Relinquishing the Truth
Anne Dohrenwend, PhD

In this essay, the author reflects on a case involving a client who presented to therapy asking for professional guidance as to whether she should tell her adult child of her true paternity. The child was the product of a paternal rape. The author explores the impact of this case on her thinking about truth as prerequisite to healing.

The expression “The truth will set you free” implies a promise and a presumption. It promises that truth will overcome oppression. It is a bold promise, stated without restriction. It presumes that truth is prerequisite to healing. I am a psychologist, and I have been a believer in truth, so defined. In its varied forms (disclosure, insight, acceptance, etc), truth has always been fundamental to my philosophy of healing. You may not share my assumptions about truth or my faith in its healing power, but there must be some core value that saturates your philosophy, a belief so ubiquitous to your thinking that you both rely on it and take it for granted. Such was truth for me, until recently. What follows is a case about incest. More specifically, it is about my client’s struggle for freedom and my struggle with relinquishing the truth.

Laura (not her real name) had been sexually assaulted by her biological father for years. Inevitably and horribly, she became pregnant. Desperate, she managed to convince her boyfriend that he was the father of her unborn child, and they married. Though they eventually divorced, her husband remained devoted to the child and never questioned his paternity or his responsibilities.

At the time that Laura first sought counseling, her daughter was happily married with several children and enjoying a successful career. The same was not true for Laura. Her father, who had so brutally raped her throughout her adolescence, was dying. He had never before openly admitted to abusing Laura but now made a death bed plea for forgiveness. Laura had survived by compartmentalizing her abuse, pushing it aside, working hard to forget it. Her father’s confrontation crushed this defense and triggered an emotional crisis.

During our first session, it was obvious that she was immobilized by anxiety and depression. Several sessions more and it was clear that she was seriously considering suicide. I thought it best to refer her for inpatient psychiatric treatment and she agreed. After completing inpatient treatment, she was referred to the treating psychiatrist’s outpatient clinic for follow-up. It wasn’t until 6 months later that she returned to my office.

When we finally met again, she told me that she was feeling better about herself and hopeful about her future. She was smiling. The dazed look in her eyes was gone. She told me straightaway that she had a single purpose for returning to see me. She was torn about whether to tell her daughter the truth—that she was the offspring of a paternal rape. The truth had been so healing for Laura. Speaking out loud about her sexual abuse had allowed her to jettison the shame she’d carried for most of her life. She knew from personal experience that accepting the truth was painful, but she’d learned that truth was the best defense against sexual violence. Predators rely on secrecy and lies, and the truth strips them of this cover. Having learned this, my client now asked, could the truth be useful to her daughter in some unpredictable way? Isn’t it always better to tell the truth about the family predator?

In essence, she was asking me two questions. Is it always best to go public with the name of a sexual abuser? And, secondly, does my daughter have a right to know the truth about the identity of her biological father? I will begin with the latter.

From private practice, Flint, MI
I have worked with women who waited too long to tell their children about their unknown fathers. They did so, with my support, for a number of reasons. These include believing that a child has a basic right to know the identity of his or her biological father, to know half-siblings, and to have a complete and accurate family medical history. Sometimes, the right of the father to know of his biological child serves as the trigger for disclosure. Fear is a motivating factor as well, such as the fear that the child will discover the truth from another source and the fear that the child might unwittingly become intimate with a biological relative.

I should add that the “rights” I described above are not legal rights, nor are they wholly agreed upon. There are those who see the decision of whether to disclose either of the biological parent’s identities as solely the parent’s choice. Certainly, this is the presumption in adoption when the parent’s identities are sealed. My perception of “rights” clearly arises out of the value I place on transparency. Countless times I have witnessed the emotional turmoil that results from well-intended attempts to bury a truth thought to be too painful to bear. Unfortunately, children are often the objects of such protectionism. In my experience, they are the most likely to sense something unsaid and, due to their egocentrism and limited reasoning ability, the least equipped to deal with resulting ambiguity.

At any rate, none of these rights, or reasons if you prefer, seemed to apply in Laura’s scenario. Her daughter would gain no additional information about her medical history. There were no undiscovered relatives—no lost potential siblings and no chance of falling in love with a close relative without knowledge of the familial tie. There was no risk of her accidently discovering the truth. Laura’s grandfather was Laura’s biological father. One could suggest that Laura’s ex-husband had a right to know that his daughter was not his biological offspring but, based on the description of their relationship as close and enduring, it was hard to imagine how the truth would be of value to him. Should Laura go public with the name of her sexual abuser? Laura had a right to say anything she wanted to anyone about what had happened to her, and there are obvious benefits of public accusation, even when the pedophile is deceased. From a psychological perspective, speaking out can be de-victimizing. It demonstrates that the victim is no longer subject to the predator’s control. By speaking up, other past victims are encouraged to come forward, break the chains of abuse, and get help. By calling out the predator, the victim becomes a survivor; then the survivor moves on, beyond survival, to an identity in which abuse takes a back seat. When helping victims of incest and other forms of family violence, it is important that we not fall captive to the predator’s way of thinking, that is, that a victim of violence can never be free from the negative effects of abuse. This kind of thinking harbors an insidious hopelessness that undermines healing. With support from others, such as loving family, survivor groups, and therapy, many women truly rid themselves of the damage inflicted by abuse. Anderson, in her book about incest and other forms of family violence, describes this as “surviving, prevailing, and ultimately triumphing over family violence.”

In Laura’s case, much of the above would be true. We know that sexual predators typically have multiple, if not many, victims and that Laura’s healing, if shared, might spread to others in her family and even play a role in ending what is often an intergenerational problem, but there was also the effect the truth might have on her daughter. If Laura went public, her daughter might discern the truth—that her grandfather was her father. Surely, this would be traumatizing and potentially, life-altering. Then again, Laura could go public about her experience of sexual abuse without addressing her daughter’s paternity. If her daughter asked the feared question, she could always lie to her.

She could always lie. The words stick in my throat. I feel as though I’m violating a sacred oath just by typing them out. After all, truth is the backbone of rich and resilient relationship. It defends against manipulation. It promotes accurate understanding. Truth-telling has served my clients well. On the other hand, maybe my fidelity to the truth is too absolute. I did attend 8 years of parochial school. Perhaps I have yet to disabuse myself of the terror that any lie might be deemed a “mortal sin,” eg, the kind that sends you straight to hell if not confessed. I found myself asking, was my discomfort grounded in good therapy or counter-transference?

I decided to bring the case up in peer consultation. When I did, I was shocked to find that my colleagues arrived at a unanimous recommendation in record time. They thought my patient should withhold the truth of her daughter’s paternity. To these other psychologists, it is too absolute. I did attend 8 years of parochial school. Perhaps I have yet to disabuse myself of the terror that any lie might be deemed a “mortal sin,” eg, the kind that sends you straight to hell if not confessed. I found myself asking, was my discomfort grounded in good therapy or counter-transference?

The next contact with my client went something like this… “You came to see me to decide whether or not to tell your daughter that her grandfather was her biological father. You wanted a professional opinion as to what would be best for your daughter. Before I answer, do you have a need to tell others, including your daughter, the truth?” The patient responded quickly. She told me that her only need was to do the right thing for her daughter. If she could do that, she would be at peace. I went on… “Without using your name, I shared your struggle with my colleagues. Given the emotional turmoil it would likely cause
her, we couldn’t find a good reason for you to tell your daughter.” The tension fell from her face. I went on. “You have your answer then. You can end your father’s abuse by not letting him touch your daughter’s life. Now that you’ve put the question to rest, move on, and put your energy into finding happiness.” She hugged me, thanking me again and again.

Laura’s healing required that she accept and deal with the painful truth of her abuse. The choice to withhold the truth from her daughter had an irrefutable benefit as well. Typically, silence protects the abuser and enables the abuse. In this case, my client’s silence subdued the abuser. It had made him impotent and ineffective against her daughter.

As a result of all this, I’ve had to create a small space in my philosophy for exceptions to the truth. This frightens me. Secrets are the proverbial skeletons in the closet. They lie in wait and pop out unexpectedly. I don’t like skeletons. It also complicates things. Truth-telling is comfortably democratic. Paternalism, or maternalism in this case, may have its virtues, but it is a covert operation with a proclivity for relational twists and tangles. Don’t get me wrong. I think I offered the right guidance to my client, but I am left with a sense of surrender. In a small way, the abuser took something from me as well. He made me use his tool, deception, to undo him. Therapy, for me, has been the pumping of fresh air and light into cramped, closed spaces, but to that world of sun and air, I now add one dank and lightless place, housing one cruel biological reality. I can’t help but wonder what other truths might find a home there.

CORRESPONDENCE: Address correspondence to Dr Dohrenwend, 3230 Beecher Road, Suite 2, Flint, MI 48532. 810-342-5826. Fax: 810-342-5810. anned@mclaren.org.

References