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What I Learned About Love When I Stopped Being Honest

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After growing up in a family that never lied, I spent decades being off-puttingly truthful.

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When I was a child, my dad invented a game that I loved. Wherever we went, he'd predict what strangers were about to say or do. We'd walk into a store and he'd point at the salesman and say something like, "Watch this. When I tell him how much I'm willing to spend, he'll immediately show me something more

expensive." The salesman did exactly as Dad had prophesized. When Dad took me to my first concert, he told me the musician would ask the audience how they were feeling tonight and, when everyone cheered wildly, would respond, "I can't hear you!" It wasn't long before the musician spoke those exact words.

It felt like magic, like Dad was telling the future or reading minds, so I asked how he did it. Most people follow a script, he said. I asked him why and I remember him replying, "Because they're afraid that if they say what they really feel, people won't like them. And they'd rather be liked than be honest." I knew then that I wanted to be honest, regardless of the consequences. I stuck to that for the next 25 years. And there were consequences.

In my family, honesty wasn't just the best policy—it was the only policy. This was never explicitly stated; there was no family contract or manifesto, and my parents never came out and said, "We don't lie under any circumstances." But I still learned the lesson that they were very strict in how they defined a lie—and their definition included much of what was considered polite or normal. They led by example, by just being themselves. I had no sense that a question could be considered inappropriate or that anyone would refuse to answer. Even when I was 4 and 5, Dad would respond to my curiosity with long-winded history and philosophy, explaining things such as the scientific method or the subconscious mind, or telling details from his own life and feelings that many would have kept hidden.

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Dad taught me the word *hypocrite* early on, as part of a conversation on being honest with yourself. I brought up to Mom that I'd noticed my grandmother complaining about others who did the same things she did. I asked Mom if her mother was a hypocrite. "Well," I remember my mom saying, "she certainly does a lot of hypocritical things." When my paternal grandmother

told Mom not to speak ill of her own mother, Mom replied that lying to me would mean I'd either stop trusting my own observations or stop trusting her, and that she wasn't satisfied with either of those outcomes.

My parents' unwillingness to hide their feelings was a rejection of their own pasts. Throughout my childhood, they'd tell me stories of their own parents, bosses, teachers, and friends pressuring them to follow the script. I was glad to have been raised by my parents instead of by "most people."

One time that I was particularly grateful was when I got my measles shot. I remember hearing other kids in the waiting area asking their parents, "Will it hurt?" Most parents said it wouldn't. Some said nothing at all, and just ignored the question. I couldn't believe what I was witnessing: parents lying to their children right in front of me! Dad explained, "Most parents consider lying good parenting." I asked Mom what the shot would feel like, and she told me that it would hurt a little, but the pain wouldn't last long. When I received the shot, I smiled to find that she'd told me the truth. It horrified me to imagine the lives of the children who couldn't trust their parents.

My parents were so enamored with my moments of honesty and proud of their truthful parenting that they'd tell stories like this to anyone who would listen and even retell them to me as family folklore, thrilling bedtime stories in which my parents and I were the heroes. My early childhood memories of exactly how these things happened are surely influenced by the retellings.

By the time I went to school, I'd heard a lot about how the outside world wasn't like my family, and I was content to be different. At age 4, I attempted to prove that a mall Santa was a fraud. At 5, I was crying in class daily, all the while insisting that openly crying felt great and that everyone should try it. At 9, I asked my rabbi what the Torah said about my fetishistic sexual fantasies. At 13, I called out the bragging boys at camp for lying about their sexual experience. I'd laugh about the bizarre and absurd lies I witnessed,

mentally cataloging lists of common manipulations and evasions. Eventually, most things I heard people say stood out in red.

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Everyone else was well acquainted with the countless good reasons to hold their tongues, but my parents and I couldn't fathom them. Why wouldn't you want to hear what others thought? Why wouldn't you tell them what you thought? For us, it seemed as if people didn't want to really know one another. Many years later, a co-worker would tell me she wished for a day that no one else would remember, a day to tell everyone what she really thought. For my family, every day was that free. Telling the truth felt like singing, but when I started dealing with the world outside, I found that it also made people want to strangle me.

When I say that I spent decades being off-puttingly truthful, many assume that I used honesty as an excuse to insult people; I'm aware that there are many such people, going around insisting that they're "just being honest" when they're actually being cruel. My honesty did occasionally offend people, such as if I admitted that I'd forgotten someone's name or if I didn't feign interest when I was bored. But insulting people wasn't nearly as much of a problem as making them uncomfortable. Even close friends would squirm when I'd gush about how much I liked them or when I'd tell a personal story that moved me to tears. I got the impression that, after having dealt with me, most would have preferred to have been insulted.

My insistence on honesty escalated when I was 17 and I first attended "therapy camp" with my family, where we camped out with a few hundred others in tents in the woods and participated in extreme, public therapy sessions. I spent one week each summer watching hundreds of adults tell their most vulnerable stories, sobbing in front of the audience. With my newfound sense of the feelings boiling unexpressed beneath all the facades, I'd rant to anyone who would listen about how ridiculous it was that everyone hid so much. I insisted that if we could all read one

another's minds and see the truth of others' pain, we'd relate, and all love one another. I couldn't understand why others valued what they called "privacy."

When I moved to New York at 22, it became clear that an honest man would have a hard time getting a job. The nicer interviewers would get concerned and offer sincere advice, telling me that when asked about my biggest flaw, I wasn't supposed to actually list my flaws. When I told them I hoped some employers would appreciate my honesty, most laughed. In some cases, I ended interviews early on the grounds that the interviewer and I clearly weren't compatible. But I got lucky and was hired by an eccentric who was charmed by my earnestness. After two months as his assistant, he brought up areas where I needed to improve, and I candidly told him that I didn't think I could do better, that I wasn't the best person he could get for this job. I pretty much persuaded him to fire me.

Up to this point, my truthfulness had also prevented any romantic possibilities; it seemed unlikely that anyone would want a truly honest boyfriend. But then I fell in love with someone who appreciated my openness and joined me in it. We talked constantly, sharing our most bizarre feelings, observations, and opinions; telling stories from our pasts; feeling known and understood. But talking through everything also meant obsessing over what otherwise would have been fleeting emotions. Expressing feelings regardless of how they might affect the other person often felt self-centered and uncaring. I'd gotten what I'd always wanted and found that I couldn't take it. After six years together, we broke up, and in my heart-wrecked state, I decided that my truth-telling had caused enough destruction, that it was no longer worth it. There must be things others knew that I didn't, I thought, reasons why dishonesty made others genuinely happy. So, the following New Year's, at the age of 29, I resolved to be "less honest."

There were no support groups for people who wanted to be less honest. Therapists advised people to speak their truth, not to shut up for once. Whatever advice everybody else needed, I needed the

opposite. So I came up with my own system, made myself lists of subjects that I'd no longer discuss and various rules for myself, such as:

- Hide your feelings and observations.
- Instead of searching for people who will appreciate who you really are, try to be what the person in front of you wants.
- Learn to make small talk.
- Do NOT be yourself.

This felt both stupid and impossible. My brain had been built to be honest. I couldn't even answer "How are you?" with "Fine" without feeling ill.

I started with small talk. I asked the same safe questions the people around me asked and pretended to be satisfied with vague or avoidant answers. I'd stuff my hands in my pockets so no one would see the involuntary clenching and shaking when I held back the truth. But I couldn't ignore how much smoother every interaction went, how much happier everyone else seemed. I got an apartment after I falsely claimed that I had a high-paying job. I got piano-playing gigs by refraining from mentioning that I wasn't a very good piano player. I found that I could have romances if I didn't mention my qualities that others might not like.

But I had the feeling, for the first time, that those who liked me didn't really know me. And I was the only one who felt that there was anything wrong. I tried to remind myself that this people-pleasing was normal, that it was what everyone wanted from me. I tried to find pleasure in being liked, having jobs and friendships and romances. But all along, my honest brain kept telling me that I had become a con artist and that those who liked me really only liked the person I'd tricked them into believing I was.

After years of feeling torn between my old ways and my new ones, I got over my discomfort at participating in the dishonest world and started to see why people spared one another the truth. As I experimented with small talk, I noticed how others used honesty to

establish intimacy. I'd always seen "hiding feelings" as cowardly, but for other people, the selectiveness of their honesty was what gave it meaning. They'd choose who was special enough to hear their secrets. My indiscriminate, automatic honesty had meant that I'd tell a personal story the same way to a stranger as I would to my closest friend; that cheapened anything I shared. Anyone who loved me wanted to see a side that I didn't show others, but I hadn't saved one for them. Immediate honesty was impatient; if I wanted people to be honest with me, I had to earn it.

It's now been 11 years since I started letting myself lie. I'm still probably more honest than most; I'm sure some people think I'm still too honest. But shutting up for a while has certainly softened me. These days, I try to save my honesty for those who want it. And when someone won't be honest with me, I can understand why. I still hope people will give me the unvarnished truth. But sometimes we have to start with the script to build enough trust to throw it away.