imposters. A panel of four celebrities asks questions trying to discern which of the three is the real one. The real person must tell the truth, and the two imposters lie. After the round of questions, each panel member says whom they think the real one is and why, and then the real one is revealed when he/she stands up, most often to applause from the panel. Viewers at home don’t know who the real person is until the panel does, so we are invited to play the game along with the panelists and decide who we think it is.

“To Tell the Truth” started in 1956 and has been revived several times and continues until this day, a truly remarkable run. Along the way, one of the hosts was Alex Trebek, who went on to “Jeopardy!” fame. I only watch episodes from 1960--1962. I find it rewarding, comforting, somewhere in there, to revisit those particular years.

[https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL39ftvD\\_GHaFDX-9JNkJNPK2F5nUer\\_mA](https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL39ftvD_GHaFDX-9JNkJNPK2F5nUer_mA)

During that time, the panel was the singer and actress Polly Bergen, the actor Don Ameche, New York City society doyenne Kitty Carlyle, and comedic actor Tom Poston. The host was Bud Collyer, who had slicked-back pomaded hair to beat all.

What am I doing watching this old television show just about daily? I mean, I'm hooked. Bud and the panelists, especially Polly Bergin, are center stage in my consciousness these days. What's up?

First, I find "To Tell the Truth" entertaining, engaging television. It's a great concept for a game show. They did a super job putting together and prepping the team of challengers. It isn't easy weeding out the imposters. It's fun to play along trying to figure out who the real one is. I'm taken by how often I'm fooled. The host and four panelists seem truly to be having a good time, and it's a good time to be around people having a good time. And the show is so wonderfully innocuous. It's a relief to be away from everything that matters, from whether Dee is going to get admitted to the college she wants to attend to my impending demise sitting here over eighty feeling like I'm standing on a trap door which will spring at any second.

Come to think about it, watching the old shows does remind me of my coming-right-up oblivion, but in a less threatening way than it does the rest of the time it is front and center in my awareness, as it ever increasingly is as the birthdays relentlessly pile up. The show is a reminder of our shared mortality. We're all in this one-time-through-life together, I'm not the only one with death waiting just up the road. Bud and the panelists, so alive on the TV screen, are all gone now, and, it can be assumed, so is just about everybody on the teams of challengers, even the young ones.

How beautiful Polly Bergin was. She died at 85. Polly Bergin, 85, my gosh. And how talented she was. Yesterday, I streamed the 1962 version of the film "Cape Fear" (it was remade in 1991); Polly was terrific in that film playing off Robert Mitchum, who of course has also passed; they've all passed. We are like bubbles on the surface of water for a time and then, pop, no more. Somehow, realizing we all face the same inevitable fate makes it easier for me to accept my reality.

"To Tell the Truth" brings me in touch with my early years. I watched it every week back then, on CBS as I remember—

somehow, CBS looked different from NBC and ABC, the three networks at the time. The old black-and-white TV picture, the 17-inch-screen Zenith television set that looked like a small refrigerator. I was around twenty in those years, just out of the army, going to the University of Minnesota--or at least nominally; 35,000 day students, no one knew or cared that I was there, which for the most part I wasn't, I rarely went to class.

I did make it on time to sit alone and watch "To Tell the Truth," however. Or at least I sat—or better, laid stretched out--in front of the set munching on Old Dutch potato chips. I wouldn't call what I did watching. As I remember it now, I had no connection to the show. I didn't think, "Oh, that's Bud Collyer, or "That's Polly Bergin," or take in Tom Poston's quips. I didn't even play along with the game and decide who I thought the real person was or, really, react when he or she was identified. The word "dissociation" comes to mind, a sobering realization.

But the upside, I'm awake and alive and responding to the world now. Whatever little I've accomplished in life, I've accomplished that much. I'm actually taking in the show now, not just letting it wash over me. I see Polly Bergin now, I hear her, I experience her, and Don Ameche and the rest of them. I play the game along with the panel. I play the game of life now. I'm alive now.