

When Friends or Patients Ask About . . .

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Tall Tales and Imaginary Companions

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A CONSULTING psychiatrist would not be surprised to read of a woman in Virginia who was hypnotized by her husband and then gave a remarkable story, in rather poor German, that she was "Gretchen Gottlieb," a German girl who died 100 years ago under dramatic circumstances. But competent authorities were unable to verify the tale. It recalled the saga of Bridey Murphy. In 1952, a Colorado woman revealed under hypnosis that she was "Bridey," who lived and died in 19th century Ireland, but who turned out, alas, to be an unverified or a falsified character. There is nothing surprising about these stories, because all of us have a touch of the desire to prevaricate, which is rendered harmless almost all of the time in most of us by our conscious and unconscious controls.

At one end of the spectrum, we see people who live a lie, falsifying and distorting any features of real life that come into their purview to accomplish a short-term gain, usually with a minimal sense of guilt, often with charm. These disorders are diagnosed (if the patients should come to examination) as "antisocial personalities" or "psychopathic personalities." All of us have met someone like this; some of us have been mulcted by such characters, in business or in politics, but only a few of us permit ourselves the fleeting thought, "Wouldn't it be great to be rich and famous, without really being either?" In the old psychiatric books, we used to have a diagnosis of "pathological

mendacity," which dealt with the symptom and not the personality's motives, that fit the case of a person to whom truth was a foreign word. I remember one man, immediately following World War II, who earned this appellation well, giving a convincing story of his exploits in combat, in the manner of a modest hero; but choosing the theatre from which I had just returned. We shortly discovered that he had turned himself in to the psychiatric hospital to avoid prosecution on another charge of bad check passing.

Another extreme maltreatment of truth is more obvious. In the schizophrenias, delusions and depersonalization may process the objective facts of a person's background into such stuff as dreams are made of. Thus, the case of a young girl in a schizophrenic attack who said, "I'm a virgin, the Virgin Mary is a virgin, therefore I'm the Virgin Mary."

Perception of Truth

But in that vast group of people who are neither psychotic nor psychopathic—the neurotic population—we often see a wrestling match with truth in which the advantage shifts from the truth to the neurotic subject's problems and then back again. Neurotic patients, Freud said, are troubled by reminiscences, and their reminiscences can effectively distort the observations that others deem the truthful facts of the matter. Thus, in a person who has already been sufficiently traumatized, the reminiscence of an additional traumatic event can precipitate a hysterical denial of perception, as in hysterical blindness or hysterical anesthesia. The recollection of a fearsome sight in the remote past can trigger a massive visual im-

pediment in the present.

But at the other extreme, in people who are normal or nearly so, there is the wish to tell a tale that is perhaps a bit too tall. All of us in my generation have friends whose war stories get better with each decade as a result of polishing the style or even the substance of the story. For example, in my own memory, I'm not completely sure whether it was I or my colonel who made a certain witty remark on V-J Day in 1945.

And normal children can have such nonfactual phenomena as imaginary playmates. I remember one child, as normal as a pebble on the beach, with a nonexistent playmate named Georgy de Georgy, who lived in the air near LaGuardia Airport. Georgy would appear to the little boy only when needed, appearing and disappearing without a trace in anyone else's eyes.

Such imaginary playmates disappear for good at about age 5, when adult-type controls begin to appear in the child's pattern of thinking. But if the controls are incomplete, the pattern can linger on, long after the child has grown, to emerge to a specific need. And if that need is powerful enough, or if the controls that would restrain it should become sufficiently weakened, an adult can not only have an imaginary playmate, but can even *become* one. This is one simple way by which we can account for the appearance of a Bridey Murphy or a Gretchen Gottlieb.

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