

The Elephant in the Living Room

While “the truth can set you free,” the liberation it brings very often comes at a cost. The truth, it seems, usually hurts even as it heals. To avoid pain, we avoid the truth. We ignore it or cover it up with rationalizations and excuses. We keep ourselves “comfortably numb” in order to avoid the feelings of fear, anger, despair, and overwhelm we would feel if we acknowledged the truth. It’s as if we have an elephant in the living room that we pretend isn’t there even as we walk around it and periodically scoop up the poop.

Pain isn’t the only reason we avoid the truth. Acknowledging the truth brings us face to face with responsibility. If we pay attention to the clues that we spend so much time sweeping under the rug, we might have to acknowledge the possibility that something is seriously wrong and that we are the ones responsible for making changes. That cold, the one that you’ve had off and on for months, is probably a sign that something deeper is wrong in your mind/body system that you need to address. That icky feeling every time your partner goes to hang out with the guys at Union Station is probably trying to tell you that something (trust or intimacy perhaps?) is missing in your relationship. The sinking feeling you get when your partner’s words are slurred, again, is probably a warning that perhaps your partner has a drinking problem and that you, dear you, might be more than a wee bit co-dependent. That tinge of resentment you feel when you think about calling your parents... uhm humm... Honey, I’m not even going to try to open up that can of worms. You know what it’s about, or you would if you let yourself feel.

It’s much easier to stay in denial and blame other people for our unhappiness. But it’s not comfortable. The cold is miserable and as much as you try to block it, fear creeps in. In dark moments, you make up worst case disaster stories like, “I’m gonna die. I have some incurable disease and I’m never gonna get better. I probably have cancer.” And the stories are always, in some ways, worse than the truth because they leave you in that floating space of uncertainty. The excuses, “He’s not really an alcoholic. He’s just having a rough time this month, what with his mother and all. And the economy. And his job – it’s just crazy.” They often drift back to blame anyway, “Maybe if I’d just hidden the booze, he’d be less likely to drink. Or maybe if I’d done a better job of helping him deal with his stress or helped him sort out his feelings about the fact that his family really treats him like a second class citizen, he wouldn’t need to drink as much.” Or maybe you blame him, over and over, for going through the same pattern without ever looking at why you put up with it night after night.

Metaphorically speaking, if there’s an elephant in the living room, whether you acknowledge it or not, it still poops. It seems to me that it’s better to give her a name, pat her on the butt, scratch her behind the ears, and maybe kiss her on the forehead. Once the shock of seeing her is over, she’s not so scary and she gives you a chance to make better decisions.

What if, for example, instead of losing sleep (and further impairing your immune system) over that never ending cold, you went to see your doctor and got his or her medical advice and opinions. And better yet, what if you followed Dr’s orders, even the one about resting? Or what if, instead of finding passive aggressive ways to get back at your partner for spending so much time at Union Station without you, you set aside time to have an honest, open conversation with your partner about your concerns and your feelings. Maybe you’ll learn that your partner feels rejected by you

and has taken up hanging out at the bar because you're not available. Or maybe you'll learn that your partner is having an affair and wants to end the relationship. Whatever you learn, at least you'll know. And at least you'll be able to make conscious decisions about what to do next and have a chance to get support.

No matter what the truth is, being present with it gives you the chance to let go of the stories you have held on to about who you are and to choose who you want to live into. Maybe you'll realize that that cold is really a message from your mind/body system begging you to get more rest and do a better job of self-care. Maybe sitting with the truth will provide the chance for you and your partner to acknowledge that you are no longer on the same path and that staying together is hurting both of you. If this is the case, breaking up will allow you both to close this chapter of your lives so that the next chapter can open up. Or maybe the truth will be the wake up call you and your partner need to repair those things in the relationship that aren't working. It might open the door to greater intimacy and an even more satisfying relationship. Even though it may hurt initially, it sure beats tip toeing around your life to avoid the elephant poop that you pretend doesn't exist.

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