



by Dolores Wilber

The Chair

The first time I remember knowing that I was being told something important was during a lecture by a graduate student, a teaching assistant, in a philosophy class. She had long hair down to her waist and we were sitting in a cinder block kind of room in a state college that was experimenting with contemporary building design. The chairs in the classroom were standard issue. Some part of them was wood, some part was steel and some part a hardened plastic material. They were not attractive, comfortable, interesting or even particularly functional. Just okay. Chairs.

She picked one up and put it in front of the class or maybe just in the aisle in the crowded classroom, the fluorescent light shown down on it and we all looked.

She told us that someone had made that chair. Someone had sat down (on another chair), and with pencil and paper had drawn sketches for what that chair should look like. Someone drew sketches considering how the chair would be used, and by whom, and what material it should be made of and how it could be manufactured by a machine. Then that person, or someone else, would find and order the materials from other people whose job it was to make those materials. Then someone else would figure out how to make the chairs with machines so that the chairs could be produced in quantity. And then someone, actually probably a number of people together, would build the chair, many chairs in fact, using the machinery that had been made by someone to make the chair. And then someone else would figure out how to get them to the school. After someone at the school had decided that these chairs were the right chairs for the school. And then someone else would load the chairs into a truck and drive them to the school. That person would unload the chairs at the school and leave them. And then someone would set them up, possibly put them together if some assembly was required. And then each of us could sit on one of the chairs.

Someone made the chair I am sitting on. This is the most important thing anyone has ever told me.

Before the lecture, a chair was just an object, period, it had no history, no relationship to anyone's intentions or actions, it was just there, poof, for our use. My life was never the same after that. It is not that everything before had been a lie. Granted lies are everywhere, real and fake. Sometimes I said I lied when I hadn't. I don't know why I did that. But I had not been told the truth. I am not sure that anyone I knew, knew the truth. Even my father, who made lots of things and who certainly knew that men, at least, made things. But he would not have considered this something to tell or talk about.

The Secret Boyfriend

The graduate student became my friend, a confidante who knew all about a world that I wanted to be a part of. I listened to everything she said. She told me all about everything. She taught me to listen to the lyrics of the Rolling Stones, and how so much of it was about sex. After a long and hard kiss, when I became secret lovers with a complicated older man, she told me to take valium, if necessary. Do not act particularly interested, merely mildly interested, perhaps interested, maybe not even. But what about telling the truth at all times no matter what the consequences, no matter what anyone else thought, what about saying what you know is right, fighting for what you know is true, what about sharing everything, and what about not lying? And then she told me the next most important thing that anyone has ever told me. She said that the truth was not necessarily the first thing that came to mind, that the truth was not blurring out whatever happened to you or whatever was on your mind at any particular moment. The truth might be really different than that. My life was never the same after that either. The truth could sometimes be really complicated and hard to understand and that perhaps we could not know the truth until a long time afterwards, and maybe never.

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Everyone lies

Every single person lies sometimes. Anyone who says they never lie, is lying.

The worst thing

The worst thing is for someone you love to lie to you.

The worst thing is for someone you love to lie to you about something important.

Which is true? Is either statement true?

The worst thing

Dissembling

The best thing

Make believe

The best thing

Not make believe

Questions about lying

Do you force people to lie when they know you don't want to hear the truth? Are you culpable when someone lies to you (ever)? That is, is it your fault? How do you know? Don't be smug. Don't be too quick. How do you know? What do you do when someone lies to you over and over again? Do you leave them? What if they are in trouble, a lot of trouble?

A friend once told me that he was lying all of the time and that he felt that he was holding his personality, like sand, in the palms of his hands cupped together. And that like sand, who he was, was slipping through his palms no matter how hard he tried, no matter how hard he gripped his hands together.

In Buddhism, in times of great grief, when sitting in a contemplative posture, you kneel with your hands clasped together, one hand holding the other, not with your fingers intertwined but holding hands like if you were lovers or close, close friends, holding yourself together. After a while you can let go a little bit by bit.

When my father was sick

My father was sick, very sick, for the last ten years of his life. He took a fall on a construction site, suffering a head trauma concussion, had fingers almost cut off from a sewer cover slamming down, a heart attack and arterial bypass surgery, total paralysis syndromes and finally lymphoma cancer in his lungs, probably from exposure to chlorine gas. He was stalwart through the physical travail, his body could take it and I don't ever remember him complaining. But he was very clear on one thing, Irish Catholic that he was. On no account was he to be told by us, or anyone else, that he was going to die, that his time had come. Without hesitation, and even after being teased and pressed, he was quite clear: we were to lie to him. And true to who we are, we kept our word.

My father stopped attending Sunday Mass when an usher insisted that he sit down after he had arrived very late for Mass one Sunday morning. He told the usher that he wanted to wait to take a seat till the next Mass and would stand until this one was done. The usher insisted, asserting his usher authority. My father left and never returned. Twenty years later, as his end bore down on him and fear was palpable in his eyes and depleted body, my anguish lead me to find an Irish Catholic priest, around 70 years old, the

age of my father. I would pick up Father Shenagan and drive him to see my father once a week or so for a few months. In the car, he would complain about woman drivers, and I would do my best to be polite. I knew that his goal was to save my father's soul, but they never talked about that directly, as far as I could tell. This was simply a visit, man-to-man, to talk about life. And it was a great comfort and honor to my father. When he died, Father Shenagan took over and told us all what to do. He told us that what was happening now—the final Mass and prayers and gathering of family and friends—had nothing to do with us, it was all about my mother, my father's wife. We did as we were told. Father Shenagan delivered the eulogy at the Mass. Like Spencer Tracy, racing back and forth across the stage, the story he told about my father, the man who raised four kids and was married for close to fifty years, was not a story that I, or my brothers and sisters, recognized as our father. In fact, I would venture to say that there was not a shred of the truth that I knew in the story this good man told about my father. But what did I really know of my father's life? My father was not really capable of a conversation that lasted for more than two or three sentences of exchange. And my attempts pretty much failed. Except perhaps for once.

It was towards the end, and I was in the car, driving my dad somewhere, probably home from the hospital on one of his many trips to and from. He looked sideways over at me and said, "So, I was there for you kids when you were growing up, right?" My heart sank at this question, because of course he had never been there. And for most of my growing up, he and I had been at all out war. And most of my operating posture as an adult had been to be polite, show up, try not to have more than a cursory conversation about politics,

religion or my personal life, virtually about anything with my family, because all roads lead to knock-down drag-out fights, not physical, but everything up until that thin line. My psychological defense was daydreaming and nodding, physical presence and emotional absence or perhaps a kind of twilight of presence. But something about the exhaustion of long, long illness, gave me the strength or provided the weakness to simply say what I knew to be true, "No, dad, you weren't." And after a pause, he said, "No, I guess I wasn't." And after another pause, he said, "But your mother was." And I could say, "Yes, ma was. And you brought in money so we were all okay." He nodded and seemed happy with this information. Nothing more was said. That one exchange of a few sentences against all odds allowed for some true sense to pass between us.

Before my father was sick

It was in the car years before when I had a failed exchange of this nature with my mother. I was driving her somewhere when my daydreaming was interrupted by "I think your father is having an affair." The grip of my hands on the steering wheel clenched and sickness in my stomach rose up. Of course we all knew my father had been having an affair with the waitress across the street from his shop for years. We all hated it and were disgusted with his inability to keep it a secret, hoping that ma would never know or perhaps just not say what she might suspect. I don't remember what I said. I know I did not confirm or deny my knowledge of events. I know that she went on to say in a stumbling way that she had not always been good. I remember saying that whatever makes you happy is okay with me, ma. That was the best I could do at the time.