

False Words

"False words are not only evil in themselves, but they infect the soul with evil."

— SOCRATES

One day soon after I moved back home, as I walked through the front door after work, my sister was sitting on the sofa talking on the telephone with her girlfriend. "Fuck 'im! Fuck 'im!" I heard her say in a contemptuous tone, and as she looked toward me, I saw pure venom in her eyes. I remained silent and continued up the stairs to my room. She was speaking just loudly enough to where there was clear intent for me to hear: "You've heard what happens to Vietnam vets! They're abusive! Something is wrong with them."

Now I was thinking, *What is this all about?*

I was never in Vietnam or abusive to anyone, and she knew that. It was obvious I was meant to hear her words, so I stood silently on the upper landing near the stairs where she could not see me, and listened. I had not been home a week at this point, and she was already disparaging me. She was not only disparaging me, but was doing it with outrageous and blatant lies. My accomplishments, achievements, and sacrifices during my military service would make any family proud, and it was not I who was abusive; it was *she* and others in the family.

This was another surprising, new development—a smear campaign that ultimately propagated like cancer.

I did not understand why she would do that. Beyond disparaging me she was destroying any meaningful bond that could have and should have been developing between us as brother and sister, but then she had started that destruction long before the day I separated from my wife and moved back home.

Any level of trust was being utterly destroyed as well. This grown woman was openly making false claims about me. *Who does such things?* I thought.

Little did I realize a major smear campaign against me was already well underway and would become a recurring effort over the coming years, led by my sister and adopted by others in my family. I felt as though I was losing part of myself. Throughout these events, I had to stay focused on maintaining my perspective and my self-awareness.

A NEW PROFESSION

Following my retirement in 1995, I continued to work for the Department of Defense, specifically for the air force as a consultant.

My business travel took me away one week per month for three years, with visits alternating between two Midwestern states. It was demanding work, and the eighty-mile roundtrip commute to work each day was physically demanding. It blended into the already stressful environment in which I was living, yet on the other hand, the drive was also my savior.

THE DRIVEWAY FROM HELL

From the day I first moved back in, Kayleigh and I had agreed that we would share the driveway next to my parents' side of the house. Our agreement was based on my leaving for work earlier in the morning than she because of my commute. Because of that, I parked in front of her. I remember mentioning that if we were both home and she needed

to go out, I would gladly move my car. She needed only to ask. It was a logical arrangement—at least at the time it was agreed upon.

Right after I moved in, though, my mother took matters into her own hands. Because I returned home from work before my sister, my mother started the process of reminding me—on a daily basis upon my return home—that my sister was coming home too. The inference was to move my car, but it was never in the driveway because I knew Kayleigh would be coming home. I simply parked on the street in front of the house.

My consistent reminders to my mother that my car was not in the driveway had no effect. It became a daily routine with her, and soon there was no hope she would stop this maddening ritual. For the first few weeks I dismissed it with, “My car is in *front* of the house, Ma—not the driveway.”

Nevertheless, she continued each day upon my return home with the same comment. I became increasingly frustrated and found my patience challenged beyond measure. It amounted to daily badgering.

At one point, I came to believe it could not be possible that she would forget my daily responses. I thought, *Wasn't she listening?* I often bit my tongue. I also felt resentment toward my sister—not envy or jealousy, but resentment for my mother's badgering in favor of my sister.

From that day forward, I parked across the street. My mother and sister made my car a major issue of unbelievable proportions. Little did I know my mother was positioning me in my family role and conditioning me to be of a lesser status in comparison to my sister.

Where I parked my car was only the first excuse for their behavior. Sure enough, there came something else from my mother and sister, something on a grand scale, both overwhelming and unforgettable. When that day came my sister would cross the threshold from arrogant superiority and outright abuse to violence-provoking hostility, and I would come to curse the day she was born.

The distance from the house to my office was forty miles, or about an hour's drive during early rush hour traffic. As such, my schedule had me up very early—four fifteen in the morning—and leaving the house by five o'clock. I would walk into my office by six o'clock. At the end of the workday, I left the office around two thirty and was home by three thirty.

One morning I left for work an hour later, around the same time as my sister would be leaving. I had finished writing an email and was dressed. I needed only to shave, which perhaps took three minutes, and then I would be on my way.

And yes, for some reason I had foolishly parked my car in the driveway in front of Kayleigh's. I knew I had to move my car for my sister if she needed to leave and I was prepared to do so. She only had to ask, as we agreed.

Just after six o'clock I was lathered and standing in front of the mirror. I kept the bathroom door closed but for an inch to prevent the light from reflecting into the hallway and the room where my parents were sleeping. The only sound was the light gurgle of running hot water in the bathroom sink.

Without warning, an earsplitting *bang!* broke the silence. The bathroom door slammed so hard into the toilet paper dispenser the impact almost broke it off the wall. I literally jumped back from shock and turned to see my sister standing at the threshold of the bathroom door with her coat on and purse slung over her shoulder.

With this look of pure evil, she screamed so loudly and with such ferocious hatred that her eyes were bulging from her head and the veins in her face were clearly visible. Not looking directly at me but straight ahead, she shouted at the top of her lungs, "Sean! I have to go to work! You have to move your fucking car!!" In the background I heard my mother, still in bed, add a nonsensical caveat in support of my sister: "Goddamn computers!" In proclaiming her approval for the outburst,

even if she did so with a phrase that made no contextual sense, she let me know that I was in defiance of my sister's sovereignty and rule.

When I think back to that morning, I wonder why my sister chose that option. She could have knocked lightly to say she had to leave—an option available to her and that, one would think, a responsible adult would have chosen. Something I had not yet considered at the time was human warmth and respect in the family.

There was none.

Nor had there been warmth for each other since long before I came home. I would not learn the true nature of my mother and Kayleigh's relationship until years later, but I did know I had to fight being sucked into the drama of the only life they had ever known.

In one of Sandy Hotchkiss's keen insights in her works, *The Seven Deadly Sins of Narcissism*, she states appropriately: "Internally, these individuals remain in a state of psychological fusion with that all-powerful, all-nurturant caregiver, and this becomes the working model for their interactions with others. They treat people as if they exist only to meet their needs, and they have little regard for anyone who can't be used in some way. In a psychological sense, they don't really 'see' anyone else, except when a person can do something for them. . . . [Y]ou will sense that quality of childlike narcissism by the way they relate to the people around them. There will be inevitable violations of boundaries."

I witnessed performances of good behavior that were convincing but not without sarcastic subtleties. The inner working dynamics of our family environment within the home were vehemently concealed from outsiders, just as an outsider does not see what goes on within the confines of a prison environment. The psychological and emotional cruelty, hostile outbursts without warning, and now the potential physical attacks were a reality, harrowing, and progressively getting worse.

Why Kayleigh chose a premeditated attack that crossed the line into purposefully instigating potential violence I could not understand. I

did all I could do to seek inner strength and restraint in responding to the viciousness of her attack that morning.

My father, hard of hearing from old age and sound asleep until my sister's rage attack, was awakened and got up from bed. If he could hear her from six feet away in his traumatic hearing condition, I can guarantee the family across the street could hear her. He stood at the bathroom door and asked *me*, shaving cream still covering my face, what was going on, as though I did something wrong and was at fault.

The only thing I could think to say was, "Why can't she be civilized?" Without finishing shaving, I hurriedly dry-toweled my face and left the house immediately. It was in the car that morning driving to work—angrier than I thought I was ever capable of feeling and completely uncharacteristic of me—that it became abundantly clear that remaining in the house with Kayleigh and my mother was no longer an option. I had to plan my escape before they escalated their hostility into something worse.

By this time, it seemed Kayleigh's behavior was designed to specifically achieve that goal: to expel me from the house by making my life so miserable I would leave.

The other problem I faced was based on gender: my mother was old and sick, and my sister was a woman. As a man, I knew that had I even once lost my cool and succumbed to their strategy of provocations, torment, and general abusiveness, or even in a moment of weakness physically threatened my sister, *I* would be viewed by society and the law as an abuser. My sister had already laid the groundwork for that with her girlfriend on the phone that one day. Thus, they would be seen as the victims when, in fact, they were the perpetrators.

I was convinced they were setting me up. But why?

It was clear that resisting her vicious, physical attacks would have only landed me in conflict with the law. I never realized how much inner strength I possessed to restrain myself.

Nagging questions came with no answers. I learned that “baiting” is another term describing narcissistic behavior that is used to antagonize, provoke, and taunt others to garner attention and commit crimes a person would not normally commit. It makes me wonder why one would behave this way if not to be punished or utterly abandoned.

My mother and sister were persecuting and victimizing others while able to convincingly portray themselves as victims.

I had seen clearly visible and undeniable indications that my sister was fully aware that she knew the things she was doing were not right, and she even took sadistic pleasure in them. She was simply indifferent to what she was doing and was often amused by their effect.

It would elude me for years as to how one could act in this manner and not be aware, especially when there was a ferocious effort to deny the behavior and conceal it by playing the victim. Seeing the results of what was transpiring around her—the destruction of the family—had no positive influence to change her behavior.

These were telltale signs I had seen so many times. The most notable was the trademark smirk my sister displayed during and after her attacks in such a way as to convey a meaning of having achieved some great victory. She closed her lips with obvious pressure and forced a smile from ear to ear while flaring her nostrils open as wide as she could, staring at me directly in the eye in a form of defiant victory.

It was the behavior of a spoiled-rotten six-year-old brat.

There was no great effort required to read the look of contempt, condescending arrogance, and pride from her perceived achievement. There was in fact cruelty and great joy in it. The Roman philosopher Seneca once said, “All cruelty springs from weakness,” and in this case, he was proven right.

There were more than sufficient indications that my sister was fully aware of what she was doing and simply did not care, and Dr. Nina Brown gracefully and further defines “gloating” as a character trait of the narcissist following “successful” abusive behavior. She writes in

her works *The Destructive Narcissistic Pattern*, “Gloating is reminiscent of childhood taunting behavior, and others react to it in much the same way: by being turned off. Being proud of winning or achieving is very different from gloating. Being proud is a personal affirmation of self without devaluing or disparaging the other person. Gloating means you are perceiving yourself as better and disparaging or putting down the other person.”

Another term well-defined in my research and with remarkable similarity to my family’s structural dynamics, and as much to workplace structures across the country, is the “serial bully.”

It is crucial to state that a parent—*any* parent—who makes a claim that, “We, as parents, should do everything for our children,” contradicts decades of published research and findings from highly respected scholars in the fields of psychology, parenting, and narcissism. Dozens of professional and scholarly works I read in my research stand by this contradictory position.

Indeed, we should all ensure the safety of our children, emotionally, psychologically, and physically. We should educate our children, give them a good home, and make sacrifices that allow them to enter the real world one day fully armed, equipped, and self-sufficient. This is, without question, the very essence of love. By contrast, even under these conditions of love, constant praise when praising is inappropriate; putting a child on a pedestal; rewarding bad behavior or “looking the other way”; telling a child or alluding continually to the idea that he or she is “so special” or better than others, serves only to develop a sense of entitlement to special treatment, that they should always get what they want when they want it, and is commensurate with developmental malignancy.

From this, the child grows to actually believe they *are* in fact better than anyone else and to have no qualms in conveying it in words or deeds. Unreasonable expectations that their demands and needs be

met (while those of others are relegated to irrelevancy) is one of several resulting developmental traits.

Any such parental-mishandling patterns that “over-valuate” a child during stages of their development only serves to inflate the budding ego and nurture a future narcissist.

A blanket statement that “We should do everything for our children,” then, should raise eyebrows and many questions. As your child grows to adulthood you will find the answers—hopefully sooner so that you, as a parent, can correct your behavior before it’s too late.

THE MURDER OF SOULS

Society accepts the definition of murder only as the killing of another human being in the physical sense, but I would argue that domestic abusers, including sibling abusers, often murder, over long periods of time, their victims’ sense of hope and optimism.

This is a death that has no legal punishment.

I felt some level of comfort and healing, though, in reading Dr. Elsa Ronningstam’s timely book on narcissism, *Identifying and Understanding the Narcissistic Personality*, which shed great light on the dynamics of what I experienced. Equally, it was of great concern and disturbing to me to learn of the lack of public awareness surrounding the psychopathology of narcissism and that this lack of awareness related to a subsequent lack of funding for research.

Ronningstam writes: “The complex nature of this disorder—high level of functioning, lack of symptoms or consistent behavior signifiers, hidden or denied intrapsychic problems (even when severe), and lack of motivation to seek psychiatric treatment out of shame, pride, or self-aggrandizing denial—have made it difficult to identify people in general psychiatric settings who meet the *DSM* criteria for NPD. Consequently, funding for psychiatric research on NPD has been less publicly urgent, especially compared with the antisocial personality disorder (ASPD) and borderline personality disorder (BPD), for which

more obvious human suffering and extensive social and mental health costs have impelled research on their etiology, course, and treatment.”

The remarkable accuracy in correlating behavior I experienced with that reported from decades of study and research opened the information channel wider. I found myself reading more, and understanding became a willing process. Whether my mother and sister’s behaviour were narcissism, antisocial personality, a combination of both, or another disturbance, I do not know. What I did know were traits characteristic of narcissism were clearly demonstrated even in the absence of a formal, clinical diagnosis.

AN ADMISSION

During the first year of my divorce, in 1993, I stayed in contact with Maureen. Our divorce was amicable, and we remained friends. We would occasionally have lunch together and talk. I would sometimes offer money to help her and the children but could only do that up until the time of Kayleigh’s morning outburst kicking in the bathroom door, after which I needed all my funds to help me move out. I admitted to Maureen that she was right in how she felt years ago and I apologized profusely for not seeing what she had.

For my ex-wife’s peace of mind, I expressed that not only was my sister the same as she had always been and that both her and my brother blatantly made false allegations against me, but I found Kayleigh’s behavior and cruelty were worse than we experienced when we were together. I hoped it would give her closure from her experiences.

What mattered at that moment was to soothe her mind and soul and to try to bring her peace as much as I could. Letting her know I was mistaken was something I owed to her.

The untenable situation at my parents’ home and the nearly eighty-mile roundtrip commute to work each day was not helping. While periods of seeming calm sometimes lasted for days in the family, their underlying fueling of anger was always in the air. These brief periods

of quietude came in subtle doses, but still there were no boundaries. Everyone was fair game; it was just a matter of time before something or someone exploded.

Personal boundaries in the family did not exist and had not for many years. My sister was fueled by her own negative energy and by my mother's. Trying to communicate with them was fruitless. None of them spoke *to* you; they spoke *at* you. Explosive tirades were the norm. I would often see my sister slumped on the sofa, appearing totally exhausted following a major explosive episode.

HOLIDAY TIME

The holidays would offer some level of superficial sentimentality, as though there was some form of emotional and spiritual acquiescence to the meaning of the holiday, but it felt like when I visited the Korean Demilitarized Zone—a truce period with an eerie silence one cannot describe but can readily feel.

No one was shooting, but the psychological guns were aimed.

Toward the end of 1992 and with Christmas approaching, I was in my bedroom one day with the door closed, wrapping gifts, when a surprisingly soft knock came. It was my sister, who, rather than kicking in the door, asked politely if we could talk. I told her politely in return I was wrapping Christmas presents, which I was. It was my hope she would not attempt to take that private time from me with some verbal tirade. I stopped wrapping to listen intently.

Through the door she said, "I'm sorry for what I said. Can we forget it?"

She was referring to the episode when she had degraded me on the telephone to her girlfriend, and she knew I had overheard.

"I already did," I responded through the closed door, but my response was more from a position of survival than one of true forgiveness. I could have denied her apology and given her a stern lesson in family and humanistic values, but any attempt to either correct her or define

the feeling I got from that type of behavior could have resulted in less than desirable consequences. I let it go to keep the peace.

THE LANGUAGE TRAP

My sister's lies and degradation of me to her girlfriend were not accidental. If one can conclude there is willful, positive forethought in demonstrating goodness, there has to equally be willful malice of forethought when devising evil devices. I never understood what was to be gained by it. Moments of superficial reconciliation like this one over the holidays were always short-lived, and I came to see that even language was designed for and used as a weapon.

It was impossible to ascertain if alluring calls with soft tones were designed to throw me off guard, but I would find that out too.

On a Saturday afternoon one summer, my brother and his family were away for the weekend, and my sister and father were not home. My mother was not in good physical condition, so someone had to be home with her. I was upstairs in my room working quietly when my mother called to me.

Her voice was soft and alluring in the sense of a normal tone, and there was no indication of anger or hostility. I walked downstairs, and turning on the last step, I saw her in the hallway closet reaching upward. I thought she needed me to reach something for her. Standing next to her, as I looked into the closet at what she was doing, I asked if I could help her get something. Her soft, alluring tone suddenly changed to seething anger, scolding, and condemnation. The proverbial horns came out, the tail was pointed, and fangs were revealed: "I want to tell you something!" she blasted. "Your father and I talked about this. If he goes first [dies], or if I go first—your father and I talked about this," she repeated, "neither one of us wants to see you shed one tear at our funeral!"

I went back upstairs without another word, slammed my bedroom door, and tried to calm myself. Without question my father was not

capable of saying such cruel things. She was lying, and the lie was designed to cause injury.

I came to realize later that even language can be perverted and pathologized, designed to lower a victim's guard through alluring and appealing delivery. One would normally expect loving tones from a mother, but my mother used them as bait. It was the first time I had been lured by a verbal trap intended to be just that: a psychological and emotional vise that hid cruelty and abuse under the initial guise of lovingness.

Following the holidays, a transition to normalcy resumed. I watched the pendulum swing between verbal attacks on both sides of the house, between my sister and my brother and sister-in-law, and I would often get caught in the crossfire.

I spent great amounts of time in my room working at my computer, learning my new defense department job. Throwing myself into my work was the only semblance of reality that existed for me at home. Across the threshold of my bedroom and out in the main house, one entered a twilight zone, an abyss, a battlefield.

I had to preserve my sanity.

