

## How much should you tell?

as told by Al Turtle

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One time my partner and I were driving around. I don't know how the subject came up. Strange subjects often came up while on the roads above our home. What I do remember was being asked whether I keep secrets from her.

I took quite a time to answer. This was in those days when honesty, openness and candour were a kind new thing to me. And it was a time when neither of us were giving shallow answers. And so I looked inside for my truth.

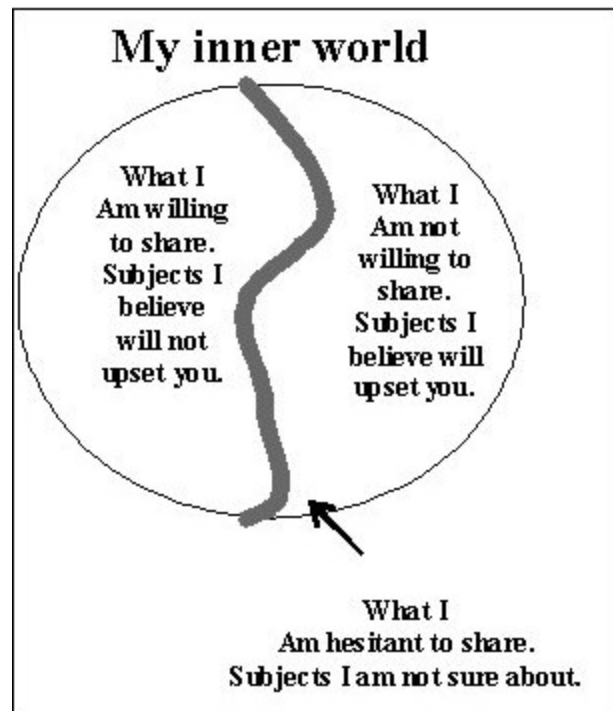
"I tell you some of my truth. Some I don't tell you," I said. She asked what I meant.

I told her that I divided my inner world into two pieces: those things I would tell her about – am even eager to speak of; and those things that I kept hidden from her, that I hesitated or refused to speak about. When we arrived home, I drew a picture of this. I said that all the stuff on the left I would tell, and on the right I would keep hidden.

Looking at the picture I told her that if she asked me a question about some things, I would want to answer. If she asked a question about other things, I would lie or refuse to tell her or change the subject. And some subjects were along that dividing line. Questions about those would trigger great tension in me. And multiple questions about those subjects would exhaust me.

There was a pause in our conversation as I both she and I became used to the truth I had just spoken.

Then she said the one word, "Why?" I pondered for a while. Why do I do this? Do all people? Why do I keep things hidden? Am I scared of sharing? Yes. But why?



I answered, "I keep the things hidden which I think will upset you." We spoke a little more and clarified that the subjects to the right were all subjects I thought would upset her. Those to the left were all the ones I thought non-upsetting. And those along the line I was uncertain about. I also added that I had come to use the word "upset" to mean angry or sad or both.

I reiterated, "I guess I am protecting you, by holding back information." And at that point I recall her getting pretty damn upset.

This discussion picked up again several days later.

### Solving the problem

We started off with this picture of me protecting her from "subjects I thought would hurt her." I was being noble, but was deciding for her, ahead of time, what she could or could not stand to listen to. She didn't like me doing this. I had been doing it for years with everyone I became close to. This was the famous "I don't want to hurt her/his feelings" subject. I hear many people saying, "I don't want to upset so and so."

One issue that bothered my partner a lot was my making a decision "for her" about what she could handle, without asking her. This seemed pretty patronizing to her, and a lot like what she experienced as a child. As I, personally, have lots of training in the tools of arrogance, this came pretty naturally to me. She didn't like it. I also didn't like

it, now that it was exposed. I could still recall my parents speaking about subjects they deemed I didn't need to hear, while at the time I was very curious. I could certainly understand her and validated her.

### **Not sharing is worse than sharing.**

We resolved that sharing could be problematical for both of us. It was hard. But that it was not as troublesome as keeping things hidden.

And so the question arose, "Why would I protect her from what she wanted to hear?" And this was followed by the question, "Why would she get upset at hearing things she wanted to hear?" And the final questions were, "What damage are we doing to each other by 'acting 'the normal way,' and how do we want to change what we are doing?"

### ***From the men***

I spent some time talking about this in my men friends and found out that my behavior seemed pretty normal to them, too. Were we, men, trained to protect women from being upset? It seemed so. We were certainly all used to our partner's upset and to trying to prevent it.

### **Upset as training**

Some felt we, men, were acting out of fear of our wives' behavior when they were upset. And so we looked at the idea that people punish others by "getting upset." The men linked this to the idea of how seeing-eye dogs are trained. A trainer has the dog by its harness. In the other hand he carries a paper bag of empty pop cans. When the dog does not pause at the edge of a sidewalk, where a blind man might fall, the trainer shakes the bag of cans in the dog's face. The dog learns to avoid the shaking bag (the upset) by pausing at the sidewalk curb. And so a man learns to withhold his sharing as his wife gets upset (shakes the bag) when he does share. That idea seemed good, but not enough.

Some men related that they were using their partner's "upset" as an excuse to not share. They were shy or hesitant even in the group meetings. As we spoke more of this, we realized that men often acted like an over trained seeing-eye dog in retirement – scared of any noise anywhere.

### **Protecting Little Girls**

Some of the men felt they were protecting women. Then one of the men recalled something he heard at a retreat with Robert Bly. "The difference between a 10 year-old boy(girl) and a 14 year-old boy(man) is that the former has no room in his head for ugly thoughts and the older has plenty of room." The idea was that a kid would run away from traumatic sights, while an older kid might be curious about the same, gory stuff. This man suggested that perhaps we, men, were all treating women as being youthful – protecting them from the ugly thoughts. That idea fit, too.

I checked this out with my partner. She spoke of the cultural imperative to keep women youthful. She had finished reading [Reviving Ophelia](#) by Mary Pipher about what our culture does to young women – conditioning them to try to look and act "nubile" forever. She finally added the word that helped me. Women are trained to appear "fragile" as part of their cultural contract with men.

Together we put the two ideas alongside each other. Perhaps men are conditioned as part of being protectors, to keep women as "girls," and women are conditioned to accept protection as proof of their success at appearing nubile. The men send the message, "I'll protect you, little fragile girl, if you let me know what upsets/threatens you." The women send the message "I'll keep appearing like a little fragile girl, if you protect me. When I need protection, I will dramatically appear fragile and get upset."

### ***The Upset Problem***

The formula then had two components:

1. people inappropriately use "upset" to avoid the unpleasant, (by the way, this is the other side of the [Master/Slave](#) issue. In that paper you may have learned that people punish others to keep them quiet. The

simple reason why people won't talk is that it is unsafe for them to talk. Similarly, the simple reason why people lie is because it is unsafe for them to tell the truth.)

2. people are trained to give inappropriate protection to those who use "upset" as a signal.

My partner and I became more comfortable with this formula which our culture had handed us over time. It even seemed to hold up when we found out that "women protect men from upset also."

At this point we threw out the idea that this was gender specific – men protecting women. The gender reverse seemed, predictably, also a normal – women protecting men. "I don't want to upset him." "I don't want to upset her."

### ***Solutions***

The solutions became clear to us over time. 1) I had to become willing to share anything with my partner. My caution, my growth challenge, was that when I was going to tell something that I feared might upset her, I had to give her warning and to help her with any reaction she might have. 2) My partner had to learn how to "get tough," and to be ready to listen to anything without "getting upset." Her caution, her growth challenge, was to encourage me to share, to work to make it safe for me to share, and for her to take responsibility for reducing her reactivity. And these challenges were true to her and for her to me.

I set about learning how to become a source of safety to my partner, while I was sharing everything. I found that she didn't like surprises. I found she didn't like feeling pushed. And so I learned to say, "I've got something to share that might be difficult for you. Tell me when you are ready to hear it." I learned to use [Mirroring](#) whenever I thought sharing might be difficult. "I'll tell you, but only if you will mirror me as I do."

I learned that her upset was often more a trial to her than it was to me, and that it was not useful for me to take her "upset" as a punishment toward me. I think that was about the time when we stopped using the phrase "upset at so-and-so" and replaced it by "upset by such-and-such." I believe we wanted to increase the chance that only one of us would be "upset" at a time. I think that the best friend an upset person has is one who is not upset, and who is [PreValidating](#), curious, understanding, and supportive.

My partner read more about women's paths in life and came up with the term "crone." This became an image of a strong and elder-becoming femininity. She used this to contrast with "little fragile girlishness." I think she found that some component of her "upset ness" was drama and some part was genuine fear. Discovering the difference and learning what to do about each became one of her projects.

She gave me another thought. Sometimes she wouldn't share because she was "trying to say it correctly or right", whatever that was. She and I learned to push through that hesitancy using another phrase. "[I don't know how to say this right! So let me say it wrong and then let's, you and me, clean it up afterwards.](#)"

### ***Lessons***

- It is better to share than to keep hidden, in the long run.
- It is better to share it crudely than to keep it hidden.
- Keeping secrets from each other does not make anyone safer.
- How you share is critical. Do it dialogically.
- Prepare yourself to listen to anything and remain relaxed.
- Protecting someone from distress is a way of keeping them from growing up.
- keeping them from growing up.