

About not knowing

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During one of my previous professional incarnations I was a ghost writer. I would be asked by families to sit with an elder member of the family, listen to their life's story and put it down in writing. It was fascinating, entering the long life of another person, and listening with the sole objective of narrating it back, in a comprehensible, consistent way.

One such client was an old man, in his early nineties, whose life-story was spread over continents and world wars, idealistic courage and humble humanity. And, in our last meeting, having rechecked some details I was unsure of, finishing some storylines and saying goodbye, he suddenly opened up in a way he hadn't before.

I want to tell you something, he said, which I haven't told a single soul until now. And I want to ask you never to tell it to anybody who might have known me either. To honour his request, I avoided telling his story. Almost ten years have passed since he died, and since his family live in Israel, and don't have any involvement with NLP, well, I took the freedom to tell his story, which – for some odd reason that I (sincerely) don't understand, has made a real impact on clients whom I told it to.

When I came to Israel, many years ago, my wife and I joined a kibbutz, as you know. Can you imagine a European young man, educated and wealthy, being given a shovel and, for the ideals and ideas of community and sharing – digging? There were moments where I questioned myself, wondering if this is the best way of putting my university degree into action, but I continued digging. The earth was hard, but I dug. At first, with great zest and enthusiasm, until slowly I noticed the cramps in my arms and hands, and the blisters started hurting. I wasn't even sure what I was digging for – nobody explained. You watch the earth opening up before you, sometimes easily, at others reluctantly, and she opens and unravels and her colours deepen as you dig, and your thoughts drift while your body digs deeper and deeper, not looking for meaning, not looking to get anywhere but totally immersed in an activity that might have no purpose whatsoever.

And then, on one of the early days of digging, I found something. There, deep in the ground, was a box. It was a small box, not bigger than a pack of cigarettes, and it looked so old and so – well, so peculiar. And I picked the box up and wondered what to do with it. Should I tell my supervisor? Joining the kibbutz, I agreed that I shall have no personal possessions, and keeping the box would amount to betraying such ideas. But I was curious and tempted, and until I made up my mind, I put the box in my pocket and continued to dig. The thoughts were moving frantically. I was curious, what was in it? I felt guilty; perhaps the mere reason for digging was looking for this very box. But throughout the day, I was so preoccupied with thinking, speculating and wondering about the box that I dug all day, and the evening has come. My wife joined me to the commune room to eat, and I wanted to share with her

my finding but couldn't, and by the time we got to our room I was so tired that I dropped into a deep sleep without even taking a shower. And the dreams you have when you have discovered something exciting, on the spot between curiosity and guilt, between hope and fear, these dreams are of a special quality. And when I woke up the day has not yet come, but knowing the day that was ahead of me, I hid the box under a tile in the kitchenette, and went to work.

That working day passed in a daze, and I was unable to think straight or focus on anything really. I was afraid that the digging we were all doing was in vain, now that the box was found, but was reassured when we started putting poles and cement into the earth, which received these with surprise and slight rebellion. If you have never laid foundations for a house, you wouldn't know that it fills your heart with such pride and humbleness at the same time, and I was so relieved to realise the purpose of our digging, and so moved by these overwhelming sensations of seeing a house being welcomed into the world, and the ground negotiating its needs as the house is built, that I forgot to feel guilty about the box.

I came home that evening, tired and resolved to tell my wife about the box, and ever so curious about its content. And after the shower, finding that although I wanted to tell her, I was also reluctant to do so. It has become my secret, my private finding – and I fell asleep perplexed, and had a dream.

And in my dream I laid next to a woman, who was not my wife. She was beautiful and very deeply relaxed, or perhaps she was dreaming too. She looked so full of suffering and joy, so full of fear and anger, of grief and love, of life and death. And I looked at her and wanted to tell her something, to thank her perhaps or acknowledge this shared moment, but I couldn't utter a word. Nevertheless, I knew exactly what I needed to do, and I went to the kitchenette and from under the tile brought out the box, placing it gently on this woman's chest. And then I drifted into a deeper sleep, into which dreams couldn't penetrate, or perhaps a state which did not welcome remembering the dreams that it did hold.

And in the morning, having decided to show the box to my wife, and to finally find out its content before going to work, I found that there was nothing there in the space under the tile; the box was gone. And with its disappearance, my decision to share this strange incident with anybody other than myself had vanished too.

Many years have passed. In those years I have laid foundations to many houses, and built my own house too. I had children and grandchildren, and have seen so much suffering and so much joy, I have known so much fear and anger, so much grief and love, so much life and death. Fifty years have passed, and one day I walked very sad in the streets of a town. It was the first anniversary for the death of my wife and I was lost and confused, and still struck with as much sorrow and yearning as I have felt a year before. And I stopped before a shop, what was sold there I do not know, but I saw an old man looking at me from there, and behind him stood a woman; a beautiful

woman who seemed so familiar, but she wasn't there when I turned my head. And I sat on a bench, drained and confused, and fell asleep. And there I was, once more laying besides this beautiful woman who has not aged a day. And she breathed so calmly, that I was not at all surprised when she opened her eyes and looked at me, only to realise that those eyes have no one colour but plenty, and once more I was a little boy. A little boy waiting, so hopefully, for something. And she took the box that I gave her and smiled at me, and she put this box gently on my chest, and then I drifted deeper, to a different level of sleep.

And when I woke up, sitting on a bench with a sore neck, the box was there – on my lap, and I knew that I can finally open it.

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