

On Honesty

Her husband of 60 years died suddenly of a heart attack. She was 85 and had been the matriarch of the family planning the families holidays, birthday parties and vacations. Now she stayed in bed and got up for absolutely necessary bathroom breaks. She ate meager amounts of food and took her meds brought to her in bed and was rapidly losing weight. Her strong faith in God prevented her from overtly actively killing herself. Passively wasting away seemed acceptable. The family had mobilized to take her to see her doctor who referred her to several other providers and psychiatrists who tried multiple different treatments. She even passively accepted a trail of ECT (electroshock therapy) that has an 80 to 90% success rate in TRD (treatment resistant depression). Nothing helped.

Her daughter a nurse had heard through a nurse who knew me I worked with TRD and contacted me requesting an evaluation and possible treatment. I agreed as did her mother to meet with her. At the first meeting I did my usual diagnostic and towards the end of our first meeting suggested during our second meeting I wanted to get to know her better by asking about her earliest memory and then come forward to learn her abbreviated life story. During the first meeting she appeared neatly dressed, was fully oriented, and was thin and fatigued but could express herself clearly. She seemed not to care she was very depressed or none of the efforts to help her had resulted in any improvement.

Her earliest memories stretching back to 3 years old were of a warm and loving family that was also centered around a religious faith. There were no major losses or traumas reported. She married her high school sweet heart. Shortly after their marriage he went off to war for 4 years. After his return they started a family and successfully raised three children without incident. The children all married and she now had seven grandchildren. She went on to discuss the various members of her family and their activities.

We started meeting weekly since she seemed to be engaged, was verbal and she felt meeting and talking helped a little. I began to feel there was something she knew she was not telling me. This feeling had started during our first meeting. Over about five sessions the feeling continued to grow stronger. The feeling seemed only to be happening when I was with her. So I eventually said, "I'm having this feeling there is something you know about that you are not sharing with me. I could be wrong but if there is, this is a confidential relationship and I will not and may not share anything you share with me with anyone else in a manner where you could be identified. It has been my experience I can often interpret what the feeling or thought or memory is in a way that is helpful." We sat silently for a few minutes. Then she said, "You remember I mentioned I got married right before my husband went to war for 4 years? Well, I had a very brief affair when he was gone and I never told him because I knew it would break his heart! And now he knows!" It was her belief he had gone to heaven after he died and in heaven all things are revealed to you so now he would know she had an affair while he was away. She became a little tearful. Shortly it occurred to me and I said to her, "If he now knows about the affair he also knows why you didn't tell him." She stopped crying and a look of great relief came across her face.

We met a few more weeks. It was very evident her depression had lifted and she had returned to full functioning. We agreed she no longer needed to come and talk with me but she would come back should the need arise.

One could view her withholding her affair from her husband a lie of omission. But she believed and I agree with her, the only thing her husband would hear, should she confess the affair, is that she does not love him which would clearly be false. There was no way she could tell him so he could understand her pain, loneliness and fear that he may not return and from missing him while he was gone for four years and how she had briefly relieved this pain by having an affair. Her husband would likely only hear, “She doesn’t and never did love me!”

Often it is believed honesty is simply reporting what happened as a video camera might record it. However honesty also entails an awareness of what the other person(s) would likely believe from the concrete truth. A video camera cannot record meaning or truth. Being honest means also understanding the meaning we are communicating to someone else. Often a spouse’s desire to ‘confess’ an affair is to alleviate their own feelings of guilt and, perhaps unconsciously, sadistically to injure their spouse. It is usually better to tell a therapist at least at first. Telling a close friend you know their spouse is having an affair may be motivated by a desire, consciously or unconsciously, to drive a wedge between your friend and their spouse and thereby believe the friend may be closer to you!

Honest is as much about considering the meaning of what we are telling as it is about telling the factual truth. It is also important when we learn things about other people we consider the motivations of the people who are transmitting the information. As Thump’s father in Bambi taught Thumper, “If you can't say something nice, don't say nothing at all!”