



JOSEPH SORRENTINO

Readers Write

TELLING THE TRUTH

AS A MINISTER'S DAUGHTER, I THOUGHT being a good Christian meant you had to avoid hurting others at all costs. I didn't know that when someone asked me out, I could say no. There were times when I found myself lying in bed with a man, wanting to be anywhere but there. Sometimes I made excuses that helped me exit, but I never told the truth.

On my wedding day, I looked up into my husband's face as I recited my vows, but he wouldn't meet my eyes. A dark thought arose: *What have I done?* We had fifteen years and three children together before he initiated the divorce.

Years later I bought a house with another man. I knew within a week of moving in that something was wrong. My son knew it too. After five years he could no longer tolerate my partner's dictatorial behavior. The next night my son called me from his dad's house and said, "Mom, I love you more than anyone in the world, but I won't live with him anymore." That Friday night I sat down before my partner — with whom I'd spent hours in thera-

py, trying to get to the truth — and told him that no part of me wanted to work on the relationship anymore. I offered no false hope, no softening of the blow. I was leaving.

Since then I've doggedly told the truth, no matter what the cost. What's most important is to tell myself the truth, to see the world as it is, rather than how I want it to be.

Maggie H.

San Jose, California

ONE HOT SUMMER DAY WHEN I WAS A girl, tired of television and board games, a friend and I got into my parents' photo albums and began flipping through the pages. One album was thinner than the rest and faded with age. I had never seen it before. I opened it to find pictures of myself as an infant. In one photo, I was lying on a plaid blanket, using a crushed beer can as a teething ring. Another picture showed my mother sitting in a lawn chair and cradling me in her arms. There was a dark-skinned Latino man sitting

next to her, holding a can of beer and playfully shaking his fist at her.

That evening I showed my mother the photo and asked her who the man was. "Just a friend," she said. A few days later she called me into her bedroom, where she was getting undressed. As she pulled off her stockings, she said, "You remember that picture you showed me?" I nodded. "Well, that's your father."

My mother continued undressing, taking special care to avoid my eyes. I got up and left the room in shock. In the hallway I looked at the framed photographs of my mother's wedding, at which she'd married the man I now knew to be my stepfather. I had seen those photographs for as long as I could remember, but that day they told a different story.

Name Withheld

WHEN MY HUSBAND AND I SOLD OUR home, we planned to rent for a few months before we bought another house. I found a real-estate agency specializing in month-to-month rentals, but our rental applica-

tion was rejected. The manager made it clear that our planned short tenancy was the problem.

When we found an ad in the paper for another month-to-month rental, my husband and I agreed in advance to be vague about how long we'd need to rent. I felt bad, but the need to find a place to live outweighed my guilt.

Our application was approved. The manager who called to give us the good news asked, "Do you think you'll be able to mow the lawn?"

I hesitated; it was unlikely the grass would need mowing before June, and we would be gone long before then.

"Um . . . we do have a push mower," I said.

"Great," she replied.

I hadn't lied outright, but I felt terrible about my lie of omission. I began to reexamine instances in my life when people had lied to me. I had always assumed that dishonesty was an integral part of their character. I decided I would be a little less judgmental in the future.

*Cheryl Morgen
Bend, Oregon*

I PARK IN FRONT OF MY FRIEND

Tanya's house and turn off the engine. My seven-year-old son, Jake, is testy, but he'll do his best to be polite, because he knows how important this visit is, especially to Tanya, whose life has been shortened to precious days.

I take his hand and lead the way to Tanya's back deck. She is curled up on a lounge chair, her once-athletic body a faint outline under her favorite blanket. Chemotherapy was not an option for her, so her hair is still thick and curly.

I lean down for a gentle hug. Tanya slides her sunglasses off to show me that her eyes have turned yellow, like marigolds. She slips the glasses back on, gives me a brave half smile, and shrugs as if to say, *What can you do?*

"You look beautiful, sweetheart," I say. "And you've baked cookies today. You're doing great."

Tanya says to Jake, "There's a bag of ginger cookies on the table with your name on it."

Jakes smiles and whispers, "Thank you." He takes the bag of cookies and returns

to my side.

As we're driving home after our visit, Jake gently says, "I don't really like ginger cookies."

"I know."

"Sometimes it's OK not to tell the truth," he says.

"It is? When?"

"When your friend is dying of cancer."

*Mary Jane Taub
Ashland, Oregon*

I COME BY MY ALCOHOLISM HONESTLY. For generations, every male in my Irish family has been alcoholic, and those who didn't go into recovery often died from drinking. During my teens and twenties, my ambition, education, and professional training kept me from becoming addicted to alcohol, and I hoped I would be the exception to my family's rule. But my mother's sudden death in the last year of my psychiatric residency triggered a ten-day binge that blossomed into addiction.

For the next few years my wife and I

fought about my drinking, and I made many vows to cut down or stop, but I broke them all. I discovered during this period that lying about my drinking came as naturally as breathing.

I went on the wagon when my son was born, and I managed to stay sober for the next eight months by white-knuckling it. When I relapsed, I kept it a secret, and for nine years I hid my alcoholism.

Eventually I slipped up and came home too drunk to hide it. Seeing the sense of betrayal on my wife's face is the worst agony I have ever felt. It is also one of my strongest incentives not to drink.

*John Ruark
Portola Valley, California*

ANYTIME I'M LATE, I THINK OF INGENIOUS excuses; I invent circumstances to explain a forgotten promise to a friend; I lie without hesitation to an organization whose deadline I'm going to miss.

This propensity for lying is a legacy of my childhood. Telling the truth was not a family value in my home. When

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UPCOMING TOPICS	DEADLINE	PUBLICATION DATE
Chance Encounters	November 1	May 2008
Patriotism	December 1	June 2008
Now Or Never	January 1	July 2008
Up All Night	February 1	August 2008
Porches	March 1	September 2008
Finding Out	April 1	October 2008

my father and I stopped for ice-cream cones on the way back from running an errand, he'd tell me not to tell Mommy, so she wouldn't feel left out. Once he lied to a grocery-store clerk to get me some circus-themed playing cards that he insisted had been left out of our bag.

One day in my junior-high math class, I hadn't done my homework, and I told my teacher I'd left it in my father's car. I assured her that if she called my father, he'd verify my story. I knew he would cover for me, because we had an unspoken agreement: he would confirm any of my small lies in exchange for my hiding one big truth — that my father had claimed my body for his sexual gratification.

Name Withheld

I WAS SEVENTEEN AND FACING THE terrifying prospect of telling my best friend, Lena, the truth. We were sitting on the shag-carpeted floor of my bedroom, a bottle of cheap red wine between us. My hands shook as I tried to light a cigarette with a silver lighter Lena had given me. I'd recently returned home after running away and traveling with some hippie friends for a month. I'd come back with one purpose in mind: to tell Lena that I was in love with her.

The word *bisexual* was a whole lot easier to say than *lesbian*, but I choked on it anyway.

"Bisexual?" Lena asked, her brown eyes kind and patient as she tucked my long hair behind my ears.

"Yeah," I said, looking down.

"Does this have anything to do with me?" she asked.

I couldn't answer. I just stared at the glowing end of my cigarette. She put her hand over mine and said, "Did you ever think I might feel the same way about you?"

*Merry Song
Eugene, Oregon*

MY FATHER, A CAREER MILITARY-intelligence officer, taught me to lie. I learned to tell lies that were simple, easy to remember, and impossible to disprove. But he never intended for me to lie to him.

After high school I chose a college that was as far from my father as I could get. I became interested in the spiritual

aspects of psychedelics and started experimenting with marijuana, mescaline, and LSD. I was tripping on acid when I came to understand that truth was light and lies were darkness, so truth became my path to enlightenment.

The next time I visited my parents, I felt a strong need to tell them about my life. With my lover there for moral support, I proudly told my father and mother that I was not a virgin, and that I believed smoking marijuana was a rewarding experience. I quit before I got to the part about LSD. My mother cried, and my father got me to promise that I would never smoke marijuana again. Afterward everyone retreated to their rooms.

Alone and trembling in the guest room, I realized that, out of habit, I had told another lie. So I went to my parents' room and told them I was no longer going to lie to them, that I would certainly be smoking marijuana again, and that there was nothing they could do to change that.

My father ordered me to leave the house. As long as I insisted on doing drugs, I was not welcome there. My mother held my face in her hands and cried, "I could have died giving birth to you!" My lover and I left. I didn't return to my parents' house for many years.

My parents and I eventually reconciled, and I learned that telling the truth can be a spiritual path, but it must be undertaken with compassion. Some truths are cruel, and hard to bear, and must be carried alone.

S.M.K.

Santa Rosa, California

TOMMY AND I MET IN 1952 WHILE playing in the same creek. We became instant friends but knew not to tell anyone about our friendship, because Tommy was black and I was white.

He and I went to different elementary schools, even though we lived less than half a mile apart. One afternoon I brought my schoolbooks to the creek to do my homework. When Tommy saw me, he came to a sudden halt. "Girl, I can't believe what you've done!" he yelled. "Are you crazy?"

"What are you talking about?" I asked. "These are just my schoolbooks. I was doing my homework."

Tommy stared at me. "*Your* schoolbooks? I thought you had stolen them from school," he said. "In our school, only the teachers have books."

Tommy was a fast reader and wanted to be a doctor; he especially loved my science book, so I started bringing it home every day. We'd been told never to check out a school library book for another person, but I began bringing library books to Tommy, too, and he devoured them.

When our school librarian praised me to my teacher for being such an avid reader, I blushed in shame. I knew I was supposed to tell the truth, but I remained silent. As I stared at my shoes, I wondered for the first time whether telling the truth and *living* the truth were always the same thing. Living the truth suddenly seemed bigger.

*Roberta Parker Martin
Black Mountain, North Carolina*

I FIRST HAD SEX WHEN I WAS TWENTY-one, with a man to whom I wasn't attracted. I found myself painfully self-conscious and somewhat disembodied during the act. I didn't have an orgasm.

In the years that followed, I continued not having orgasms during sex. It didn't even occur to me to fake one; I was so anxious and insecure that my own arousal didn't factor into the equation. The men apparently felt the same way, because none of them acknowledged my pleasure — or lack of it. As time went on, though, my inability to have an orgasm made me feel defective and ashamed, so I started faking it.

The first time I had sex with the man who would later become my husband, I faked an extraordinary climax. I had become a pretty good actress over the years. Afterward he told me how much it had meant to him to be able to give me such pleasure. When I heard this, I felt a bit disappointed by how gullible he was, but mostly I felt sad and alone.

Months of dating this man increased my self-esteem and my comfort with my sexuality, and I gradually began to inhabit my body during lovemaking. Finally the day came when I had my first authentic orgasm. It was less dramatic on the outside, but on the inside it felt great — honest and satisfying.



EDIS JURCYS

Yet I was still alone in this new experience. I didn't want to hurt his feelings, or face my own guilt, by revealing my past dishonesty, so I lied again — this time by omission. But this new deception began to weigh on me. Finally I decided to end the charade. "You know, you're the first person I ever had an orgasm with," I whispered to him in bed one evening. There was a pause. "Really?" he said. He asked when the first time had been. I told him. A longer pause. "But what about the other times?"

He was confused and insulted, thinking I had faked it to protect his ego. In tears, I explained that I hadn't wanted him to find out that I was an uptight, neurotic girl pretending to be a woman. I had never felt so vulnerable. I had also never felt so relieved. Having told the truth, I could finally be my real self.

Name Withheld

MY LITTLE BROTHER BEANY WAS ONLY two when Dad died of cancer. Mom packed the family into a white Ford station wagon and moved us from southern Ohio to the coast of New Hampshire, where we knew no one. Under my bed, in an old tin box, I kept the family photographs. Late at night I would take them out and organize them as a way to reassure myself

that Dad had, in fact, existed.

One afternoon I found four-year-old Beany and his best friend, Peter, staring up at our imposing portrait of John Brown, the abolitionist who attempted to start a slave rebellion in Harper's Ferry, Virginia. Peter pointed to the painting of the man in a tattered uniform and asked who he was. Beany said, "That's my dad. He was killed in the war. Shot between the eyes." Peter's eyes opened wide, and he said, "Wow!"

To correct this misinformation, I went upstairs and got a picture of Dad to show Beany and Peter. When I returned, the boys were out in the yard, playing soldiers and gleefully reenacting Dad's death scene. I stopped and watched. The boys looked up at me.

"Hi, Mandy," Beany said. "We're playing war. What's that?"

"Oh, nothing. Just an old photo," I said. I tucked the picture into my pocket and walked back inside. Who was I to take away his truth and replace it with my own?

*Amanda Donovan
Portsmouth, New Hampshire*

IN THE EARLY SEVENTIES, WHEN I was twelve years old, recreational drug use was rampant. Fascinated by my older siblings' stories about the parties they

went to, I thought it would be cool to be a "druggie."

I'd heard the term "reds," but I knew nothing about them except that they were pills. I started to boast to the kids at school that I was doing reds. One day the Therault sisters showed me two pills they said were reds. I looked at the red ovals and said, "Oh, yeah, can I have them?" They could have been rat poison for all I knew, but I swallowed them anyway. About ten minutes later I started to pretend I was getting high by running around, screaming, and mimicking what I thought a "bad trip" might look like.

After I'd calmed down, the Therault sisters flatly told me that the pills were Geritol. I tried to cover for myself by saying I'd taken some reds earlier, but they'd gotten me good. I never wanted to get caught in a lie like that again.

I didn't. I grew up to be an addict.

*Andrea Laws
East Hartford, Connecticut*

(end of excerpt)