

Soul Matters, February 2014

What Does It Mean to be a Person of Honesty?

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Honesty is a foundational value of Alcoholics Anonymous. “The Book” of AA says, “Rarely have we seen a person fail who has thoroughly followed our path. Those who do not recover are people who cannot or will not completely give themselves to this simple program, usually men and women who are constitutionally incapable of being honest with themselves.” Honesty is a fundamental value of all 12-step programs.

And honesty is a fundamental value of healthy relationships. “Honesty is the best policy.” It seems simple. All we have to do is tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. Without holding back, without secrets, without reservation.

But life is never that simple. Being honest can come at a tremendous cost. Loss of love, loss of friendships, loss of life sometimes. The Rev. Martin Luther King, and many, many others have been killed for “speaking truth to power.” Lies have saved people’s lives – think of people who sheltered escaping slaves, or Jews during the Holocaust. The truth can hurt people’s feelings, or make them angry. The truth can be used brutally, to wound others.

So there is no simple black and white clarity to honesty and lying. The truth can be used for good or evil. Lying may be kinder than truth. Beneath the surface of “honesty is the best policy,” things are complicated and murky... like life.

So this month, we’ll explore this murky depth together. Soul Matters will focus on three questions:

1. When did telling the truth “save” you or someone else?
2. Have you ever lied “for the sake of love”?
3. Who or what isn’t as bad as you’re making them out to be? (This is being honest about the lie of exaggeration.)

These are provocative questions. I hope that they help us to see things from a different angle, and to find a gift in the murkiness. Honesty is the key to healthy relationships with others and with ourselves. Without honesty with ourselves, there is little hope of growing into spiritual maturity. So welcome the murkiness, and join a circle of friends with whom to try to sift through it.

With gratitude for the murkiness of life and people who try to figure it out.

Beatrice

A Question To Think About Ahead of Time:

When did telling the truth “save” you or someone else?

We’ve begun a habit of wrestling with questions that help us look backward, that help us think about what our upbringing taught us about the topic or that help us see how the theme has played itself out previously in our lives. This question is one of those looking backward questions.

Don’t let the word “saved” get in your way. It’s in quotes to encourage you to define it however best fits your experience. But it’s also there to push you--to think about a time in your life when honesty (or lying) entered your life in a dramatically life-enhancing way.

It can be a time that you told the truth to “save” someone else or a time when someone else told the truth to “save” you. Examples are not hard to imagine. Someone stirs up the courage to tell the truth about abuse going on in the family. The immediate aftermath was likely painful, but ultimately such honesty was liberating and healing. One also thinks about “coming out of the closet” or “fessing up to a wrong or a secret that you’ve been hiding” and that was “killing you.” My friend says that the day she was honest with her husband about not wanting children was the first day she could “breathe.” And then, of course, there are the lies we tell ourselves. Indeed, are we ever fully living until we are honest with ourselves?

And as you think back to times when you or others used honesty to save, rescue or heal, pay close attention to the cost. Make sure to remember and share that part of the story too. Coming clean about yourself or confronting someone else’s lie rarely lead to happy experiences in the short-term. Often there is fallout. Truth-tellers get rejected by friends and family. Sometimes they are even called liars themselves. Maybe you were even part of the back-lash. Maybe your friend tried to get you to see the truth and at first you rebelled and punished them for it, only to later see their act as the gift it was.

The ultimate goal though is gratitude. Live with this question throughout the month. Let it stir up numerous examples of times in your life when honesty blessed you with healing, wholeness or second-chances. Then pick the story you most want to share and bring it to your group.

Another Question To Think About Ahead of Time:

Have you ever lied “for the sake of love?”

This question also invites us to look backward, but with an ironic eye. Our introduction talked about the “murkiness” of honesty. This question invites us to dive right into that by asking us to think about those times when withholding or slanting the truth was the right thing to do.

And push yourself to go beyond the common or easy examples. We regularly lie to people about their outfits or hairstyles to save hurt feelings. Use this as an opportunity to revisit those times that were more complicated or that you are still ambivalent about. Maybe you lied to your husband about how much you wanted that third child. You may not have a single regret about it now, but back then you did it “only for him.” And maybe you gave up something big for it--a job opportunity for instance. One also thinks of those who have to lie to their parents with Alzheimer’s. I have a friend who tells her mom that her pills are vitamins. Another friend tells her dad weekly that it’s a “hotel” he’s living in and that she will be bringing him home “next week,” when in reality he’s in a locked unit where he will stay the rest of his life. Or maybe your story has to do with hiding a painful secret from your children or spouse to protect the privacy of another loved one. Does your teenager really need to know that his aunt tried to kill herself when she was younger? Might it be OK if you never tell anyone that your teenager tried to kill themselves or got pregnant and had an abortion?

And as always, don't get caught up on the wording of the question. Interpret "for the sake of love" however you like. But try to let it push you or open something up for you. For instance, it is likely to make you remember how you've lied for the sake of kindness, but maybe it will lead you in an entirely different direction, like how you lied in the service of "goodness." For instance, many of us have had times in our lives where letting the truth fall into the wrong hands would lead to "bad guys" using it to manipulate or hurt others. Sometimes we are called to lie to keep information out of the wrong hands. A story like that is an important one to revisit and share.

As with our first question, be sure to take your time with this question. Mull it over. Live it with for the entire month. Let it lead you down unexpected paths. Use it as a chance to not only lift up the complexity of our topic but also to ask yourself, "Would I do it again? Was the lying worth it?"

Your Spiritual Exercise:

Who or what isn't as bad as you're making them out to be?

(Be honest about your exaggeration and DO SOMETHING TO FIX IT.)

Exaggeration isn't the first thing that comes to mind when the topic of honesty is mentioned, but it's arguably when honesty comes up for us most often. And almost always this type of lying comes at someone's expense. For instance, it's just so much easier to take our anger out on someone if we can convince ourselves that they or their actions are "appalling!" And if we are feeling bad about ourselves, what better way to prop up our egos than to focus on and exaggerate the flaws of others? I also think about a friend who, whenever she feels needy, inevitably exaggerates and focuses on the "half-empty" part of her life in order to attract the sympathy and attention of others. I have another friend who regularly takes full credit for things he was only partially responsible for. He does it out of insecurity, but the result is that he cheats others out of the credit they deserve and he also ends up causing others to resent or lose respect for him.

In short, we all have people or situations in our lives that are not as bad as we make them out to be. And we all have our unfortunate reasons for making them seem worse than they are.

So this month, here's your challenge:

1. Take a brutally honest look at your life and figure out where you exaggerate the most.
2. Figure out why you do it.
3. Then make yourself notice the cost; identify how your exaggeration is unfair to others or to yourself (and how it might hurt others or yourself).
4. Finally, do something to fix this!

Be gentle with yourself as you go about this assignment. The point is not to beat yourself up but to give yourself an opportunity to heal something, to restore something, to make things right, or whole.

And you don't have to fix it all at once. Just one small step. That's all you need to take on this month. You'll have plenty of time to finish the job.

FOR REFLECTION: Some Resources to Prime the Pump

As always these are not “required reading.” We will not analyze or dissect them in our group. They are meant simply to get you thinking and to enrich your thoughts as you think about the two questions and spiritual exercise listed above.

From the “Readers Write” section of a literary magazine called *The Sun*:

All the children in my large Irish family attended Catholic school, where we were taught to handle pain, whether gnawing hunger or a parent’s angry slap across the face, by “offering it up for the poor souls in purgatory.” I believed whatever hardship I endured would not only save someone else’s soul but also hasten my own journey to heaven.

My faith helped me cope with my mother’s undiagnosed manic-depression. I obsessively recited novenas that promised miracles if performed correctly and with devotion. I believed the priest’s assurances that if I prayed diligently, sacrificed, and accepted God’s will, my mother would know peace.

I was twelve years old and home alone with my mother when she attempted suicide. After failing to reach my father and my grandmother, I called an ambulance and then the parish priest. The ambulance came and went, and I waited on the front porch for Father M. to show up and comfort me, reassure me, lift the burden of responsibility.

When Father M. arrived, he asked if my mother had still been alive when the ambulance had left. I said I thought she had. “You know,” he said, “if she dies, she cannot be buried in a Catholic cemetery. Suicide is a mortal sin.”

While my mother recovered, I struggled with the realization that I would find neither compassion nor comprehension in the teachings of my church. I began to seek insight at the public library instead. But my parents still expected me to attend church.

I left the house by myself each Sunday morning, telling my parents that I was going to early Mass because I wanted the rest of my day free. I walked to the dough- nut shop a few blocks from the church, drank a cup of cocoa, and perused the day-old newspapers. Walking home an hour later, I composed a plausible theme for the morning’s sermon, in case I was asked. My fictional accounts seemed to bring my mother peace of mind.

Susan Haines, Anchorage, Alaska

From first to sixth grade I went to a small private school in Charlotte, North Carolina. The other children all had rich parents: businessmen dads and stay-at-home moms who were involved in the PTA. They were Southerners and went to Christian churches and lived in big, two-story houses.

My family was different. We were not Southern. We were not Christian. We weren’t even Jewish. My parents took my sister and me to a Unitarian Universalist church so we could explore many faiths. My mother and father weren’t married. They had different last names, and my sister and I were stuck with a hyphenated combination of the two. My dad did not put on a suit every day and go to an office and earn big bucks. He had a full beard and an earring and long, unkempt hair, and he stayed home to care for my sister and me and write country songs in his spare time. My mother was the one who got dressed up and went to work in an office.

In first grade I informed some of my classmates that you did not have to be married to have children: my parents weren't married, and I'd still been born. One of the girls went home and told her parents what I'd said, and my mother received a phone call from my teacher asking that I keep to myself the fact that "you can have the honeymoon without the wedding." In second grade I began to realize that my dad didn't look like the other dads when he came to pick me up from school. In fact, most dads didn't even come to school unless it was a special occasion. When the teachers called my name to go home, I would run into the parking lot ahead of my dad, so no one could tell I was with him.

One day I asked my mother why my dad couldn't just go to work and cut his hair and shave and wear normal clothes. "Because he doesn't want to," she replied. "But he embarrasses me!" I said. "You're lucky," she said. "You have a father who has time to get to know you." I rolled my eyes and continued to pretend that he wasn't my father.

These days my father does put on a suit every day and go to an office. His hair is short, and his earring hole has almost closed up. He writes a new song only every few years. Like my seven-year-old self, my dad's employer wants him to look the same and act the same as everyone else, even if that means he has to be someone he's not; even if he has to pretend.

Hannah Ely-Mooney
Charlotte, North Carolina

In my Junior year of college, I attended York University in England and spent weekends with my grandparents in their rambling house near London. I tried to act like a happy twenty-year-old, but I revealed the truth to my journal. I was depressed and lonely and had suicidal thoughts. I'd also developed a dark attraction to the poetry of Sylvia Plath, who'd taken her own life.

One Sunday afternoon, as I gathered my things to head back to school, I realized my journal was missing. I searched my grandparents' house until darkness fell and I finally had to race off without it to catch my train back to York.

When I returned the next weekend, my grandmother announced with great cheer, "Here's your diary! The cleaning ladies found it." I went along with her story, though it was clear to anyone who set foot in the house—where every surface was covered in layers of dog hair, and faded Christmas decorations from years past hung limply on the walls—that no cleaning person had visited in a long time. When I inspected the journal, there were fingerprints on almost every page.

At dinner that night Granny said to me, "Tell me about that writer you like, Sybil something-or-other." "Sylvia Plath," I said. "She was an American poet living in England. She killed herself in 1963." I'd never mentioned Plath to my grandmother, so I knew she must have read my journal.

"Her poor family," Granny said. "She probably had no idea how much she was loved and needed." She continued, "I remember being twenty." Another slip: Plath had been thirty when she died; it was I who was twenty. "It was the hardest time of my life. It is for everyone. But things get better. Sybil would have found that out if she'd held on just a little longer."

My grandmother had been through many hard times: the Second World War, trouble in her marriage, the death of an infant daughter. So her statement about twenty being the hardest age didn't ring true. But I agreed that "Sybil" should have hung on.

Granny put her gnarled hand on mine for a moment, then asked if I wanted pudding.

Lucinda Weatherby
Ashland, Oregon

I'm an actor, but for twelve years I held day jobs as a teacher. I taught everyone from homeless preschoolers to union members to teen felony offenders to fifth-graders (by far the most challenging.) At some point during each job, I would reveal to my co-workers that I was an actor, and they would say something like "Oh, teaching must be easy for you, then. You just get up and pretend to know what you're doing!"

Actually, I did pretend as a teacher: I pretended to care about tests. I pretended that getting through the day's lesson was of the utmost importance. I pretended that effective conflict resolution could be taught in twelve forty-five minute workshops. I pretended that getting your GED would radically alter your life, even if all the odds were stacked against you. I pretended that six months' rehabilitation could remove the obstacles that racism and poverty had placed in a young person's path. I pretended that I didn't care when students insulted or humiliated me. I pretended to believe that my students should listen to me as an authority figure. I pretended to respect my principal and to care about keeping my job.

There are indeed skills that are transferable from acting to teaching; pretending is not one of them. As an actor I never pretended. I always expressed the truth.

Susannah Mackintosh
Oakland, California

I was adopted during World War II by a Hollywood couple. My father was a moviemaker and my mother had been a singer on the radio and in nightclubs. My parents adopted me not because they wanted to be parents but because they needed me (and my brother) to complete their image of a couple who had it all: house in Beverly Hills, spaniel dog, fleet of servants, and two adorable children.

During the week my brother and I were cared for by the nanny, the cook, the housekeeper, and the gardener. We saw our parents mostly on Sundays, when we went with them to the country club and ate potato pancakes and creamed spinach from the buffet. We were expected to look and act perfect. I wore frilly dresses, spoke only when spoken to, ate with my correct utensils, and always cleaned my plate. I was a cardboard cutout of a little girl, sitting up straight in my high-backed, country-club chair.

My best memories are of visits to my grandmother's. "Gammy," my mother and my aunt would get manicures and while they waited for their nails to dry, they'd talk about the good old days in show business. My grandmother was in the Motion Picture Mothers' Club, an organization for women whose offspring were in movies. (My aunt had appeared in B-movie westerns.) When I was seven, I got to attend the club's annual rummage sale. It was held in a musty church basement lined with tables, on which were piled hats and earrings and fake pearls and old furs. I tried items on, layering one on top of another, and paid two dollars for all my loot.

Back home I experimented with various outfits, finally settling on a pink satin nightgown, oodles of jewelry, a wide-brimmed hat, and matching gloves. Awestruck by my metamorphosis in the mirror, I decided to give myself a new name: "Madam Modipuss." Little Janie was invisible; Madam Modipuss was flamboyant. Little Janie was mute; Madam Modipuss was bold. Little Janie always did what she was told; Madam Modipuss had a mind of her own. Little Janie took matters very seriously; Madam Modipuss, quite frankly, didn't give a damn.

Looking for a safe place to reveal the new me, I went to see the three-year-old boy next door. "I am Madam Modipuss!" I announced when they answered my knock. The boy just stared at me with his mouth open, but his mother invited me in. I spent many hours there and in time became known affectionately as "Modi."

Sixty years later I am driving through Little Italy on my way to see my granddaughters, who are sitting on the steps in front of their row house. When they spot my pumpkin-colored car, they shout the only name they know me by: "Modi, Modi, Modi!"

Anonymous

Quotes:

Whatever games are played with us, we must play no games with ourselves, but deal in our privacy with the last honesty and truth.
Ralph Waldo Emerson

Today I bent the truth to be kind, and I have no regret, for I am far surer of what is kind than I am of what is true.
Robert Brault

We do not err because truth is difficult to see. It is visible at a glance. We err because this is more comfortable.
Alexander Solzhenitsyn

Penetrate deeply into the secret existence of anyone about you, even of the man or woman whom you count happiest, and you will come upon things they spend all their efforts to hide. Fair as the exterior may be, if you go in, you will find bare places, heaps of rubbish that can never be taken away, cold hearths, desolate altars, and windows veiled with cobwebs.
Myrtle Reed

All civilization ever does is hide the blood and cover up hate with pretty words.
Ursula K. Le Guin

The most delusional fantasies can be made to masquerade as sanity if you've got the political power to reinforce them.
Penny Skillman

There's no such thing as a secret. There's just denial — agreement to pretend we don't know. I concluded this after watching a performer a couple of years ago, a fellow who could tell when people were lying and when they were telling the truth. He did it like a parlor trick on stage, but his services have been used by governments, police, jury selectors, and so on. And pretty much every technique he was using to discern the truth was based on one cue or the other that the liar was giving. What poker players call a "tell." And these "tells" are part of overall communications matrix. They are part of the 93% of human communication that takes place non-verbally.

See, on some level, we are all telling the truth no matter what. Our husbands and wives know when we are lying to them, even if they haven't allowed what they know to be true to fully enter consciousness. Our lying is ultimately useless, except insofar as it serves as "manners." We pretend we don't know.

Douglas Rushkoff, Media analyst & Documentary filmmaker; Author, Program or Be Programmed

“Stories” from the writer Brian Andreas:

i don't really have any secrets, she told me once. i just forget a lot of stuff.

he was always a twin but he kept the other one hidden under his Stetson to protect her from the sun & the wind & the stares of startled people.

i used to believe my father about everything but then i had children myself & now i see how much stuff you make up just to keep yourself from going crazy.

of course people lie to me, she said. i'm not the type you can trust with a credit card, much less the truth.

she kept asking if the stories were true. i kept asking her if it mattered. we finally gave up. She was looking for a place to stand. i was looking for a place to fly.

for a long time, she flew only when she thought no one else was watching

Podcasts:

This American Life

Show # 357: THE TRUTH WILL OUT

<http://www.thisamericanlife.org/radio-archives/episode/357/the-truth-will-out>

Does the truth always come out? Of course not! Though sometimes it comes out in the most uncomfortable ways imaginable. Stories of concealed truths bubbling to the surface.

The Diane Rehm Show

“Apology”

<http://thedianerehmshow.org/shows/2010-07-15/apology>

An exploration of what makes for a “real” apology

Radio Lab

“Deception”

<http://www.radiolab.org/2008/mar/10/>

Lies, liars, and lie catchers. This hour of Radiolab asks if it's possible for anyone to lead a life without deception. We consult a cast of characters, from pathological liars to lying snakes to drunken psychiatrists, to try and understand the strange power of lying to yourself and others.

Radio Lab

“The Bus Stop”

<http://www.radiolab.org/blogs/radiolab-blog/2010/mar/23/the-bus-stop/>

There's a common problem faced by Alzheimer's and Dementia patients all over the world: lost in their memories, they sometimes get disoriented, and wander off. In this podcast, Lulu Miller talks to a nursing home in Düsseldorf, Germany that came up with a novel solution. When an Alzheimer's or Dementia patient wanders, they can end up too far from home, frightened, or hurt. So what are you supposed to do if your loved one--a parent, a grandparent--begins to wander in this way? Often times the only solution is to lock them up. Which just feels cruel. But what else are you supposed to do if you want to keep them safe? Well, the Benrath Senior Center, came up with a new idea. An idea so simple you almost think it couldn't work

Movies:

I received a lot of recommendations for movies about honesty and lying, but one stood out so dramatically for me that I'm only going to list it--as a way of making it more likely that more of us will take the time to watch it! It's called:

My Kid Can Paint That

Here's a link to more information about it: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0912592/>

However, I strongly encourage you to not read too much about it or even watch the previews. You will understand why once you watch it.

And MOST IMPORTANTLY: Be sure to watch all of the special feature!!