



Chapter Five

Truth #2

"The truth is always exciting. Speak it, then. Life is dull without it."

— Pearl S. Buck

We moved to California when I was seven. The trip took two weeks, but I remember only the accident. An hour out of Little Rock a drunk driver hit us head on, totaling both cars. Although I was seated on the front seat, I do not recall the oncoming car and only remember my mother calling out that it was going to hit us. I also remember the mice in our hotel room, my sore back, and the bright blue car we got to finish the trip. For two weeks and two thousand miles, nothing else remains of this major event. We discussed no hopes, no reflections, no anything of emotional significance. We could have sitting in traffic on the way to Kenosha.

There was nothing to say because honesty was off limits. A real discussion might have gone:

“How will we register Bob in school without a birth certificate?” asked Ann, anxiously.

“We can handle that when we get there”, Stanley responded. “Right now I am worried about whether transporting a black-market child across state lines constitutes a crime.”

“Mom, we can lie to the new school like we did to the old one,” I added, trying to be helpful.

“Thanks, son.”

At least someone might have remembered that conversation.

Two factors worked against us. First, the black-market aspect presented serious problems. They ranged from possible criminal charges to dissolution of the placement. Second, the Andersens opted for deceit over truth in handling my adoption. The first factor did not mandate the second. They could have come much closer to the truth without including the black-market aspect. And with my adoption this issue became moot. Their deceit prevented me from understanding our family dynamics. That is bad enough, but the process of gaining such understanding forms a part of the actual relationship. We could have honestly discussed adoption and crafted a cooperative response, but I could not logically be an active party to a system that failed to recognize my sovereignty. They offered security with servitude or integrity with isolation. I was not that courageous and opted for security.

The trip was not unique for its lack of memories. I remember almost nothing of events in our house during my seven years in Wisconsin. Here is the list:

- 1) Ann and I added yellow coloring to white margarine.
- 2) I almost pulled the refrigerator down on myself swinging on its door.
- 3) Stanley painted himself into a corner of the basement (which I thought was pretty dumb).
- 4) Stanley slipped on the ice coming back from work and arrived home with a broken ankle.
- 5) Our telephone number was Jackson 627.
- 6) My dog stayed in the house when it was cold.

Outside was different. I remember fireflies, Easter egg hunts, toboggans, school, marbles, Mrs. Flanagan, and so on indefinitely. Why the difference? The outside activities were genuine, they had energy; the inside ones were pretend, they were flat. People remember things that matter and forget those that do not. No one remembers small talk on the way to the emergency room.

They blamed me for our lack of vitality. That was an easy move since they devalued my birthparents. But feelings occur in context. One can not paste a happy face on a front end collision—or at least expect it to stick. The tedium belonged to them, since they were the ones who refused to address the issues. Finger pointing confused the issue but did not fix any problems.

I am hoping to understand the family dynamics of my childhood. Comprehension is a laudable goal, but it is not fulfilling emotionally. It does not redress prior insults; it just helps prevent future ones. Still, it is what I am aiming for here. There is nothing more. And it does not bring closure. Nothing does. Understanding is the best we can hope for. Yet it is something.

But understanding does not lead to forgiveness. It leads to confrontation or withdrawal because it points out the probable intractability of the behavior in question. Any ugly human behavior can be explained as a reaction to frustration or fear, but that does not explain it away. Hitler allegedly became obsessed with Aryan purity because he contracted syphilis from a Jewish prostitute in 1921. No treatment was available, and he could only watch the progression of his disease. But that does not sanction his behavior. Evil is defined by the actions one takes to avoid existential realities, not by the realities themselves. The realities are simply tragic. People add the evil.

The Andersens lied to me because they felt entitled to compensation for their loss and feared losing their defense against it. But that does not mitigate its effect on me. I can neither forgive nor forget. Forgiving is pretentious. If you walk in another person's shoes you realize how you might have acted as that person did. From where then do you get the traction to offer forgiveness? That is better left to God. And trying to forget is an oxymoron. How do you recall what you are supposed to forget without remembering it? The productive response to insult is to render it mute, i.e., if you are refused a loan, earn the money yourself.

So my options with the Andersens became reduced to approach or retreat. I prefer the latter. I have never been successful at changing someone else's behavior, perhaps starting with my birthmother. The Andersens used me as a means. I have scaled back my view of them as parents. Anything less debases the term parent. The issue is now essentially moot, but the lesson is not. I cut relationships today at the first sign of insincerity and do not second guess my reads. It works for me.

Their demands presented a metaphysical problem about the nature of feelings. Comprehension involves addressing this issue. So we return to Descartes and Spinoza.

Thoughts are energy independent—it takes no more energy to imagine walking twenty miles as it does to imagine two. But feelings are thoughts en route to action, and as such they enter the material world. This means they cannot just be created at will. Also, they are dependent on context. To laugh at a joke you have to find it funny. You can laugh at something you do

not find funny but that is pretending to laugh. It is not laughing.

The bottom line is that we experience feelings, we do not create them. Telling yourself you like rap music is not going to make you like it. (Thank God.) The primary rule of feelings is simple, and we do not make it.

Primary Rule: Whatever increases our capacity to survive provides pleasure. Whatever decreases that capacity produces displeasure.

Wishful thinking cannot override that rule. It is grounded in nature—and perhaps beyond.

How then do we maintain agency? We cannot just paste affect on experience. Meaning is determined by context and context determined by capacity to survive. So losing a finger is never a good thing. But we do have some ability to reinterpret the context, which can change the experience. For example, a pitcher loses a finger and decides to pursue law rather than professional baseball. That might turn out well for him. But he altered the context. He did not just redefine the injury. We appear to be able to rearrange nature, but not create it.

What does that say about the Andersens and me? Everything the Andersens did with respect to our relationship was designed for effect. They used me as a means to protect Ann's well being and never as a partner in dealing with life situations. They colored information for their benefit, not mine.

Stanley treated me as if I was his real son. Perhaps I treated him as if he was my real father. But we were tripping all over ourselves there. It was like laughing at jokes that were not funny.

So I was treated as a means, not an end, offered pretend rather than genuine, and expected to respond with enthusiasm. Maybe they presumed I was too slow to get the read, but that merely adds another insult. This was not a context to foster togetherness or energy. To fault me for lack of enthusiasm appears ignorant at best. At worst, it was immoral. Buying a baby was the least of their problems. Mortgaging his soul comprised the bigger offense.

I remain uncompromising on this issue. But it was my major issue. Resolution of adoption conflict does not come through meeting one's birth family or getting medical information. Typically it involves learning about growing up with platitudes and letting go of idealizations. The lies presented me with a bigger problem than my relinquishment. Stripped of a need to protect the sensibilities of the Andersens or my birth family, i.e.,

looking for the truth, I now see that both sets failed badly as parents. They cannot merely be excused as well-intended, and the problem written off to some form of miscommunication. I seek no entitlement at the end of this narrative. No charges are to be filed. My goal is simply to find the truth from which to move forward. But anger is inseparable from honesty here. Free will may allow us to do what we please, but it does not allow us to please what we please.

The Andersen's plan was at fault, not my character. You cannot engender trust with lies, any more than you evoke love with force. And feigning responses would not change that at all. I am angry about being blamed for their shortcomings. I should be. It will help keep me out of similar situations in the future.

People misunderstand anger. They follow Descartes, faulting the feeling and not the situation. Anger is determined like any other emotion. It is the contextual response to interference with our well being. It is not a toxin. It will not eat you up. Sometimes we misinterpret a situation and generate anger internally, which is not good; but sometimes a goon kicks our dog. What then should we do, offer milk and cookies? Anger supplies energy to fix a problem. It does not itself become a problem if one has defined the situation accurately and selected an appropriate (Spinoza's "adequate") response.

Pretending not to be angry of course precludes both accurate assessment and appropriate response. Pretense is easy but holds no future. Truth is difficult but enduring. "Pick one," says Emerson, "you cannot have both."