

Personal growth is just that

By Ruth Ostrow

A FRIEND of mine - let's call him Adam - told me an amazing story the other day. While out of work, a close, male friend of his offered him the use of his rental apartment, for free. Adam was very touched by the generous gesture and moved into the flat for a few months. The upstairs apartment, which Adam's friend also owned, was also vacant, giving Adam great silence and peace. Until one night when he noticed the faint sound of voices, laughter and feet walking across the wooden floor.

Because no one was supposed to be up there, Adam peeked in the window to make sure it wasn't an intruder. There he saw his friend's wife of many years, "Sally", and a strange man. A few days later he saw a car pull up. Sally got out of the car and led a different fellow to the apartment above.

Then one afternoon she turned up with the first fellow. Because it was a warm day, Sally opened all the windows, unaware of the acoustics. This time there was no mistaking what was going on.

"I was horrified," Adam said, recounting the story. "Here was one of my best friends doing me a favour. And I watched his wife cheating with two different men in the space of three weeks. I faced a huge dilemma - to tell him or not."

Indeed, I've heard similar stories many times as a former relationships writer. When do you tell a close friend something that will hurt them? What is honesty, what is causing unnecessary pain? It's a spiritual as well as ethical dilemma because it goes to the heart of truth, love and friendship.

Adam made his decision. Over lunch he told his friend. "Your wife entertains lovers in the apartment above me. There is more than one man involved."

Adam's friend turned white, started shaking, wouldn't touch his food and, after a short time, left.

A few days later Adam called to see if his friend was OK. The friend was furious, yelling that Adam should have minded his own business, that he had no right interfering in the relationship. He said that Adam was responsible for the ending of a good marriage.

In short, he shot the messenger.

"It was the truth. I was telling a friend something he needed to hear," homeless Adam moaned into the phone.

But I had to disagree. For while I have based a whole career on speaking my truth and encouraging people to speak theirs, I am aware of a very powerful force: denial. Many people can't hear the truth because they aren't prepared to admit the truth to themselves. The problem when confronting friends with any truth - be it that they have a drinking problem, that they are behaving in a way that is counterproductive to their wellbeing or that someone close to them is betraying them - is that many people don't want to know.

And I believe the most compassionate stance one can take in these matters is not to tell people things they are not ready to hear or things they haven't given you permission to tell them.

I'm not saying denial is a good way of being. People in denial live with a heavy and exhausting tyre around their necks. Denial doesn't make them any happier; it is hard work, requires all sorts of mental gymnastics to suppress emotions and leads to "dis-ease". And it's only delaying the inevitable.

But in the case of Adam's friend, the information he was given forced him to make a tough decision - perhaps out of male pride - that he was clearly not ready to make.

The fact is, we face things under our very noses only when we are ready and some of us die ignorant, which is sad. But it isn't other people's job to force us to look into the mirror of our souls. Personal growth happens in our own good time, not because others want us to shift, change or see the consequences of our actions.

It's quite different when people ask to be told the truth. If someone asks if they are too fat, suggests - in a pondering way - that they think their partner is cheating or laments that certain friends don't want to see them any more, then we can consider ourselves invited into a discussion and we then have an obligation as friends to be honest.

But when people are not seeking mirrors, have made peace with their situation - despite the fact it may be self-deceptive - then it's best to step back and honour another human-being's process.

If I were Adam, I would have poked around a bit to see if my friend had concerns about his wife he wanted to discuss or had an appetite for being gently prodded into certain awarenesses or realisations.

My husband has a saying: If it truly serves the person, tell them. If not, leave it out. Which is as useful as any adage in handling the vexing issue of love and disclosure.

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