

# 10 TRUTHS & a LIE

A roomful of strangers, a blank sheet of paper, and an intensely personal task.

by Nancy Gertz

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I learned to play “Ten Truths and a Lie” at a writing retreat. I had flown from the East Coast to San Francisco, then wove my way north on the switchbacks to Bolinas, a small community — a relic of the '60s — known for its residents' practice of removing town signs so nobody can find the place. I had no idea where I was headed or if I was going to get there anytime soon. It was an apropos metaphor for this daring journey I had embarked upon.

I followed the scanty GPS commands until, finally, I drove down a long, narrow path through wide cow pastures on either side. There it was, Commonweal, a retreat center perched like a pelican high up on the cliffs above the crashing waves of the Pacific. This peaceful cloister of a few buildings and many dusty paths is sheltered by a canopy of aged towering pines.

This is where people come to unveil and declutter some of the emotional and spiritual messes lurking in their hearts and minds. I was terribly nervous about the bold decision I had made to come to this remote place with a bunch of strangers to do deeply personal and probably painful work of the soul.

The retreat topic was “Grief, Loss, Uncertainty and Change.” I had signed up months before, when the realness of it was far off in the future. As the travel date loomed closer, I thought perhaps I didn't really “need” to go anymore — that the difficulties I was experiencing related to my separation and impending divorce were easing and therefore this whole endeavor seemed like overkill. I guess that happens with some frequency to the workshop participants, because it was

right around then that I received a letter from the teacher saying, “Perhaps you're having second thoughts and don't think you should come. It's normal to feel that way. Now here's the packing list.”

That clinched it for me — I must be just like everyone else, a combination of curious, courageous, scared and intimidated.

By the time we're well into middle age and beyond, most of us are pretty skilled at making social appearances. We can cover up our doubts and insecurities at neighborhood cocktail parties, and we know how to say the right things when we're meeting our child's new beloved. We answer the question “How are you?” with some filtering, knowing that not every inquiry is on par with another. There are those who want to hear the truth and those who don't, people with whom we want to disclose what's real and others with whom we are more guarded.

If this retreat had a banner, it would have said, “Prepare to Tell the Truth, The Whole Truth, and Nothing But the Truth.” Everyone in the room knew the deal — that without honoring our deep and sometimes painful truths, we wouldn't reap the rewards of coming in the first place. But how to start?

After our inaugural dinner with 20 strangers making small-ish talk, we were gently ushered into the ice breaker called “Ten Truths and a Lie.” Our teacher described the process — write down 10 things that are true about your life and one thing that is a lie. She demonstrated by reading down her own list.

The room was totally silent as she shared what were probably, at least at some point, significant secrets. I was astonished by her collection of what

had to be truths, and there was absolutely no way I could discern which among them was a lie. This list rolled right out of a Hollywood suspense thriller. Nobody could make this stuff up.

When she finished, one by one, each of us had to guess which numbered item was the lie. We failed miserably, but at the same time, we began to peer behind the facade of our own lives to reveal our own deep truths.

Everyone went into their private corners to craft their list. I surprised myself as my list grew longer with a run of some pretty crazy things too. The teacher's list was an invitation to go big, to curate some of the greatest and most devastating, sweet and sour, painful and glorious highlights of my life. The hell with making a good appearance, she was saying ... just go for it, tell it like it is, and let's see if anyone can detect the one declaration that is patently false.

We went around the room, each person slowly reading. Everyone voting. It was nearly impossible to separate the lie from the truths in all the lists.

There were stories from the mountaintops of nirvana and horrible retellings from the pits of hell on earth. There were laughs, tears, fears realized and hopes achieved. Looking around the room, there was no way anyone could have imagined the stories that each of us held about our lives. We bonded over the shared common ground of life's ups and downs, the undeniable truths of our rich and varied lives. Compassion filled the room.

It turns out, the truth can be nearly impossible to believe — especially our own. Speaking them out loud proved a profound exercise in honoring what is real. ♦

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“The great advantage about telling the truth is that nobody ever believes it.”

— Dorothy L. Sayers