

An Editor's Invitation: Telling the Truth

Category: Telling the Truth

written by Paul Gross | March 1, 2019

To me, there's something sacred about honesty, and telling the truth is one of the things that attracted me to the healing professions. Inside an exam room or a therapist's office, any magic that happens arises out of honesty: We talk about what's really going on in the body or in the soul. We acknowledge our fears. We say things that, in the telling, bring us relief.

The truth can be painful. I know. I was once given the diagnosis of type 1 diabetes. But what stung more than the truth itself was the way in which that truth was delivered to me—in a waiting room, by a receptionist.

Expressed in private, with compassion and humility, the truth can begin a healing process, even as it inflicts the wound.

While one imagines a cancer diagnosis as being painful to deliver—and it is—I'm equally pained by another scenario: Telling a young married woman, or one who's faithful to her longtime partner, that she's acquired a sexually transmitted infection, one that she didn't have a year ago.

"How could this have happened?"

Unfortunately, I can only think of one likely way—a way that will probably be devastating to hear.

Sometimes patients also find it difficult to tell the truth. It's hard to acknowledge to a doctor you want to please that you haven't been the ideal patient: That you don't like taking your cholesterol pill, so on many days you don't; or that it's hard to avoid unhealthy temptations, so oftentimes you give in to them.

And of course there's the challenge of family and friends being honest with one another around issues of illness and mortality. "If Mom has something bad, don't tell her. Tell us." These are words that I hate to hear.

"Your mother is my patient," I have to respond. "Much as you would like to protect her, I can only keep her in the dark if she tells me that that's what she wants."

Honesty is one of the things I treasure about Pulse. Here's a space where we've agreed that the truth is not only bracing and liberating, it's also a form of intimacy—and sometimes a first step toward change and redemption.

Here's a place where things we don't get to say aloud can be expressed. Where our vulnerabilities are welcomed—and forgiven. Where flaws—ours, and those of the systems we work under—can be put on the table and examined.

This month's More Voices theme is Telling the Truth. We'd love to receive your story about telling, not telling, or perhaps dancing around the truth.

Paul Gross
New Rochelle, NY