

Would I

The
Amazing
Power of
Being
Honest in
a World
That
Lies

Judi Ketteler

to You?

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**The Amazing Power of
Being Honest in a
World That Lies**

JUDI KETTELER



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*To my parents, who set me up for success,
and to my children, who are a daily reminder not to squander it.*

Contents

Introduction: Paying Attention to Honesty	1
Chapter 1: My Strange Relationship with Honesty	10
Chapter 2: What Is Honesty, Anyway?	38
Chapter 3: Is Honesty Really the Best Policy?	50
Chapter 4: Honesty in Social Situations	72
Chapter 5: Workplace Honesty	102
Chapter 6: Honesty in Friendship	137
Chapter 7: Honesty in Marriage	159
Chapter 8: Honesty and Parenting	196
Chapter 9: Self-Honesty and the Stories We Tell	226
<i>Honesty Principles</i>	249
<i>Sources</i>	250
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	259
<i>About the Author</i>	262

Would I

LIE

to You?

Paying Attention to Honesty

Everybody wants the truth, but nobody wants to be honest.

—Anonymous

IN THE SAME MONTH I STARTED WORKING on this book, I had to stop wearing my contacts for two weeks in preparation for a Lasik surgery consult. My distance eyesight is very impaired, and I can't see much without contacts. For working, driving, watching television, and general functioning in life, I simply switched to wearing my glasses. Running, however, was another story. The sweat made it impossible to keep my glasses on, and the way they bounced slightly with each foot strike made me feel dizzy. Without them, I could glean a few feet in front of me, see cars, and distinguish if a traffic signal was red or green. I decided it would have to do for running. I stuck to main roads with sidewalks, versus the winding, wooded roads I often ran, and muddled through.

Still, running without being able to see properly was slightly terrifying. It's not an exaggeration to say that I couldn't see shit, because I actually stepped on dog poop at least once. The world around me was so fuzzy. I couldn't see the faces of people I passed on the sidewalk. I couldn't see houses or trees or flowers. I had run these routes hundreds of times before, so it wasn't that I was missing anything exciting. I just felt unmoored that I couldn't see the familiar. Obviously, the experience made me think about people who have vision impairments that can't simply be corrected with glasses or contacts, and how much I took my own sight for granted. It was a lesson in gratitude, to be sure.

Each time, when I got back from running, I would head inside my house, wipe the sweat off my face, and put my glasses right back on. It was such a startling sensory experience—to go from trying to navigate a world of hazy shapes to a world where everything was suddenly in focus. What felt even more startling was knowing that I had the power to decide if I would walk through the world only seeing the vague outline of the landscape, or if I would grab the lens I needed to truly be able to see.

I'm telling you this because I realized something else during those strange few contact-free weeks that coincided with me settling down to start writing this book: Focusing on honesty is a bit like putting on glasses after you've been out running familiar paths, but only being able to partially see them. Suddenly, you can see so much more, and absorb texture and nuance that was unavailable before. I could get by running without my glasses, but only *just enough*. I couldn't participate in the world in a very real way. For that, I needed corrective lenses. Paying attention to honesty is a kind of corrective lens that helps you engage with the world in a much fuller, much richer way. When you start to notice the choices you're making to lie or truth-tell, life comes into focus in a new way. And if you commit to paying attention—I mean *really* paying attention—you will inevitably bump up against the great irony of human beings' relationship with honesty, which is this: We want honesty from others so badly, yet we struggle so mightily with our own honesty. In fact, "want" is probably an understatement. We don't merely want honesty. We *demand* it. We protest when we don't get it. We divorce spouses who withhold it. We send people to jail who fail to exercise it. We give our children stern looks when they don't practice it. Yet when it comes to our own behavior, well, um . . . can we change the topic?

On one hand, we know that dishonesty is a big societal problem, often leaving victims in its wake. We can quickly tick off the multiple public arenas where dishonesty lives: Politicians routinely lie; tabloid-like fakery gets passed off as news and spread around on social media; corporations break the rules and their top executives willingly

deceive the public. Dishonesty affects us in very personal ways, too. For example, if our significant others, friends, family members, or children lie to us, we may feel betrayed, embarrassed—shattered even. When we find out someone we love has done something suspect or hurtful and tried to cover it up, it's not uncommon to say, "It's not so much that I'm mad that you [fill in the blank], it's that I'm mad because you *lied* about it."

It's very clear that lying is hurtful, harmful, and often criminal.

On the other hand, when it comes to the decisions we make about our own honesty, the waters quickly muddy. I want to be honest because I want to be a good person. I don't want to be hurtful, harmful, or criminally negligent. Yet I still struggle to be forthcoming with people in all different kinds of situations. The struggle may be that I don't want to hurt someone else's feelings. Or I might be struggling against my own self-interest. Other times, it's a struggle to simply be honest with *myself*. I've talked to enough people about their experiences with honesty to realize this phenomenon: Demanding honesty in others, yet so painfully grappling with our own truth and lies, is part of the human experience. I think it's accurate to label it *cognitive dissonance*, a term that simply means that you are holding two or more contradictory values or beliefs in your brain. This is why you can hold up honesty as utterly non-negotiable in one hand, while letting it slip quietly away in the other.

Like . . . when your kid asks you about Santa Claus.

Or when revealing a secret will do more harm than good to people you love.

Or when you wake up thinking about having sex with someone who isn't your spouse.

Or when you avoid giving difficult feedback to someone who is vulnerable.

Or when you live a life of one-second happy-face snapshots on Facebook and cry yourself to sleep a few nights a week.

Would I Lie to You? The Amazing Power of Being Honest in a World That Lies is about those moments and many more: the big and the small; the obvious and the not-so-obvious; the shameful and the

redemptive; and, in the words of the serenity prayer, the wisdom to know the difference. Given our current political climate and the speed with which lies are spread, honesty is one of the hottest topics of the day. We're bombarded with dishonesty, and have learned that we can't take the information we see at face value, but instead, must constantly be evaluating at every moment for lies and fakery. It's incredibly stressful and demoralizing. And yet, it does no good to lament all of this dishonesty in the world if we don't also look within ourselves to identify our own patterns around lying. Our own choices. Our own fakery. Our own falsities. That's what I'm daring myself to do by writing this book, and it's what I hope you dare yourself to do, too. Though it can be difficult, this self-exploration is also incredibly empowering. Not only can this work help you strengthen your relationships and improve your communication skills, it can also help you feel less like a victim of a dishonest world and more like a fully engaged human being. If you are feeling powerless in today's climate of lies, focusing on your own is a way to find your power again.

THE QUESTIONS I AIM TO INVESTIGATE in this book include the following: Is there any such thing as a truly honest life? What does it feel like to work toward living a more honest life—at home, at work, and in the world at large? When is deception better than honesty? Why do we lie out of habit? Why is the conversation around honesty so fraught and full of truisms that aren't, in fact, true? How did we evolve to value honesty so highly, yet act so deceitfully ourselves? What are the consequences of repeatedly lying to ourselves? And finally, what is the power of honesty in a world so full of lies? My intent is not to cast myself as the person who has all the answers about honesty. Rather, I am simply the person who is willing to ask the uncomfortable questions, and this book is my attempt to write my way through them, with as much transparency as possible. It is only *my* attempt, though, and I don't claim universality in my experience. You can read my story and apply whatever labels and qualifiers seem relevant (she was raised Catholic;

she's white and middle class; she grew up sheltered; she's too liberal, too American, too Midwestern, or too provincial; she and her husband have an unconventional marriage; she hasn't faced real adversity), and you wouldn't be wrong. I've obsessed about who this book is for and who it applies to. Like, does it apply to refugees, who are barely holding on to life? Does it apply to people who have to lie or parse truth for a living, like clandestine intelligence officers? Is it equally relevant for people on the political left and people on the political right? For college students and retired people? For husbands and wives? (Or for husbands and husbands, or wives and wives?) What about for people who have faced terrible trauma and the truth feels too dangerous? Or constitutionally shy people or people with social anxiety disorder? From the beginning, I worried about who I might offend, who I might anger, who I might leave out, or who I might lose credibility with. I wondered if I should avoid mentioning politics, and mute my feelings about charged social issues, lest I get cast as some kind of pundit. I wondered what was my story and what was someone else's story, and how I would know the difference. I wondered if I was being self-indulgent and naïve in writing from a place of privilege, compared to the way the majority of people in the world live. I wondered if I was being irresponsible by focusing mostly on the psychology of honesty and people's inner lives, versus addressing the complicated social and economic factors that shape our behavior. But through all the ruminating and hand-wringing, I kept writing. And the best I can say now is that the book is for anyone who decides they want it to be for them. I wrote it for mostly selfish reasons—to help me figure out this business of honesty so I could be a better person. I encourage anyone who reads it to be equally selfish in your motives and how you apply it to your life, because I believe those around us can greatly benefit from our selfish desire to keep trying. There is a Buddhist saying I particularly like: *You heal the world by healing yourself*. What starts inside has a ripple effect. If my ripple reaches you, that is something. But how far yours may reach is the real power. The inner work of honesty can never take the place of values like civic responsibility, fighting for justice via legislation and reform,

and holding people accountable—but I would suggest these things are rather hollow without a personal understanding of honesty.

How This Book Is Structured

We've all developed patterns related to honesty, guilt, and shame. Because of all the conflicting messages we get about honesty, we often can't see our way through these patterns unless we take the time to trace them and commit to some deep excavating. That's what I set out to do in the first chapter of this book, beginning with my earliest memory of lying. I trace my relationship with honesty through my teen years, young adulthood, and early motherhood, until I arrive at the point in time a few years ago when I had an honesty crisis. The next two chapters define the key terms and explain some underlying theories about deception. Chapters 4 through 9 explore honesty in the various areas of life, including social honesty, workplace honesty, honesty in friendship, honesty in marriage, honesty in family and raising kids, and self-honesty. In each of these areas, I reflect on my own struggles and share stories from my life, as well as stories others have shared with me. I address some common conundrums and dilemmas, and then offer suggestions gleaned from different places, including philosophy, behavioral economics, etiquette, organizational psychology, evolutionary biology, spirituality, and personal development.

In essence, the structure of the book follows my own internal process of working my way through honesty in the different areas of my life, which I envision as three concentric circles. The outermost circle is social honesty, the middle one is intimate honesty, and the innermost one is self-honesty. The outermost circle of social honesty is basically honesty “outside of the house” and outside of your closest relationships. How honest do you need to be with the person working in the cubicle next to yours? With the supplier on the phone? In the stands of your kid's football game? At that once-a-year-lunch with people you have less and less in common with every passing year? It's not that these social connections are all low quality. In fact, our social connections are extremely important, and we couldn't have

developed as a society without being able to trust each other. Our honesty struggles in this outer tier of relationships have to do with conflicting motivations involving group cooperation, social empathy, fear of being judged, and how we identify as individuals or members of a group. In general, they are the day-to-day concerns of life—if not short-term, then very much the present tense. They can matter a lot in the moment, but they often don't have the same weight as the concerns we face in our more intimate relationships.

Intimate honesty—the next circle—is concerned with honesty in our more intimate, loving relationships. I don't simply mean romantically intimate, though honesty in marriage/long-term relationships is definitely an area we'll explore. I also mean in friendship, within families, and in the space of raising children. Some of the conflicting motivations that intensify the honesty struggles in this area include fear of disappointing or hurting loved ones, personal vulnerability, and high expectations of relationships. The honesty questions we face in our intimate relationships tend to focus more on the long term. The dilemmas can feel every bit as “of the moment” as the social dilemmas, but they are more future focused. What you say to your spouse or your child doesn't just affect that day or week, it may affect your whole (or their whole) future.

Finally, the last circle is less a circle than a dense core. “Self-honesty” is about the questions we wrestle with in our most interior lives. This includes the beliefs we have about ourselves, how we shape our personal history, and the stories we tell—both publicly and privately. Shame, specifically avoiding shame, is one of the biggest motivations for lying to ourselves. Self-honesty is a concern in all tenses—past, present, and future. There is an element of self-honesty that's more past focused than the other circles of honesty, because trying to be more honest with yourself almost always involves going *back* in time to be able to correct the story.

The circles are interrelated, of course. They are separate, too. I'll walk through a lot of research in the book, but here is one piece to chew on as we get started: A 2018 paper found that if you engage

in one type of dishonest behavior in a specific area of life, you are more likely to engage in some other type of dishonest behavior in that area. For example, if you lie to your boss at work, you are more likely to also pad an expense report at work. But here is what else the researchers found: People seem to behave differently in *different areas* of their lives, and how you behave in one “life domain” doesn’t necessarily predict how you will behave in another. In other words, the way you are at the office may not reflect the way you are at home, or the choices you make about honesty with your kids may be different from the choices you make about honesty with your spouse. I think the findings on behaving differently in different life domains are sound (the data is from more than a thousand people across five different countries, and the research was conducted by smart researchers with deep expertise in human behavior), but I don’t know if I buy it or not. Some days it sounds right and other days it doesn’t. Some days, I am certain we are who we are all the time, and other days, I think we are experts at compartmentalizing. I don’t have the answer—I don’t think there *is* a definitive answer—but working through it piece by piece, life domain by life domain, circle by circle, seems like the only way forward, no matter what you discover.

I’VE ALWAYS KNOWN HONESTY WAS A STRANGE BEAST. What I understand now, and why I’m writing this book now, is that I finally understand that the complexities that surround honesty aren’t just my personal struggle, but a human struggle—yet one that most humans don’t want to talk about.

When I tell people my stories, either casually during a conversation or in the pieces I write, over and over again, they say, “Judi, you are so honest. You talk about these things I think, too, but don’t want to say.” I understand that we all have different degrees of privacy, and that my tolerance for sharing intimate details of my life is far higher than someone else’s may be. It’s not vanity or the desire to hear myself talk that compels me to tell you about my flirtation with infidelity, or how

I screamed and cursed at my dead brother, or any of the other stories I will tell you in this book. It's that one of my gifts is the ability to see and hear the pain that's lodged within people because of their shame and fear. I can't prescribe them medication or teach them meditation or give them the right cognitive behavioral tools to ease their pain. I can only tell my stories from an honest place, and hope these stories land like a hand that reaches out to them. *This is life. This is how it goes. This is who we are. Let's just be honest about it. Life will be better if we are.*

CHAPTER 1

My Strange Relationship with Honesty

Tell all the truth but tell it slant.

—Emily Dickinson

WHEN I WAS SEVEN YEARS OLD, I had my “first confession”—a terrifying experience involving confessing my sins to an old man behind a screen. I said all my lines, just like a play, and then . . . well, I made stuff up. After all, why would I tell this priest the sins I was least proud of, like wanting terrible things to befall the girls who teased me, or touching myself “down there”? (This was listed as an official sin in our second-grade religion book.) Surely, it was not his business. I didn’t like the way lying made me feel, since it was Wrong, with a capital “W,” but the thought of being honest in that moment didn’t feel right, either. So I made a calculated choice about what to share, and made up generic sins to confess, like fighting with my brother or taking an extra cookie when my mom wasn’t looking. These things may have had some kernel of truth—I’m sure I had snuck a cookie at some point in my young life or screamed at my brother—but they were not real in my mind.

The priest gave me a penance of saying ten “Hail Marys.” (If you’re not familiar with how Catholic confession works, the priest who hears your confession essentially gives you an “assignment”—your penance—to say some prayers. And if you say them—either there in the confessional, or later, on your own time—you are absolved.) That reciting words could make sins go away was absurd, but I *really*

wanted to be absolved. In fact, I hoped they would absolve me from both the sins I didn't utter, and the lie I told to create the "stand-in" sins. As I left the confessional to rejoin my parents in the church pew, I vowed to myself to say the prayers before bed that night, and planted a fake smile on my face. This was my first time receiving a sacrament, after all. I was supposed to be joyous. But I didn't feel happy. I definitely didn't feel pure. Instead, I felt confused, guilty, ashamed, angry, and worried over the state of my soul.

I look at my own kids, who are now ten and eight, and I think, *Yep, what a weird little time of life they're in.* Remember that space of childhood, between being a kindergartner and a tween? You're starting to have concrete thoughts and memories that hang together. You know that the world is the world and that magic *probably* isn't real. A lot is expected of you, but you're not actually in charge of anything. Grown-ups are supposedly the sole reliable source for what is right and what is wrong, but so many of the things they say contradict each other. And yet, when you point out a contradiction to them—like how they tell you that you should always respect what your school principal says, yet you heard them calling him bad names the other night when they thought you were asleep—they only get angry. So you stop pointing it out, and eventually take on the contradictions as reality. It is such a flawed system that even the most well-adjusted among us gets miserably tangled up in knots around this idea of honesty. We wind up utterly confused and spending a lot of time feeling terrible about various honesty transgressions.

Or at least that was my experience.

In my case, I assign a chunk of the blame to Catholicism—at least the particular breed of it I was surrounded by in ultra-conservative Northern Kentucky—and its predilection toward making children feel as guilty and shitty as possible. Who tells a seven-year-old their soul is in trouble unless they reveal their most embarrassing thoughts and actions to a cranky old man they are told has a direct connection to God? Still, I know that even without the nuns and their stern looks or the priests and their shady screens in back rooms of churches, I

would have been a shy, sensitive kid who broke toward earnestness. I can thank my DNA, my upbringing, and whatever X factor creates our personality for that. I'm the youngest of seven kids. In order: Herb Paul Claire Laura Nancy Tony (say it in one breath for the full effect) . . . and four years after my mother must have thought she was done . . . there I was. My oldest brothers were so much older than me (my oldest brother got married when I was seven), and mostly absent from the day-to-day of my childhood. But my sisters doted on me exactly as you would expect. I admit, being the youngest of seven kids is a pretty good gig, if you can get it. But it also meant that I had a lot of people to charm, please, and prove myself to. As the youngest and the one people seemed to have their eyes on, I couldn't just do things halfway. I sought to do them to their fullest, whether it was perfecting my gymnastics routines or being a good Catholic.

My parents, Bert and Mary Ketteler, were raised during the Great Depression, which I heard about *constantly*. They came of age in the years around World War II, and told us kids stories of rationing, air raid sirens, and Harry Truman. Though they came from intact and loving homes, each lost their father at a young age. My mom was seventeen when her father died, and my dad was only eleven when his passed away. Both deaths were sudden (from diseases now easily controlled with medications), and both were financially devastating for their families. My parents' childhoods were imprinted with a national crisis of poverty, a second world war, and unexpected death. This led them to imbue in me a sense of humbleness and civic responsibility. Watching their behavior, I had clear and explicit examples about gratitude, decency, and doing the right thing. After all, they were the tail end of the Greatest Generation and they held those values closely.

There was something else, though. Something that I didn't piece together then, but see looking back now. Though they each had emotionally and economically challenging childhoods, as young adults, they also each had tiny strokes of luck. My dad was drafted in 1952 into the Army's Fourth Infantry Division. But instead of getting sent to Korea, the Fourth Infantry was sent to Frankfurt, Germany, as

part of NATO. My dad would talk about how the other GIs spent their leaves getting drunk. Not Bert Ketteler. He sent most of his money home to his mother, and used the rest to sightsee. He visited old castles and World War II battle sites, and took hundreds of photographs—which he learned to develop himself. He was so grateful to not be at the Korean front where his contemporaries were dying, that there was no way he was going to waste the opportunity. He used to talk about how he assumed when he was drafted that he was going to die in Korea. He got a deferment to finish college (he paid his way through the local Catholic college by working constantly), but then, it was time to go. He didn't want to go, but he had to do what he was told. When my dad didn't get sent to battle, it was a piece of luck that seemed to instill in him the idea that you should find the good in whatever opportunity you're offered.

On my mom's side, the piece of luck was an inheritance from her grandmother, who died in 1956. That this chunk of money—about \$5,000—was somehow left to her seemed almost impossible. Her mother advised her to buy a winter coat and save the rest for her future. That money was how she and my dad were able to afford to build a house in the suburb of Ft. Wright, Kentucky, in the same year they got married. Like the majority of other houses in the neighborhood, it was a modest ranch with an unfinished basement to accommodate the large family that all new homeowners in the highly Catholic neighborhood were sure to have. My parents were told by both their government and their church to go forth and multiply, and the miracle that they were here at all, not dead on a battlefield and not forced to live in a cramped apartment in the poorer neighborhood to the south, made them only too happy to comply.

I say all of this because I think perhaps one of my earliest lessons was that good things happened to good people who were earnest and worked hard. There are so many fundamental flaws in this thinking. It's a dangerous and simplistic narrative, with the potential to be used for the worst kinds of violence and justification of inequality. I realized this as an adult, when I came to understand the unfairness of the world.

But as a kid, you see what you see. You Etch-A-Sketch your reality, and it takes years of education and experiences (and writing books about honesty) to fully clear away some of those early sketches that keep your thinking too small. I know now that being born in the time and place I was born and getting these two particular people as parents was my own tremendous stroke of good fortune. I did nothing in particular to deserve it, but I have tried to make the most of every opportunity it's provided. I've thanked the universe in every way I know how, but I am open to more suggestions because the luck of the whole thing can't be overstated. I will say, though, between their strong moral presence and my six older siblings, I had *a lot* to live up to. When I failed to be as true as I should be, I felt the collective weight of all of them. This is no one's fault (well, it's a *little* bit the Catholic Church's fault), and I wouldn't change anything about my upbringing. It just set the course for a rocky relationship with things like honesty and shame.

FIRST CONFESSION IS MY EARLIEST MEMORY of having a run-in with honesty, but these incidents outline my childhood like fence posts.

There was fourth grade, when a girl named Christy stole my Easter stickers. I held in my tears long enough to make it to my house a few blocks away, but I broke into pieces the minute I got back home. The stickers were right there in her room, the day after she swore she didn't take them. How could she lie to my face? Then I remembered how I lied, not just to the priest behind the screen or to the nuns who asked me if I loved Jesus (how could I love some guy I never even met?), but also to my cousin who was rich and got way more than me for Christmas. Whenever we compared our Christmas morning loot, I always went second, because I needed to know how many gifts to invent to feel equal to her. I also lied to the girl in my gymnastics class who was always bragging about her parents, telling her that my sister might be going to the Olympics. Many nights while falling asleep, I thought about these and other instances with deep shame.

Then there was sixth grade, when a girl who was made fun of

mercilessly for her stringy hair asked me if I had heard kids making fun of her. She was so sad, so defeated, in how she asked. How could I tell her yes? Instead, I deflected and talked about how stupid the popular kids were. I recall trying to make some kind of joke about it. Maybe a better friend would have been straight with her, and said, without judgment or teasing, "Wash your hair more." I don't know. It wasn't in me to do that, and I felt both guilty about it and, also, good about it. I never wanted to hurt anyone's feelings, having been on the receiving end of a lot of taunts about being weird, especially after I had a spell in fifth grade when I cried in school almost every day for the first half of the school year. I could never articulate the reasons why I was crying; I just knew that once I felt the tears coming, I couldn't stop them, and it was deeply shaming. I knew that other kids thought I was strange. My solution had been to withdraw into myself and create my own little fantasy world, where it was safe and I was in charge. I would never have told anyone this. Speaking the truth of it was frightening.

Then there was high school. I went to Notre Dame Academy, an all-girls Catholic school. I did not enjoy it. I do believe these kinds of spaces have the potential to be progressive and empowering. That was not the case in Northern Kentucky, which I would describe as neither progressive nor empowering. Notre Dame certainly produced many brilliant young women (I'm fairly certain the no-nonsense nun who taught physics was a genius), and every one of us was encouraged to live up to our academic potential. The problem wasn't the education. It was the culture. You could say all high school culture is messed up and damaging. But there is something especially toxic about a group of girls behaving badly and thinking they have God on their side. There was a righteousness and sense of entitlement that wafted through every corridor of Notre Dame. It was always the most popular girls who loved to talk about things like peace and following Jesus's example in religion class. But right after, in the hallway, that was all forgotten, because it was time to solidify their status and place in the pecking order. Shy and awkward girls like me were the easiest target. My hair bow was stupid and obviously procured cheaply, my shoes

were wrong, I didn't have a boyfriend, I was a weirdo who was too quiet. The list changed every day. I hated them. They were a bunch of liars and hypocrites, and I could never reconcile their behavior with the idea that we were supposed to be loving our neighbor as ourselves. And yet, another emotion always waited for me like prey on the other end of that hate and confusion: *guilt*. Big scary deadly guilt. It was Christy and the stickers all over again. Was *I* truly loving my neighbor as myself? Wasn't I dishonest, too? Didn't I make things up to avoid embarrassment, like telling the girls on my gymnastics team that I had a boyfriend? Didn't I hide my true feelings about things? Pretend to laugh when I didn't get the joke? Go to church every week and say the words that I either didn't comprehend or didn't believe? These were all small things. But together, they had the weight of shame—one of the heaviest substances in the universe—so they piled on. And as they did, my frustration with others' dishonesty and my guilt over my own became locked even tighter in a vicious tug-of-war.

I could see the path of what I should do. *Be true. Be honest. Stop being afraid*. And yet, so often, I couldn't do it. I couldn't speak the words, own up to my failings, or even be real with myself. It felt like there was so much more to hide than there was to show. That I wasn't being the best and truest I could was a constant source of discontentment, so I poured my desire for perfection into gymnastics. I couldn't master social situations, but I could master the balance beam. I loved how gymnastics felt in my body and how I could use it to express myself. I didn't have the drive of a champion—already too independent, I never could have submitted to some egomaniac coach's will—but I was motivated and dedicated, and trained extremely hard. I loved the transparency of gymnastics, too. If you fell or screwed up, you got a low score; if you hit your routine and stuck your landing, you got a high score. It was all there for people to see, and while bad performances were disappointing, they were at least honest.

My family was of modest means, but we weren't poor. However, I heard the stories about how we had been close-to-poor in the decades before me. My mom was a traditional homemaker and my dad was the

breadwinner. For forty years, he worked as a scientist—a pharmacologist—in a lab at a small pharmaceutical company in Cincinnati (those were the days when there were still small pharmaceutical companies). Because he didn't have a PhD, he didn't advance much—but he loved his job. Toward retirement, he was promoted and made more money than he ever thought he would make, but for most of the sixties, seventies, and eighties, budgets were tight. Even after they loosened, my parents told us we had to work for the things we wanted. I did work, but my siblings would surely tell you how I got far more than they did. They are right: I benefited greatly from my birth order. And yet, being surrounded by wealth at my high school was still a daily reminder that I was out of my league. Catholic education was making its transition from affordable to outrageous in the early 1990s. The school—which is now around \$10,000 a year—was already starting to feel elite during my time there, when it was probably half that amount.

I think this is why, around junior year in high school, I developed an interest in social justice. I started listening to Harry Chapin songs and reading activist poetry, from John Lennon to Audre Lorde. Unlike the vast majority of people at my school, my parents were Democrats. I'm not entirely sure how this came to be, because Northern Kentucky was—and still is—such a conservative area. Though the church was a huge influence in their lives, they never went along with the church's conservative political agenda. My dad used to scream things like, "Deregulation doesn't work!" at the television whenever Ronald Reagan was talking. I would have lengthy arguments with my oldest brother, Herb, about liberalism versus conservatism (Herb was, and still is, extremely conservative: Picture *Family Ties* character Alex P. Keaton giving lectures). I loved this sparring (I still do), and it helped me start to crystallize some of my politics. I was still frightfully naïve, though. As a senior, I took a new independent study elective at Notre Dame called Social Concerns. It involved a service project, and I chose to volunteer at a homeless shelter in Covington, Kentucky, which served the large urban community living in poverty just four miles from my middle-class suburb. I talked a good game with my protest poetry, but it

was the first time I spent any time in the inner city. The first time I was around groups of African Americans. The first time I understood that poverty and homelessness affected children. I was, of course, merely a kind of “tourist” in this community. Nonetheless, the experience was jarring and profound. I was embarrassed by how little I understood about the world and ashamed at how shielded my upbringing had been. I didn’t yet know terms like *white privilege*, *white fragility*, and *white savior complex*—mostly because they hadn’t been coined yet. I knew things weren’t equal, but my own role in it was confusing. When I tried to talk to my friends about this, I didn’t have the right words. I already felt disconnected from them, so I faked smiles and nodded along at the lunch table when everyone was talking about who was dating whom. I was a mass of internal contradiction, feeling sorry for myself for not belonging socially while simultaneously feeling guilty for not being poor—and then, in the next breath, feeling resentful that we weren’t nearly as well off as most of the other families at my high school.

Above all, I wanted to be a good person who made a difference. I no longer connected this with religion—or at least not with Catholicism. While I saw that some cultures did use religion as a positive tool, my view of it by then was too jaded, too connected with shame and guilt. I didn’t know the words or theory yet, but I was already starting to develop my feminist beliefs. I didn’t like that men were in charge of everything in the church, and throughout history, had made seemingly arbitrary rules that mostly served them. I could have voiced this dissent. But it was easier to stay silent with my opinions, write bad poetry in the solitude of my bedroom, and bide my time until high school was over. That’s exactly what I did, opting out of Catholicism (and all organized religion) as soon as I graduated on that glorious evening in May 1992.

Leaving all that behind as I started college definitely helped me shed one layer of the cognitive dissonance about who I was, but I still lacked social confidence. I didn’t have a typical college experience, since I lived at home and paid for college myself. I coached a gymnastics team, worked at a fabric store, tutored at the campus writing center, and babysat on the weekends. Working hard helped me see myself as the

upstanding, independent person I wanted to be. By then, my honesty tug-of-war was related less to sin and guilt than it was to crystallizing what I believed and who I wanted to be.

WHEN I WAS ABOUT TWENTY, I had two realizations around the same time. The first was that I was a feminist. The second was that I didn't like my body. I had been a gymnast all my childhood. I was strong and flexible, but also curvy. The curves, which had stayed lean throughout my competitive years, began to unfurl when I quit gymnastics right before college. I gained weight, first just a few pounds, but within a year, it was twenty pounds, pushing hard on twenty-five. So I decided to go on a strict diet and exercise *a lot*. I became obsessed with losing weight and developed what I would classify as a moderate eating disorder. I did eat, but I was completely consumed by food, calories, exercise, and weight. I lost the twenty-five pounds I had gained. And then about fifteen more just because. I read the canon of feminist authors, my ire at the patriarchy steadily growing—all the while I tried to ignore my stomach rumbling. I simultaneously starved myself of food and fed myself empowering theory that told me what I was doing was twenty-nine kinds of wrong, and not at all feminist. The contradiction was so intense, so shaming, so fucking confusing that I didn't know what to do. I felt trapped in my own web of lies about who I was.

But that wasn't the only contradiction I was living. I was writing passionate papers about women's liberation, the male gaze, and sexual freedom, yet my sense of how I might go about expressing my own sexuality was still repressed. It's not that anything terrible, like rape or abuse, had happened to me. It's that I was wholly inexperienced. Still painfully shy about the opposite sex, I was sure that I was unattractive and sexually unappealing. I had a series of unrequited crushes, and fixated on the question of whether or not I would ever lose my virginity. I was simultaneously ashamed by these things, and angry with myself that I cared so much about these things. As I read female slave narratives and feminist treatises about how women had been mistreated and

disenfranchised throughout history, and fought back in both overt and subversive ways, I would think: *Damn the whole system!* And in the next breath, I would wonder if a boy could *please just kiss me*.

As I edged closer to senior year of college, I started to come out of my shell a little, and even had a few dates with a sweet boy. He liked me, but I wasn't into him. I said yes to going out with him because I didn't want to hurt his feelings. My ultimate solution when I didn't want to have any more dates was to make sure I wasn't home when he called and to never return his calls. I felt horrible about it, but I couldn't bring myself to be honest with him. I knew I handled it completely wrong, and I felt enormous guilt about that—how could I have been so awful? However, I didn't judge myself for not wanting to date him. I wasn't willing to be with someone I didn't connect with just to have a boyfriend. But would I ever find anyone? I wondered the same question nightly as I drifted off to sleep. I tried to push down whatever desire I might feel toward men and focus on creating the future I wanted—which was graduate school. I would get a PhD in English. Somehow a fairy tale would happen, and I'd marry another professor and we'd have this terrific life. As conflicted as I was about all of these areas of my life, I had a sense that I would somehow figure it out. After all, I was Bert and Mary Ketteler's youngest daughter! I was resourceful and clever! Graduate school would make everything clear.

It did. But not in the way I thought.

I GOT ACCEPTED WITH A FULL RIDE and a teaching stipend to the graduate program in English at Miami University of Ohio, which was about an hour away from home. But before I left for graduate school in August, I went to London. I had saved up my money to be able to afford a summer study abroad program that was a partnership between NKU and Kings College in London. When I boarded the flight to London on July 4, 1996, it was my first time flying. Though I was officially a college graduate by this point, my level of inexperience with the world was vast, and slightly shameful. I knew how to work hard, how to study, how to

do gymnastics and coach gymnasts, how to sew and cut fabric, how to be the youngest of a big family and make everyone be amused by me, and how to try to be perfect at everything I did. But I didn't know romantic love or have sexual experience. I didn't know cultures different from my own. That summer, living in London on my own—well, not quite on my own, because I was part of a study abroad program and living in dorms—was the first step in my physical independence. I mastered the subway system, learned London's parks (I ran several times a week), and took day trips to places like Bath, Stonehenge, and Brighton. I made a small group of friends and we took a weekend trip to Wales, where I walked the old city wall of Conwy and hung out with the mountain goats. I understood for the first time that America was an infant in the world. The buildings in Europe were like a thousand years old. The history there was startling. I walked and gawked and took it all in. I sat in Bloomsbury Square and wrote a letter in my diary to the writer Virginia Woolf, whose "A Room of One's Own" essay about female independence had made such an impact on me. I told her that I felt so naïve and embarrassed in the ways I struggled to be forthcoming with people, but I believed that big things were ahead for me if I could just fucking speak up. I had graduate school waiting and I had faith that I would figure everything out.

Because the study abroad program overlapped with the start of graduate school, I missed the first three days of the two-week summer class all new graduate students in English with teaching assistantships took to teach them how to teach. By the time I got there, the new crop of master's students had already started to gel, and I felt like the odd one out. I had been determined to talk more in class and be more assertive among my peers, but I found myself sitting and listening silently as my peers spoke with confidence about their ideas about whatever pedagogical theory we were studying that day. The longer I was quiet, the more awkward I felt about talking. I was angry at myself, and would ask myself during my runs: *What the fuck is the matter with you, Judi? Why can't you just talk? Why can't you just speak up? What are you so afraid of?*

I scoffed at my stupid letter to Virginia Woolf. How would I ever do big things if I couldn't open my mouth?

After a few weeks of feeling lonely and cut off, I decided to force myself to be social. It wasn't difficult. My fellow graduate students were generally friendly. Unlike high school, it wasn't cliquish. We were all adults, all smart, all here because we wanted to be here, all interested in engaging with the world in a serious way and talking about books. Something about being on my own, away from the small (and small-minded) suburb where I grew up, freed me at last. I started going out more and joining in the fun. Even flirting. Once I got over the initial nervousness of speaking up and introducing myself, it was surprisingly easy to find my way. I discovered that my social skills were actually quite good. I liked people. I liked conversation. I liked being part of it all—I just needed to do things on my own terms. I developed a crush on another student in the program named Tim, and after talking at a party one night about our mutual addiction to ChapStick, he asked me out. The first time we kissed, every part of me tingled. I was desperate to not be a virgin anymore, and later that week, I happily fell into bed with him. I pretended it was fantastic, but the whole thing was disappointing, as first experiences so often are. I figured there was just something wrong with me. I had smidges of honesty with Tim (he knew I was a virgin and did everything he could to make me comfortable), but mostly, I pretended. As I lost some of my awkwardness, the sex got better. But I still lacked confidence. Looking back, I realize that I couldn't have asked for a better first boyfriend. Tim was kind and funny and respectful. These are all the reasons we're still friends today. Back then, though, I was so gaga over him, I couldn't see straight most of the time. Although I was fiercely independent and quite capable of taking care of myself, I was immature in ways I didn't even know. Mostly, it's that I was negotiating experiences in my early twenties that were usually the territory of sixteen- and seventeen-year-olds, feelings like jealousy, insecurity, and infatuation. I was so in love with him, but so unfamiliar with what to do with that.

Tim and I dated for about a year, and then . . . he broke my heart. Not on purpose or out of cruelty, but because we were young and he recognized that the timing wasn't there. He had wrapped up his MA program (he was a year ahead of me) and was moving back east to a PhD program. He didn't want to commit, and he didn't want anything long-distance. It was excruciating, the way your first heartbreak is. I actually thought something was physically wrong with me, I was so broken about it. I listened daily to The Cure and The Smiths, and thought I might die.

But after a few months, it started to dissipate. I developed solid female friendships with other grad students, and finally had some perspective. I met another guy and dated him for a while. That didn't work out, but it was no big deal. So I dated someone else. Ditto. This repeated itself, and soon I realized that this was how dating and sex worked, and it was all kind of fun. All in all, I had a much more solid sense of myself by my mid-twenties than I did in my early twenties. Those few years of independence had made all the difference, and the decade I had spent being so frightened of boys and having a tortured self-esteem seemed like such a waste of time. My high school insecurities were fading (though, of course, they never actually go away completely). I had come out the other side of my eating disorder (which never reached a dangerous pitch—it was mostly emotional torment). I also finally admitted something to myself that I had been trying to ignore from the moment I got to grad school: I didn't actually like teaching. I loved my graduate work and writing papers and discussing books in seminar classes with my fellow grad students, but I did not like being responsible for teaching others. After I completed my MA, I opted to find a job instead of going on for a PhD. I eventually found a job as a proofreader and copywriter at an agency that designed packages, brochures, and a strange new thing called "web sites." I freelanced for newspapers on the side and started to build up connections. I was a professional. I had friends. I had cats. I ran marathons. I saved money. I traveled a bit. I volunteered at the local women's crisis center.

I always had a sense that I would like being an adult more than

being a kid, and once I was an adult, I realized that I was absolutely right! It was far superior. I bloomed later than most, but I bloomed nonetheless. At last, it was confirmation that I wasn't a total weirdo. I had done what I wanted to do for so long: I had figured it out.

THOUGH I HAD COME INTO MY OWN, I was still playing at emotional dishonesty. For one, I routinely faked orgasms because I was too embarrassed that I couldn't figure out how to have one. I also pretended not to feel certain things, because I definitely didn't want to get my heart broken again. When I was about twenty-six, I had a boyfriend tell me that I was the most emotionally guarded girl he had ever dated. I took this as a compliment. It meant that I was doing a good job hiding my struggles, so that I didn't appear too needy. I showed men a curated version of myself: an independent, smart, fun girl who didn't really need anyone. The version of me I kept secret had vastly more needs, was still trying to figure out sex, and sometimes had the disgustingly un-feminist longing to weep openly and just be rescued.

In April 2002, I got laid off for the second time in six months (remember the 2001 recession?). That same week, I started corresponding with a guy on Match.com. His screen name, AngelClare34, caught my eye, because I knew Angel Clare was a character from *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* by Thomas Hardy. I was intrigued, and then slightly horrified as I read his profile. "I don't want to date a woman more than ten pounds overweight," he wrote. "And no dog owners. If a cat, not more than one." It went on in a similar fashion for another paragraph. I pinged or winked, or did whatever you did in 2002, with a lengthy response, most of which I don't remember. I'm pretty sure it started: "So . . . your character is a total jerk, which is fitting, since you seem like a total jerk, too." It definitely ended with me saying that I didn't intend to end up arrested at Stonehenge like Tess. He emailed back: "Well, at least we both like books."

His name was Allen, and reluctantly, I agreed to go out with him. But I was purposely ambivalent about the whole thing. I had been

getting ready to sign a contract to buy a house when my layoff had come, so I was deeply disappointed and skeptical about anything ever working out. And then his ridiculous Match post? It felt like there was literally nothing to lose by being exactly who I was. To my surprise, this *eh, whatever* approach somehow let me be more myself than I had ever been. I wasn't concerned with what I should or shouldn't feel, or holding on to any expectations. I said what I thought. I called him out on shit. I never faked orgasms. Instead, I admitted it was an issue for me, and he was only too happy to help me figure it out.

This tell-it-like-it-is version of me was someone I hadn't seen before. I liked her. *A lot*. She was so honest! Allen and I had a steady banter and lightness about us. Nothing was forced and nothing was really expected. It settled me, in the best way possible. That job layoff is also what led me to start working for myself as a freelance writer in 2002. No more feigning company loyalty or pretending to care about contrived company cultures. I was on my own and loving it, setting my own agenda every day and making good money (far more than I ever made working for someone else). I worked my way from writing for the local paper to nabbing bylines in dozens of national publications and working with big companies to help them tell stories.

Allen and I dated solidly for about two years, and then started an on-again, off-again pattern for another two years—mostly because he never wanted to get married and never wanted kids. I knew that I did, but I wasn't in a hurry. It wasn't a problem, and then eventually . . . it was. By early 2006, I was feeling done with the looseness of where we were going. I told him what I wanted and that it was okay if he wasn't able to do it, but that I had to move on. I loved him and hoped he would come around, but I didn't plead with him. I let it be and started thinking again about buying a house. That spring, he decided that he wanted us to be together, and reluctantly agreed that he would do the whole shebang: house, marriage, and kids. At the time, I saw his reluctance as romantic—he would give up his childless bachelorhood for me!

I didn't need him financially, so the first part—getting a house—seemed low risk. I figured we'd just live together and see if it worked

out. Buying a house together in the summer of 2006 seemed to go well. So we got married the following year, when Allen was forty and I was thirty-three. I got pregnant immediately, and wound up having two babies in two years—our son, Maxwell (or Maxx, as he likes to spell it, for short), was born in July 2008 and our daughter, Georgia, in September 2010. Allen became a stay-at-home dad within weeks of Maxx's birth. That had been an incentive that sweetened the pot for him. He didn't like his job and it wasn't particularly lucrative (he had never found a true career calling and just took various low-stress, low-paying jobs to get by). I loved being a freelance writer and made enough to support the family. In fact, I took great pride in it. We had a novel division of labor, but it worked well for us. I was happy. Actually, I was smug that other women hadn't figured out how capable men were with children and taking care of the house. When they would complain that their husbands didn't do housework or know what to feed the kids for lunch, I secretly judged them.

My tug-of-war seemed to fall away. Finally, I had arrived at the best version of myself! The feeling of being two different people? Gone. The feeling of having to keep myself guarded? Gone. Pretending? Gone. The guilt and shame surrounding Catholicism? Long gone.

With a thriving writing career and a family to support, I was too busy to obsess about truth.

For a while.

And then, as I edged closer to forty, I found myself becoming obsessed with honesty again—for some of the same reasons as always, but also, for new reasons altogether.

THE FIRST THING THAT HAPPENED is that my brother died. I was working at home one Tuesday in November 2009 when my sister Laura called and said, "I think Paul is dead." Paul, the second oldest in the family (fourteen years older than me), was the one we could never figure out. Looking back, I've made the unofficial postmortem diagnosis of oppositional defiant disorder—which is characterized by having a

defiant attitude and being hostile and difficult to get along with. It's also linked with developing an addiction, which he did in his teenage years. He started drinking early, and added pain pills to the mix after a back injury when he was nineteen (he fell off a billboard while working for a sign company). Ultimately, the combination of smoking, drinking, taking pain pills, and generally beating up his body is what killed him at the age of forty-nine. Every step and every phase of Paul's life felt tumultuous. I know he caused my parents a lot of sleepless nights, but I was oblivious to it for a long time because I was so much younger, and a good bit of the drama had already come to pass by the time I was even aware. He moved out when I was about nine. He would go through years of being involved with the family and years of being somewhat estranged (even though he always lived within a few miles of my parents' house). When he died, in a way, I barely knew him. I felt intensely sad, but mostly I felt regret that he had slipped through the cracks. His death had the effect of drawing my siblings and me closer together. Our unit had sustained a blow, and we realized the importance of sticking together. I always knew who I was inside my family—the youngest kid, the one eager to prove herself and please everyone. Now, I understood that I was also the family storyteller, and that while we all had our experience of who our family was, I had the job of synthesizing all of it. I say job, but in reality, telling stories was instinctual, and the only way I knew how to work through grief and make sense of anything. It wasn't just within my family—I started looking at the world-at-large more through the eyes of a storyteller, too. Being a freelance writer, I was certainly in the right business.

Except the economy collapsed. The recession of 2001 had launched me, but the 2008 recession gutted my business. It didn't happen right away. In fact, things were going really well right up until the time I had Georgia in September 2010. When I took a few weeks off for maternity leave, it felt like everything had shifted when I came back. In reality, it had been happening slowly, but I didn't notice until suddenly, I saw that the majority of my editors had been laid off. Publications were shutting down day by day, and the ones still around were barely assigning.

One of my main magazine journalism beats—home and garden—had been hit especially hard. By late 2010, our savings was nearly gone, especially after spending \$10,000 to have Georgia, since self-employed health insurance plans didn't cover maternity at the time. (Georgia was a wonderful addition to our family, and of course, we didn't regret spending the money to bring her into the world. We just thought we'd be able to build the savings back up.)

I started working with a business coach named Darla. I couldn't afford Darla, but I made a leap of faith that the money would work out. It did. She helped me move away from magazine writing. I didn't even realize how beaten down I was feeling until we started working together. Darla worked with me to rebuild my business and taught me how to market myself as a writer in a different way. She also helped me see all the ways I'd been holding back saying what I really felt about things. I started to let go of some shame around showing emotions I had been holding on to since I was a kid. I had never forgotten the shame of crying uncontrollably in fifth grade, but I didn't see how much it had scarred me and made me fearful of expressing emotion. I had thought of myself like an emotional Swiss Army knife—capable of tending to myself in any situation. Working with Darla, and then reading books about vulnerability from Brené Brown, clued me in on how much I had let shame rule my life. What I called “independence” was, in part, just fear of speaking up.

My coach told me I should start a blog. This seemed like a dumb idea. What was I going to write about? Semicolons? Catchy headlines? I was a storyteller, she reminded me. So I should tell stories, starting with stories about my own life. She also told me that I needed to start public speaking, as a means of marketing myself. This seemed like an even worse idea than the blog! I was shy, I reminded her. I told other people's stories, not my own. I wasn't good at that. Darla's response was something like, “Tough shit and oh, by the way, stop lying to yourself.” She helped me see that these were all stories I had been telling myself about who I was. I was paying her a lot of money, so I followed her advice. That was the beginning of finding a new voice. Of writing essays about

my life and telling personal stories. Of sharing truths and speaking in front of people with confidence (which took practice, but I got there).

Not only did I realize I was good at this public honesty thing, I also realized I wasn't too keen on being an emotional Swiss Army knife anymore. Lots of women talk about how having children causes them to lose parts of themselves, to compromise their independence. But for me, it was quite the opposite: I found parts I didn't know about that I wanted to explore. Also, my dad was getting sicker. By 2012, Alzheimer's had invaded his mind to the degree that he couldn't really hold a conversation anymore, or do any of the things he loved. He was still living at home with my mom, but it was unsustainable. My brothers and sisters and I started growing closer after Paul's death, and that only intensified as my dad became less and less of himself. We talked about him a lot, communicating openly with each other about our fears and frustrations.

I found that I didn't want to be emotionally self-contained anymore. I wanted to cry in front of people and admit when I needed emotional support. In reality, I had always wanted this, but I had shoved it aside. Working with my coach helped me realize that I was tired of ignoring that part of me. The relationship I had with Allen wasn't quite built for exploring this other side of myself. It just wasn't what we *did*. This didn't seem like that big of a problem at first, because I had other means to do it. I had my writing. I had my siblings. And I had friends.

One of those friends was a colleague from my freelance work. Like me, he was married with two kids and was going through some shifts in his life. We had much in common, and because we found ourselves working on the same projects, we spent a lot of time together. One project involved making several driving trips to meet with a client about two hours away. For two summers in a row, we made the trek a dozen or so times. The first summer I worked with him, Georgia was still a baby, and there was so much going on in my life—including rebuilding my career—that I didn't think much about the time we spent together, other than simply enjoying it. By the following summer, I found myself looking forward to those two-hour trips like I hadn't looked forward to

anything in quite a while. Still, it felt like nothing more than a working relationship, with a friendship on top of it. He was so easy to talk to, and I could talk to him about the things I had a hard time talking to Allen about, like how stressful it was to support a family or what the nature of a soul was. Talking to him started to feel like an escape. I felt like he saw right through to some essence of who I was. Plus, he was cute. Boyishly handsome, with clear eyes and a warm smile. I tried very hard not to notice this. But every time he would look at me, I would feel the familiar rumblings of attraction.

Allen and I were in the trenches with our two kids. They were little. They were needy. They sucked all the emotional resources Allen had. Plus, Allen had grown up with a very emotionally needy mother (who was most likely bipolar), and he confused providing emotional support with being emotionally manipulated. He had a much different childhood than mine—far less stable, and parents who routinely screamed at each other. He was an anxious person, conditioned to always be anticipating the worst, and parenting seemed to elevate his anxiety and negativity even more. His reluctance to have kids—which once seemed so romantic—was now a growing chasm between us. Though he loved our children fiercely, he resented me for wanting it all and for pulling him out of his simple bachelorhood existence. Over and over, I told him how childish this was. He agreed, but couldn't seem to let go of it. Getting a job was always an option, I would remind him condescendingly, at which point he would accuse me of thinking he was a failure. I was constantly trying to “fix” him, and he was constantly defending himself. Our discussions were circular and unproductive, and ultimately, only created more disconnection.

Watching my dad decline made everything worse. By 2013, he was in a nursing home, and I would cry every time I came back from visiting him there. Allen's answer would be that I was visiting too often. I didn't understand why he would regard me almost with disdain when I was upset, or when I wanted to talk about if there was a God or not. It's as if I was shedding these layers of protection around myself just as Allen was building up his own. The ambivalence that had been so

instrumental in shaping our relationship now felt very limiting inside our marriage. Though I loved him and I knew he loved me, *eh, whatever* no longer worked as a comprehensive relationship philosophy.

I needed more. I needed *connection*. But Allen seemed locked into seeing me a certain way, which felt like he wasn't seeing me at all. He had always relied on my fierce independence and self-sufficiency—and while I valued those things in myself, too, I wanted us to explore vulnerability together. My fresh need to feel connected to him in a more emotionally mature way only wound up causing disconnection. I felt lost and frustrated.

This is how the relationship with the other man tipped toward more than friendship. (Note that I am only going to refer to him as “the other man” throughout the book, because I care about his privacy. But know that he has read and approved every word I've written about him.) In the spring of 2013, he and I started a new client project that had us traveling on longer trips, involving planes and overnight stays. I knew my feelings for him were deepening. At first, I thought of it as a crush, and figured it was one-sided—the way all of those old teenage crushes had been. But as our conversations became more intimate, I sensed he had feelings for me, too. I didn't shut it down. If anything, I encouraged it and probed. I *had* to know how he felt. One night in May 2013, when we were out of town on one of the client trips, we drank a bit too much, and I told him how I felt about him. The truth came out that we were both attracted to each other—but more than that, we felt connected to each other in ways that we didn't feel connected to our spouses. With him, I could be vulnerable and it felt safe. It was such a sweet relief! He had an amazing way of making me feel taken care of. Like me, he felt emotionally abandoned by his spouse, and he feared they were headed for divorce.

Though we didn't do anything physical (we worked extremely hard not to touch each other, and only gave in to some stolen hugs) something fundamental shifted after that night. We texted and emailed much more fervently, and since we continued to travel together for the project, we had time away from our “real” lives to be together.

Essentially, we were having an *emotional affair*. By July, we were trying to figure out if there was a way for us to really be together. I knew this was both wrong and impossible. He did, too. We were tormented. Once the project wrapped up at the end of July, we decided to back off from each other for a bit.

And then my dad died at the end of August. When I texted Allen from the nursing home the morning my dad passed to tell him it was over, his only response was, “Okay.” He simply didn’t know how to deal with situations like this—but in that moment, his reaction felt like disinterest, which hurt very badly. Naturally, I turned to the other man again. We wound up meeting for drinks one evening, and at the end of the evening, we kissed for the first time. It was electrifying and wonderful. It was also terrible, and I felt intensely guilty.

I confided in my sister Laura about what was going on. She was always the voice of reason, and I knew she was right when she told me that I wasn’t seeing clearly, and that whatever issues I was having with Allen, I couldn’t involve someone else in. Logically, I knew it was all too cliché—the same way I knew in college that developing an eating disorder was all too cliché. It didn’t make it go away, though.

Hiding my feelings from Allen felt awful. While I loved him and didn’t want to break up our family, I was angry with him for being emotionally unavailable and resentful of me. I was also angry with myself for . . . what exactly? Being dishonest? Being a shitty wife? Letting myself fall for someone else? Breaking a marriage vow? It was all of the above. I tossed it over in my mind day after day. Sometimes, after the kids were in preschool and my husband left for the gym, I would lie on the bed and sob. I thought back to childhood, to all those dilemmas and crises of conscience. I knew that I had to be honest with my husband, especially after all the work I had done on myself to be this person who spoke the truth. I had started seeing a therapist earlier in the summer, and she helped me work through how I would tell him.

A few weeks after my dad passed away, I finally told Allen the truth about the emotional affair. His reaction was interesting and probably

not very typical of how spouses usually react. He was caught off guard (he knew the other man and I were friends, but he didn't suspect anything else was going on). But he wasn't angry. He actually showed incredible empathy in understanding why it happened. He had been seeing a therapist for a while, too, and had been trying to make some changes in his life because he wasn't happy with how he was being as a father and a husband. He knew he was holding on to resentment related to parenthood. He saw my emotional infidelity as a by-product of that. I did, too, but I also knew I had responsibility in it. Ultimately, it launched a series of conversations about the future of our marriage, and what we each needed to do to strengthen it.

Things initially improved in our marriage. We were kinder to each other, and I worked on being more patient and less judgmental of him. Yet my feelings for the other man didn't really go away. We cut off contact for about six months as we each focused on strengthening our respective marriages. But . . . work is work, and the following summer, it was time for the project to start again. I said yes, because this project represented a significant chunk of my income, and also, I wanted to see him again. He brought something to my life I wasn't willing to give up—I just didn't want it to destroy my marriage (or his, for that matter). We put boundaries in place, and we stuck to them. When we talked about our spouses with each other, we only said positive things. Neither one of us wanted to be people who had affairs. This motivation was strong enough to keep things in check. I'd like to say that I completely left the emotional affair behind, but it lingered in the background. My marriage still had so many ups and downs as Allen worked to make the changes he wanted to make and let go of his resentment over parenthood. I compartmentalized my feelings as best as I could, and tried to focus on my family. So did the other man.

I continued to tell stories about my life on my blog and in my published essays. There was so much to mine in my big crazy family, after all! I had a treasure trove of memories, but also the painful moments, like my dad's death and Paul's death. Writing about these things opened up a whole new territory for me. It felt good to be

vulnerable. To be *real*. Readers started responding, telling me how much they appreciated my honesty.

While I was certainly writing from an authentic place, I couldn't shake the idea that I was living these separate lives—my interior life (which contained my judgments of others, feelings of shame, and my marriage discord) and my life that faced the world. These two lives seemed almost independent of one another, though I was continually looking for ways to bridge them. For example, I wrote a blog post in October 2013 about how the experience of almost making a mistake—but then catching yourself and making a better decision—winds up saying a lot about you and your character. I told a story from childhood to make the point, but I was really thinking about how I almost made the mistake of having a full-on affair, but caught myself. No one knew this was the real impetus behind this blog post, of course. I wanted to share the sentiment, because it was genuine. But I was disguising its true origin. This wasn't lying, but it didn't seem wholly honest, either, not when I was on this journey toward vulnerability and shedding layers. How could I be simultaneously unpeeling layers of myself and adding more on?

An avid runner, I thought about this misalignment of my inner and outer lives for miles and miles and *miles*. I sorted through it as I ran up and down the same hills day after day, month after month, year after year. Answers were always elusive, but I came to realize one thing for sure: A whole lot more was at stake in this honesty game than before. It wasn't just about boyfriends or high school bullies. Now, it was about my marriage, my children, and the essence of who I was.

Time passed—days that were long by the hour and short by the year. I stayed busy, wrote essays, and watched my children grow into grade school kids. I continued to work with the other man. And I kept trying to figure out if my husband and I would ever find peace and ease in our relationship.

And then, of course, the presidential election of 2016 happened.

If my obsession with honesty was at yellow-alert during the presidential campaign, it moved to full-on red alert when Donald Trump actually became president. Sure, we had been-there-done-that with the whole

lying president thing, but Trump's clear and unchecked self-interest, dangerous narcissism, and attacks on the media elevated questions of truth to new heights. (Interesting fact: As of this writing, when you do an internet search for the most recent polls on lying, the top results are all polls about Donald Trump.) His victory terrified and angered the half of the country who hadn't voted for him and never saw his candidacy as legitimate. As a progressive and firm believer that pussy-grabbing was, you know, *assault*, I shared the pain, and considered myself part of "the resistance." At some point, though, there was so much screaming, unchecked name-calling, haughty preaching, and shocking twinges of unexamined racism, anti-Semitism, and classism among my fellow resisters, I had to step back. It seemed counterproductive. And something else: a little bit dishonest.

I noticed that people were lashing out, calling Trump out for all kinds of dishonest and generally disgraceful behavior and practices—and rightfully so. Yet, I also noticed that some of those same people seemed to lack self-awareness about their own actions. I don't know how many times I heard my fellow liberals talk about all the "hillbillies" who voted for Trump, or how many times I witnessed my fellow feminists who positively exploded when people picked apart Hillary's physical appearance insult every aspect of Trump's appearance. It's easy to hold a villain to standards you just assume you meet, without really looking to see if you do. After some psychological sleuthing, I came to realize that this is called the *actor-observer bias*. It means that we think our own behavior is justified, caused by extenuating circumstances that feel almost beyond our control. But if we observe someone else taking part in that behavior, we judge that person harshly and assume they lack personal integrity. In other words, we cut ourselves slack while demonizing others who do a version of what we're doing.

Did this describe me, too?

I didn't want it to. I wanted to behave differently. To be true. To avoid hypocrisy. To examine the unexamined. But I had built up so many defense mechanisms and justifications and compartments of feelings that I wasn't sure I could even trust myself to know when I was being honest and when I wasn't. I started to make a list of my questions:

Was there any such thing as living a more honest life?

What would it look like and feel like to work toward that life?

When was dishonesty a true kindness, and when was it merely self-serving or self-delusive?

What was the cost of not paying attention to our own dishonesty?

In mid-November 2016, I gave a talk to my son's third grade class about being a writer. The week after, I wrote a blog post about how standing in front of those young people made me realize that no matter what, my voice still mattered. Everything I said in that blog post was true. It was just *half the story*. Everything in my life felt like *half the story*.

I was a citizen of a country I deeply believed in, yet we had a crazy, narcissistic president and a cadre of strange people who invented terms like *alternative facts*.

I was the mother of two wonderful kids who were the most important thing in the world to me, yet I often paid little attention to how I answered their heaps of questions.

I was a writer sharing brutal truths, yet I was hiding some of my most painful ones.

I was a wife who loved my husband, yet I couldn't shake the feeling that I might be in love with someone else.

I was a daughter, sister, friend, and neighbor who believed in generosity of spirit and open communication, yet continually held on to judgment.

I was a privileged, white, middle-class person who publicly railed against institutional racism, yet other than giving my kids speeches about Rosa Parks, did very little in my private life to actually counter-act racism.

I was an active user of Facebook and Instagram, with a smiling profile and carefully curated bank of mobile uploads and pithy posts, yet I often didn't recognize myself in them.

I was a generally content, healthy, well-adjusted, non-clinically

depressed person, yet I felt like a mad woman every time I laced up my running shoes looking for answers to my questions about honesty.

While this push and pull all seemed intensely personal, as if this struggle belonged only to me, I had a sense that I probably wasn't alone, that other people were navigating their own contradictions regarding honesty. Those contradictions might involve infidelity, a toxic friendship, an untenable situation at work, a family secret gnawing at them, a truth about themselves they were trying to admit, or any number of other shit storms brewing in that place where lies, shame, and guilt converged, with the ability to cause great pain.

I couldn't accept that *pain* was the last word in all of this. I couldn't accept the notion that we just live in a dishonest world and we all "do our best."

There was no fucking way I was doing my best.

I wanted to, though. I wanted to *do* better, so that the world—my corner of it and maybe a lot of other corners of it—could *be* better. Honesty seemed like the way. It *had* to be the way. Didn't I intuitively know this when I was seven? Why was it so hard now? How did it all get so complicated?

More than anything, the question was this: *What was I going to do?*

I pondered this as 2016 turned into 2017. I kept turning it over as I took down the holiday decorations, watched the snowflakes fall, cut out Valentine's Day hearts with my kids, and saw the first daffodils poking through the soil. Around the time I started sneezing from pollen, I finally had a real idea.

If everyone else was yelling and freaking out, I would go quiet. I would do one simple thing: I would start paying attention to when I was being honest and when I wasn't. I would make a practice of noticing, and I wouldn't hold back.

On April 1, 2017, I opened a Google document and wrote "Honesty Journal" at the top. I didn't know where it would lead, but I knew I would have to follow it.