

**“The 12 Steps: Honest Healing”**  
**12 Steps Series – 1 & 2**  
**Psalm 32; Luke 5:12-16**  
**Andrew Foster Connors**  
**2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday after Pentecost**  
**June 18, 2017**

We’re all a bunch of liars, according to the research. The average human being lies at least 1-2 times per day, according to those who study this habit.<sup>1</sup> It’s thought that lying first developed among human beings at about the same time as language when people learned that lying is often an easier way to gain advantage over others than through brute force. Call it a nonviolent innovation among humankind.

You get better at lying the older you get. In one experiment, researchers ask kids to guess the identity of toys hidden from their view, based on some obvious sound clues. For the first few toys, the clue is obvious—a bark for a dog, a meow for a cat. After that the sound played has nothing to do with the toy. The experimenter then leaves the room on the pretext of taking a phone call – apparently you have to lie in order to study lying. And then when she returns the child is asked the question, “Did you peek or not?” Most of the children actually do peek. But while only 30% of 3-4 olds lie about their indiscretion, 50% of 5-6 year-olds lie, rising to a whopping 80% of 7-8 year-olds who lie about taking a peek.<sup>2</sup>

Not only do the older kids lie more, but they get better at lying, too. Kids under 7 have less-developed lying skills. One five-year-old girl who denied having looked at the toy, told the researcher that she wanted to feel the toy before guessing. So she put her hand under the cloth where the toy was hidden and said “Ah, I know it’s Barney.” The researcher asked, “How do you know.” And the girl replied, “Because it feels purple.” (Not a very convincing lie). I’m sure her lying has improved since then. The frequency of lying peaks between the ages of 13-17, but by then, our facility with lying is well established.

Two things about this research really stand out for me. The first is that the more you lie, the easier it becomes to lie in the future. The brain’s emotional processing center actually becomes less activated and engaged the more you lie. And the second is our motivation for lying. It turns out that only a small percentage of lies are told to either hurt or protect other people. Most lying is motivated by a desire to promote or protect yourself. In other words, at the root of most of our lying is greed or fear. A full 22% of all lies are carried out to cover up a mistake or misdeed.<sup>3</sup> We would rather lie than face the truth about ourselves.

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<sup>1</sup> Bella DePaulo, a social psychologist at the University of California, Santa Barbara, is credited as the first researcher to undertake a systematic study of lying as documented in *National Geographic*, “Why We Lie,” June 2017, <http://www.nationalgeographic.com/magazine/2017/06/lying-hoax-false-fibs-science/>.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

It's this insight that is very much at the heart of the twelve steps. Those who do not recover from alcoholism by following these steps, says *The Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous* - the Bible for AA groups - "are usually men and women who are constitutionally incapable of being honest with themselves...they are not at fault; they seem to have been born that way. They are naturally incapable of grasping and developing a manner of living which demands rigorous honesty."<sup>4</sup> If you follow the steps and learn to be honest about who you are – a manner of living that demands rigorous honesty - then you can be saved. Honesty is at the heart of healing.

The 32<sup>nd</sup> Psalm got this long before we knew how or why it worked. "While I kept silence, my body wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer." It's not so much our wrongdoing that hurts us. It's the hiding of wrongdoing that saps our energy, our passion, and our freedom. It's wasted energy, often an extraordinary amount of energy that we expend as if we could obstruct God's justice with our lies. "Then I acknowledged my sin to you," says the Psalmist, "and I did not hide my iniquity; I said, 'I will confess my transgressions to the Lord,' and you forgave the guilt of my sin."

The fifth step of AA makes this kind of honesty actionable. "Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs." It's that last part – admitting *to another human being* the exact nature of our wrongs – that seems to be the most difficult part for people. It's not hard to share your shortcomings with God especially if you've grown up with the idea that God already knows the truth of who you are, anyway. What's more, if you're following the 12 steps then you've already admitted to God that you were powerless to get your life back in the first step. The most difficult part is to share an honest accounting of your wrongs with someone else. AA, in classic form, says this is necessary because a lot of alcoholics have started drinking again without it. Naming your own shortcomings to yourself and to God doesn't seem to be sufficient to actually change your behavior. You have to share it with another person.

The Church is supposed to know this – after all we practice confession in some form or fashion. The Roman Church has its sacrament of confession. We have our Prayer of Confession every Sunday. Human beings have a tendency to want to run from telling the truth about ourselves which is another way of doubting God's power or desire to forgive us. So we institutionalize the act of confession in the church. But where the Roman tradition wrongly puts that power only in the hands of priests instead of in the entire community where it belongs, the Protestant tradition diminishes the very real power of actually naming our wrongdoing in the presence of a witness: person to person conversation. The freedom that comes from the naming and from the assurance that almost always comes from handing things over to God.

I've sat on both sides of those conversations. When you are the one doing the confessing you feel like you are the worst human being who ever lived. The anxiety of sharing the truth about yourself is almost overwhelming. I've felt it in my bones and I've watched others fidget in my presence as if they believed they were certain I

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<sup>4</sup> *Alcoholics Anonymous*, (New York: Alcoholics Anonymous World Service, Inc.), 1976, p. 58

had never faced any human being as horrible as them. But the relief that comes in the sharing has never once disappointed. The healing is in the naming. And yet we run from the accountability of naming what we need to own.

It's not surprising, then, that we have a hard time in our public life naming the truth of such things as how inequality got to the level that it is, or how white supremacy is at the root of much of our racial wealth divides, or what's going to happen as a result of our love affair with fossil fuels, or why the US is the world's leading jailer. If we can't face the truth about ourselves in our own lives, we'll have a hard time facing larger truths together. Or maybe some of us would rather look only at those larger truths to deflect attention from being focused on ourselves. As Jesus said we have a lot easier time pointing out the speck in our neighbor's eye than noticing the log in our own.

A friend of mine in AA shared with me his experience of step 5. He had already gone through the moral inventory and written a lot of things. So he called on his sponsor to hear it all. "I can still remember it," he told me, "I was sitting in this person's car sharing the worst parts of me – things I had never spoken to anyone and his response was, 'well, what do you know. You're human. You sound about as bad as the rest of us.'"

"More than most people," The Big Book argues, "the alcoholic leads a double life. He is very much the actor. To the outer world he presents his stage character. This is the one he likes his fellows to see. He wants to enjoy a certain reputation, but knows in his heart he doesn't deserve it."<sup>5</sup> The Big Book might be right about that, but I think this could easily apply to most of us. And I'm sorry to say that the Church has often worked more on trying to create programs that attempt to make people deserving of God's love, rather than disrupting their pain with the announcement of God's forgiveness.

That is, after all, the center point of the Gospel. Our punishment for our sin is not our destruction, but God's grace – the primary disruptor of our wrongdoing that both heals us and shows us the truth of who we actually are at the same time. That's why step 6 – being entirely ready for God to remove all of the defects of our character comes after step 5. Forgiveness is what makes change possible.

And yet how often has the Church taken this good news and turned it into another impossible system of achievement with winners and losers, insiders and outsiders, rulers and their subjects. In many ways the history of the ongoing Reformation of the Church is of people who relearn this leveling grace for themselves – the truth of who God is – the forgiver in chief. Paul learned it from Psalm 32 which he quoted in his letter to the Roman church, concluding that we are not healed by what we do but by faith through God's grace. Augustine – the most important bishop in the development of the Christian faith - read Romans 4 and paired forgiveness with the three Pauline virtues of faith, hope, and care. Good actions spring from these virtues, rooted in the experience of God's forgiveness, not the other way around, he said. Martin Luther read Augustine and Paul 500 years ago and rejected a whole abusive system of church rules that tried to turn God's

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<sup>5</sup> *Alcoholics Anonymous*, p. 73.

grace into a commodity that could be bought and sold in a religious marketplace.<sup>6</sup> And maybe the current dismantling of the church in North America is yet another Reformation moment of people rediscovering that the Gospel isn't some product owned and managed by the Church, but the radical truth that God loves us as we are – the only good news that ever has a chance of changing us.

Somehow that good news has a way of rising to the top despite attempts to turn it into something else. The leper says, “if you will it, I will be healed.” And Jesus responds without missing a beat, “I *do choose*.” Or as Richard Rohr translates it in his book on the Twelve Steps, “*of course* I choose it.”<sup>7</sup>

It's the one thing I hang onto when the phone notifications blare news that there's been another shooting, more murder, another attack; when immigrants are being scapegoated and the pointy fingers of partisanship are sharp and on the loose; that even then there are recovering alcoholics and drug addicts in church basements and fellowship halls across our same country confessing to each other the exact nature of their wrongs and building a community of people not afraid to face the truth about themselves. That even then there are more parents and friends of queer people discovering that the real sin that needs to be confessed is the judgment and rejection they have pursued. That even then there are thousands of people in pain who find a way to pick up a mirror instead of a gun, because they know that God's healing is nearby, that Jesus is never more ready to heal us - of our deceit, our shortcomings, our failures – than when we call on his name. Healing from the hurt of knowing that you aren't the person that you can be, that God wants you to be, really is that close for anyone who wants it. “I do choose to heal,” he says to the leper. “Of course I choose.

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<sup>6</sup> Ellen Charry does an excellent job of tracing this “discovery” and “re-discovery” through the Christian tradition in her commentary on this Psalm in *Psalms 1-50*, Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible, (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press), 2015, p. 170-173.

<sup>7</sup> Richard Rohr, *Breathing Under Water: Spirituality and the Twelve Steps*, (Cincinnati: Franciscan Media), 2011, p. 51. As mentioned in the earlier sermons of this series, Richard Rohr's books provides a main cornerstone for this series.