The March sky was raw and grey on the afternoon in 1314 when Jacques de Molay faced his execution. A scaffold had been erected in the shadow of Notre Dame, and the people of Paris waited with a mixture of dread and delight as the moment drew near. The 70-year-old Master of the Knights Templar, who had just withstood seven years of imprisonment and severe torture, now stood shivering alongside his brothers in arms, listening wearily as the details of his false confessions were read aloud to the growing crowd. Despite their dire condition, the men were not entirely doomed; mercy had been promised—but only if they confessed their guilt as heretics and blasphemers. If they did not, it was to be death by fire, and several massive wooden pyres laden with brushwood were situated behind them as evidence of the fact. Two broken Knights stepped forward, mumbled their guilt, and were saved, but when it was time for de Molay to speak, he offered a much different response.

As he moved to the edge and looked into the eyes of the crowd, eyewitness testimony suggests he shouted, “On this terrible day, I shall let the truth triumph and declare, before heaven and all the saints, that I have committed the greatest of all crimes—that I once confessed to malicious charges against the Order Templar so I could escape further torture. I shall not confirm a first lie with a second. I renounce life willingly. I have no use for days of sorrow earned only by lies.” And with this statement, he was seized roughly by the guards and chained to the stake, where the rushes were set aflame and his body carried up to his savior in a great blaze of red and orange. Because he had infuriated King Philip IV by retracting his previous confessions of heresy, his pyre was set to burn at an agonizingly slow rate. His screams of innocence filled the frigid air, now filled with the heat of a crackling fire and the sound of popping wood. It appeared the grand leader of the Knights Templar had died freely and valiantly to protect the integrity of his personal truth. But many people wondered, what truth could possibly demand such a price?

Today, in our convenient new world of virtual reality, alternative facts, and pervasive lies, the truth is mostly obscured. It is not upheld nor regularly acknowledged. By definition, the word “truth”
relates to the quality of something seen or accepted as real, but sadly this offers no genuine understanding. The truth is what lies in accordance with fact or reality, but as we know, those two words are also mysterious shapeshifters. Flimsy and filled with air, the idea of truth lacks substance because it no longer thrives in our shared human consciousness. It is a dying breed. Yes, de Molay of the Knights Templar clearly understood his truth, but do we know ours? Reality is typically in the eye of the beholder and not subject to the universal laws of fact. It is largely up for debate, up for review, up for sale. Truth has no authority—it is soft and vulnerable and susceptible to the will of those who seek to manipulate it, shape it, wield it. The truth has no agenda and no ego; it is defenseless against abuse and neglect. It's only strength lies in our human ability to honor and embrace it. And as a result, truth has become a shadow, a relic, and a remnant of long ago when people like de Molay of the Knights Templar, who died on the pyre for his beliefs, assigned it the ultimate value—a time when men invested their full spirit into protecting words like loyalty, faith, and honor.

Of course, even truth throughout history is blurred. There have always been those willing to trade veracity for ambition, greed, and personal gain; that much hasn't changed. Likely, even the Templars knew a certain level of corruption. But what has shifted since the days of yore is the human fortitude to appreciate truth, even when it doesn't serve us. Living up to reality's fierce standards is no easy task—it takes character, honor, and mettle. In the past, people accepted the need for honesty more readily because, frankly, they didn't know any better. Their hearts were innocent with an acceptance of human principle. It meant something. When they placed their hand on a Bible and swore to tell the truth, they couldn't imagine doing otherwise because violating such a powerful notion was unthinkable, not possible. When the Knights Templar and de Molay declared they would defend their beliefs to the death, they didn't mean until they felt like quitting—they meant to the death. And in this way, their Order was a shining example of what can happen when people commit fully to an idea, to a code, and live by it in every way, not just when it's convenient. The words defining our human morals have not changed—only the people who speak them often fail to recognize the hollowness of their own language. They have been alienated from their truthful origins, and they don't even know it.
But let's not be too idealistic. Of course, even the Templars likely suffered from a bout of selfish duplicity every now and again. They were a Christian order of warrior monks founded in the 11th century and tasked with protecting their beliefs, which were lofty and filled with pride. At first, the Knights sought only to protect pilgrims trying to travel across Western Europe to visit the Holy Land of Jerusalem. They were focused on the protection of their brethren and the divine right to praise God. Like most meaningful pursuits, this soon blossomed into a stronger, more focused objective, and they soon founded a military order devoted to the guardianship of Christendom through an unyielding and austere code of ethics. Yes, war often achieved this end, but the violence was always used within in a larger framework of thoughtful intention. They were raising their swords against the infidel, not in anger, but as a way to protect the tender idea of truth and its need to prevail. Their lives and their movement illustrated a time when words like honor, trust, and loyalty actually meant something—something worth dying for.

In some forums, the Knights are seen as zealots and murderers, but their existence was far more complex and nuanced; they were much more than just a religious military order. Their movement is a lasting symbol of the genuine power of faith and devotion. Of course, their view of God, life, and the Holy Land was not shared by everyone—it was one perception of a universal reality—but their undying devotion to this personal truth was what made them exceptional. The Knights had such a powerful regard for the notion of personal ethics, their *esprit de corp* was positively unshakeable—and as a result, so was their military and tactical prowess. So were their lives. They did not fight the enemy with mere weapons; they fought with the heart of a lion—robust, capable, and determined—because their beliefs demanded it. Above all, their faith was the gleaming treasure they protected at all cost. Can we say the same for the world today? For ourselves? Looking around, it would seem that antiquated code of conduct has given way to more feeble conditions like fear, greed, and pettiness.

Today, we often live our lives by a code attached to what's convenient or acceptable, not by the truth that dwells in the heart. We are pretenders and fools, believing in nothing and standing for
nothing but the almighty dollar and a chance to get ahead. Ahead of what, we don’t even know. We are willing to die for nothing, but always willing to stand in criticism of those who do. We are hypocrites and we are liars, most likely incapable of even appreciating the rigor and discipline of a Templar’s life. But for those of us who can, it is a hero’s song and a way to envision a brighter future. Whatever your cause might be, whatever you believe in, there’s a reason to stand behind that truth with all your might and resurrect in humanity the notion of honor. Because whether we know it or not, it’s still in there somewhere—deep in the center of the soul—waiting to emerge from behind built-up layers of laziness, fear, and ignorance.

De Molay knew this, and he understood the inherent power of truth. As he mounted his execution pyre some 670 years ago, he showed no fear and reminded his accusers that God would avenge his death. As the flames began to lick around his ankles, some witnesses (and many ancient tales) agree de Molay cursed Pope Clement V and King Philip IV of France—along with all of their descendants and the royal bloodline—who had condemned him so unfairly. Just a few months later, the Pope was fatally taken by disease, after which the King himself died unexpectedly of a stroke while out hunting. And throughout the next 14 years, the King’s three remaining sons would all die of mysterious illnesses, along with several of their children. Because the monarchy was left without a male heir, the direct line was destroyed, and the House of Caped perished after some 300 years of dominion. And so it would seem, the only thing mightier than the fire, horror, and death of de Molay’s execution day was the divine power of his truth.