

BY JANE WALKER

SIX YEARS AGO, ON THE FIRST SUNDAY in April, I was sitting in a hotel room in New York City planning a lie.

I was attending the meeting of a professional organization I belong to as a college teacher, and I'd just met a professor from Cornell University whose books and articles I admired. She had read one of my articles and had asked me to eat lunch with her. I was thrilled and very eager to make a good impression.

Since it was an hour before we needed to meet for lunch, I went back to my room and decided to review the newsletter and journals I had brought with me to see if this professor had recently been published. I wanted this professor to think that I was up-to-date on our field and that I really did know and appreciate her work.

Bad news: the newsletter announced that she did have a new article published, but it wasn't in the journals I had brought with me. All I would know about her new article was the little bit the newsletter told me. I wanted her to think I had known about the article already and had gotten a copy. I knew I couldn't pretend to have read the article, since all I knew about it was the title and the main idea. So I planned to tell her that I had read about her article in the newsletter already and, since my library didn't carry that journal, I had ordered it from another library but hadn't had time to read it.

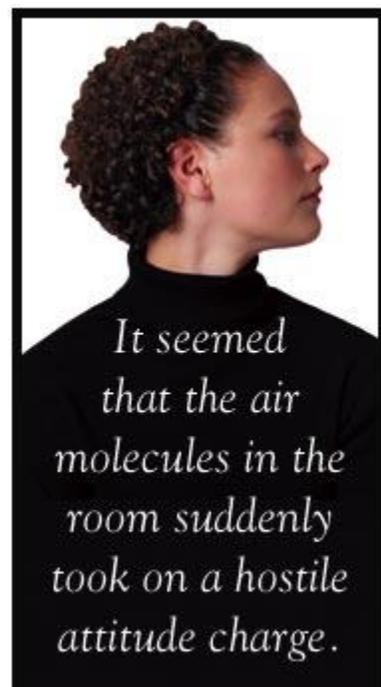
Even while I was thinking of all this, I knew that it was wrong and that I shouldn't lie. But I somehow felt that I had to. I can't explain it, but the instant I read about that professor's new article, it seemed that the air molecules in the room suddenly took on a hostile charge. Even though I remembered being taught that before the time of trouble I would have to get to the point in my Christian walk where I would choose to die rather than commit a known sin, it seemed to me that at that moment that I didn't have any choice.

The professor was very pleasant. She was a little confused by my story about the article, and a little disappointed that I already had a copy, because she had an issue of the journal with her that she had wanted to give to me. I felt guilty a couple days later when I received a copy of the whole issue of the journal her article had appeared in. She explained in a note that she wanted me to have an inscribed copy. (Did you tell her that I lied, God?) I quieted my conscience by confessing my lie to the other women in my Bible study and prayer group.

Camp Meeting 1995

Two and a half months later, at camp meeting, I attended a seminar led by Carol Zarska.* At the first meeting she talked about how some people struggle with the same sin, although it's not something they *want* to keep doing. Yet it's not a legalistic preoccupation—they aren't afraid God won't forgive them, because they know He does. But it's depressing and discouraging to keep on getting it wrong when you really want to be like Jesus. As she spoke, my mind immediately leaped back to the conference in New York.

Carol went on to say what we have all heard many times: God wants not only to forgive our sins but also to cleanse us



and to give us a heart like Jesus so we don't commit the same sins again and again. Not exactly new information, is it? But what was new was the process she laid out. She said that God doesn't usually change us without first leading us to understand the pattern that traps us in a particular sin. God wants us to participate in and understand the work He does in our lives. As secular psychologists and counselors do, Carol suggested that the sinful patterns in our lives come from our childhood. In order to understand where a particular sinful pattern came from, we need to think about the situation in which we commit that particular sin and ask God to give us insight so that we can connect it with the childhood situation in which we originally learned to react that way.

Carol used her own experience as an example. In the past she lost her temper with her little boy (now an adult) and used excessively harsh discipline. Afterward she would plead with God to forgive her, change her, and give her the victory over her temper. One day she finally asked God to show her where that sinful tendency in her life came from. What came to her mind was her own father's physical abuse of her when she was little. Carol had been surprised at the connection because she had accepted Jesus long before she ever became an abusive parent and had long since forgiven her father. She even had cared for him in her home before his death. But accepting Jesus and forgiving the person who has hurt you doesn't necessarily heal the damage. And that, according to Carol, is where our own sinful patterns come from: our damaged hearts, characters, attitudes, and responses.

The Path to Healing

I determined to take her advice and follow the program she laid out. I really wanted to let God dig out the root of my lack of truthfulness. During my walk that evening, I asked God to show me where that lie in New York-and all the other lies that come so naturally to me-came from. Then I paused to see if I'd made contact.

"Contact" described it exactly. The ideas started flowing. But instead of the rich, fascinating psychological insights from my early years that I thought Carol had promised, what came to mind was situation after embarrassing situation-times I'd stretched the truth, or told only part of it, or outright lied. "Thanks a lot, Holy Spirit and Carol. This was not what I had in mind." I confessed each of those sins and asked God again to show me the root of my deceitfulness. But apparently that was enough for one night as far as God was concerned.

When I went walking the next evening and began once more to pray about the issue of my lying, asking to discover the origin, God showed me. I realized that what I was feeling in that hotel room-when all the little air molecules turned into enemies and when I knew I was going to lie without even feeling as if I had decided to-was fear. I lied because I was afraid. But afraid of what? My job at my state university was not in jeopardy. I wouldn't have described this Cornell professor as someone who looks at people and thinks, *If you haven't read every word I've written, you are an idiot*. What was frightening about that situation?

What came to mind during that summer evening walk was the memory of my mother, an intelligent professional woman and affectionate parent who was mentally ill and took her own life when I was 10 years old. God helped me connect the fear I felt in the New York hotel with the way I used to feel around my mother. I wanted her to see everything about me as perfect so that she wouldn't need to get upset. It was scary when she was upset.

It was that way with a lot of the lies I told: I would say I agreed with people when I really didn't, or give compliments when I didn't mean them, so that other people would feel good and be OK with me. I wanted this professor to feel good that I knew about her article and to be OK with me about that. Never mind that she didn't expect everyone on the planet, or

even everyone in her field, to read every article she writes the minute it's published. My attitudes and responses had been damaged by my mother's illness. Fear doesn't have to be rational in order to have power over us, and my fear had power over me. I felt as if it took away my choice whether or not to lie.

I fully believed that God loved me and forgave me. I knew already that I wasn't lying for the fun of it, and I didn't want to lie any more. I also didn't want to be afraid anymore. But how do you stop being afraid?

The Next Step

In our seminar sequence, we were now to ask God to reveal to us how Jesus, as a child, would have responded in the same situation that we were in as children. Since He had a perfect human nature, He reacted to other people's hurting Him in a way that didn't set up sinful patterns. Again, Carol referred us to her own situation: if Jesus, as a little boy, had been beaten and verbally abused by Carol's father, He wouldn't have reacted with the anger and hatred that set that little girl Carol up for the pattern of growing into an abuser later on.

Carol made it clear that God doesn't blame children for reacting to sinful situations in a sinful way. Children can't react as whole, perfect humans, because they have sinful natures. But God can show us how Jesus would have responded. I realized that if His mother had been mentally ill, erupting with unpredictable emotional outbursts; and if His childhood had been disrupted by her misery, hospitalizations, and suicide, He wouldn't have taken it personally. It wouldn't have been about Him, but about her. His heart wouldn't have feared for Himself but would have been free to reach out to her. I had certainly tried to reach out to my mother, but I did so because of how her illness affected me and made me feel. As a little girl, I was afraid and anxious and worried. I wanted my mama to be OK so that I could be OK. Jesus, on the other hand, didn't want other people to be OK for Him, but for their own sakes.

I now knew why I had a problem with untruthfulness: fear. I realized that the fear came from my childhood: from living with and depending on a mother who was, from my childish point of view, sometimes scary and unpredictable, and then from losing her entirely. I thought I saw how Jesus, as a child, would have reacted to my experience: not as a threat to His own safety and well-being, but with compassion and unselfishness. What next? We need to repent and confess our damaged childhood attitudes and reactions (even though they were merely human, not intentionally sinful) and ask God to give us the attitudes and reactions of Jesus. The Bible tells us to "put on the Lord Jesus Christ" (Rom. 13:14, NASB), to "be renewed in the spirit of your mind, and put on the new self" (Eph. 4:23, 24, NASB) and that's what I was supposed to do. So I asked Jesus to forgive me for my self-centered, self-protective responses to my mother and to give me His heart. I asked that He would put into my character, responses, and attitudes the healthy human reactions that He would have had in the same situation.

An Opportunity and a Choice

Immediately I began to follow up on all those bits of unfinished business-those situations that the Holy Spirit had brought to my memory-and make them right. The old me would have been afraid of what those people from the past would think of her if she contacted them and said, "I didn't tell you the truth." But I didn't feel fear. I was even able to write to that professor at Cornell University and apologize without worrying that she would think of me as weird and neurotic. And the freedom from fear has spread so much further than that.

God has healed that part of me. When I have a chance to lie, now it feels like an opportunity and a choice to decide not to lie. I still like it when people are happy, and I don't like it when they're upset. But I no longer feel the need to seek ways, honest or deceptive, to please people. I can look at people as they are in themselves and not for how they might affect me. For me, God's Word has come true in my life, and it has triumphed over the damage in my past. "God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind" (2 Tim. 1:7, NKJV).

*Carol Zarska is a counselor and public speaker.

Jane Walker is a pseudonym.