

No, honestly! It's all true!

Lies are sometimes stories in need of understanding

I'd been working with a boy who spent hours telling me stories, all of them exaggerated and most of them, I suspected, made up. For a long time I listened, trying to decide how best to respond.

Most young people tell the truth as best they can. Their truth. It may not fit with another person's truth – different people tell different versions of the same story – and one person's 'truth' may change over time. So I sat there thinking, "Should I accept whatever Owen's telling me, or should I challenge the truthfulness of his stories? And if I'm going to challenge him, how do I do that without embarrassing or humiliating him?"

There are young people who make things up. They tell lies to protect themselves or other people. So why was Owen telling me these stories, I wondered? Why was he allowing our conversations to continue if they were based on lies? What did his stories mean? What was he trying to say?

Some young people tell exotic stories to be interesting. From past experience, they don't trust that the ordinary, mundane circumstances of their lives will ever keep another person interested, and yet their most primitive need is to interest people in order to exist and feel worth something. They're desperate to see the reaction on the other person's face. They need to know that they're being taken seriously, that they have the power to affect other people. So perhaps Owen was trying to grab my attention, making an attachment, making himself memorable? And perhaps I needed to understand his stories as expressions of anxiety: anxiety that might diminish the longer our relationship continued and as it gradually became clear to him that I wasn't about to abandon him as uninteresting or worthless?

Sometimes telling a lie has a developmental function akin to a game of hide-and-seek or peek-a-boo. In hide-and-seek, the child enjoys the thrill of hiding, safe in the knowledge that the adult will keep looking and the child will eventually be found. The adult mustn't give up or the game will be spoiled. Developmentally, the game allows the child the experience of existing without necessarily being seen by another person. If all goes well, the child is able to hide for longer and longer periods, becoming more and more independent. A child's first successful lie (hiding the truth or hiding from the truth) therefore achieves a similar kind of independence, proving that no one is able to read the child's mind any longer. So perhaps Owen's stories were ways of hiding the truth, or hiding from the truth, seeing how long he could survive on the strength of a story, waiting to see if and when he'd be found out? Perhaps I needed to 'find' him, gently uncovering the truth in a way that wouldn't shame a thirteen-year-old boy for behaving like a three-year-old child?

I wondered if his story-telling itself was the problem. In effect, he might have been saying to me, "Look! Making up stories is my default setting and it's all I know how to do. And it's what we do in my family: we never tell the truth to people outside the family because that would be grassing. So we're obliged to tell stories to get each other's attention but our stories are always unreliable. We

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never know the actual truth about anything and eventually we stop listening to each other. Please help me find a different way of doing things!”

I listened to his stories, toying with possible understandings. I wondered about stories as metaphors or fairy-tales, as oblique expressions of mixed feelings emerging from Owen's unconscious like dreams, needing to be understood and translated into thoughts he could recognize without feeling shamed.

Eventually I said as matter-of-factly as possible, “Owen, you know how sometimes you exaggerate things to make the story better, and even add things that aren't quite true? Well, I was thinking about how annoying it must have been for you in your life when people haven't taken you seriously and how tempting it must have been to say things to shock or to upset them....”

I'd guessed correctly.

“Yeah!” he said. “Really annoying! They think I don't know things and they think I'm scared to do things. But I'm not!”

He was off the hook. We went on to talk about what it had been like for him over the years, never being taken seriously. We didn't need to argue over whether his stories had actually been true or false. That had never really been the point.