

**RADICAL HONESTY**  
**HOW TO TRANSFORM YOUR LIFE**  
**BY TELLING THE TRUTH**

**BY**  
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*Dedicated to my Clients — Past, Present & Future*

*“Life is a game in which the rules change as the game progresses, and you have to know where you are in the game to know what rules to play by. Furthermore, you can’t ever be certain where you are in the game, and the rules don’t always apply.”*

*— Brad Blanton*

## INTRODUCTION

I am sixty-four years old. I have been a psycho-therapist in Washington, D.C., for 30 years. People come to my office and pay me money to pay attention to them and do what I can to help out. I have some skill in helping people find ways to make their lives work. This is what I have learned:

We all lie like hell. It wears us out. It is *the* major source of all human stress. Lying kills people.

The kind of lying that is most deadly is withholding, or keeping back information from someone we think would be affected by it. Psychological illness of the severest kind is the result of this kind of lying. Psychological healing is possible only with the freedom that comes from not hiding anymore. Keeping secrets and hiding from other people is a trap. Adolescents spend most of their time playing this hide-and-seek game. The better you are at getting by with playing hide-and-seek during adolescence, the harder it is to grow up. “Important” secrets and all the plotting and cogitation that go with them are all bullshit.

The mind is a jail built out of bullshit. This book tells how the bullshit jail of the mind gets built and how to escape. This is a “how to” book on freedom. Withholding from other people, not telling them about what we feel or think, keeps us locked in the jail. The longer we remain in that jail, the quicker we decline. We either escape, or we go dead. The way out is to get good at telling the truth.

My clients are mostly people in the 20- to 65-year age range who are depressed, anxious, angry, burnt out, or a combination thereof. I work with government employees, lawyers, business people, media professionals, and other overgrown adolescents with super-critical minds who can't stop judging and criticizing themselves and moralizing to other people. I work to relieve their suffering, primarily the suffering of deadness. Deadness is a low-intensity form of suffering. It is the result of staying on guard against imagined greater dangers. The greater dangers we imagine are based on memories of how we have been hurt before. Many of us learned as children that being fully alive was bad and you got hurt for it, so we deadened ourselves: partly as a defense against the big people, and partly to spite them. Deadening ourselves was our way of hiding that

we were alive in improper ways, and the only thing to do was to keep it a secret.

The path we must follow to get over the suffering of deadness leads, initially, into greater suffering. For example, if you have deadened yourself for a long time to keep from experiencing anger, getting very angry will feel worse than deadness. But it's only your willingness to feel worse that will allow you to feel better. Trying to remain carefully kept and avoid further pain, embarrassment and difficulty is normal.

Normality is the key to avoiding change and continuing to suffer. People who want to be normal are often proud of it and victims to the ideal of normality: dead-suffering, death dealing normality. Sigmund Freud once said that psychoanalysis was to help people get from intense suffering to common unhappiness. I don't think we have to settle for that. I help people focus their attention and muster their courage for the journey into previously avoided suffering, and then beyond to a truly abnormal life. Facing what one has previously avoided results in intense emotion and then a breakthrough into overflowing creativity. That overflowing creativity is the source of power for changing or re-shaping our lives.

I work like a body-shop mechanic works to fix a bent fender. When, how, and particularly *why* an accident occurred doesn't make a damn bit of difference to a body-shop man. He's only interested in results. He'll bang around the outside of the fender with a rubber mallet, tap it from the inside with a ball peen hammer, drill a hole, attach a rod, and try to pull it out or hit it with a rock. When it pops out, if it does, he sands it off, paints it and sends it out. If it doesn't pop out, he replaces it. He is pragmatic, experienced, and confident of the essential flexibility of the material with which he works. Careful attention to detail and experimentation with each new dent bring consistent results.

I work on individual, self-created suffering with people who are responsible for continuing to create their own suffering. Like the body shop man and the owner of the car, we concentrate on the condition of the machine and the results we want; we don't have to figure out how the accident happened, and we judge the success or failure of our efforts by how close we've come to the results we want.

I work mostly with “garden variety” neurotics: average, basically healthy people who are anxious or depressed or both. Often these general states of being — anxiety or depression —

are accompanied by somatic discomforts and diseases such as skin rashes, ulcers, lower back pain, spastic colitis, allergies, high blood pressure, and insomnia; or by recurring problems in relationships, on the job, or in the family. When therapy works, the somatic ills disappear or decrease in intensity; anxiety and depression as steady states go away; and people take responsibility for making their relationships, professional lives, and creative powers work. Taking *responsibility* means a person no longer blames outside circumstances, or other people, or past events for the conditions of his own life.

Both the bodily ills and the steady unwanted emotional states go away because of a learning that takes place, and that learning always involves letting up on the demand that the world, including the demander, be other than what it is. Therapy is over when a person stops incessantly demanding that other people be different from what they are, forgives his or her parents and other begrudged former intimates, reclaims the power to make life work, and takes responsibility for doing so.

Psychotherapy doesn't always work. My estimate is that about a third of the time the results are good to adequate, about a third of the clients make a few half-assed changes, and at least a third of the folks who see me don't get any good out of therapy

worth mentioning. Very few people suffer any damage in therapy since it is as hard to do damage as it is to help. I have seen a lot of failure and a lot of success. This book is an attempt to say what works, when it works. When therapy works, the result is an experience of well being, wholeness, being whole. This book is about getting there.

### **Where Does Stress Come From?**

People say modern life is stressful. Stress is not a characteristic of life or times, but of people. Stress does not come from the environment, it comes from the mind of the individual under stress. We make certain assumptions about the world, and we become attached to those assumptions. We suffer from thinking. We worked too hard to learn our ideas about the world to give them up. Like poker players who have already lost too much, we desperately double the bet in hopes of forcing fate to give us a good card. We think about things too much and too seriously and we suffer a great deal from trying to make the world match our thinking. We complain about how the world fails to live up to our expectations. We think about how life doesn't live up to its billing, and how it should, and how it is

rotten that it doesn't, and how we should somehow fix it. Many people think themselves to death.

In order to survive, we have to apply what we have learned from experience. But it is equally true that in order to thrive — in order to stay alive — we have to *overcome* continually what we have previously learned. If we don't somehow get rescued from our assumptions about life, they devour us. Rescue involves recognizing that the assumptions we so stubbornly cling to as truths are, in fact, decisions we have made about what “should be true” based on past experiences.

## **The Truth Changes**

Because of being lost in our own minds, we fail to recognize that the truth changes. When the truth changes and we fail to recognize what has now become true, while holding on to the *idea* of what used to be true, we become liars committing suicide. If at 8:00 pm, I am mad at you and tell you about it and get quite worked up over it, and you get mad back and we talk about it, and we stay committed to the conversation and to the possibility of getting over our anger, there is a good chance that by 8:45 pm we can laugh and have a drink and not be angry

anymore. It was true that I hated your guts at 8:00 pm. It was no longer true somewhere between 8:20 and 8:45. In contrast, people who live according to principles, like “I hated you then, and for good reason, so I still hate you now,” can’t get over things. This is reasonable but stupid. I have seen a lot of reasonably stupid people in my life.

Life goes on, and the truth changes; this just happens to be the way life is. What was once true is often no longer true just a little while later. Yesterday’s truth is today’s bullshit. Even yesterday’s liberating insight is today’s jail of stale explanation.

Roles and rules are also thoughts, which, when grasped onto as principles, are hard for people to get over, or get beyond or let change. People choke the life out of themselves by tying themselves to a chosen “self image” — any “self image” whatsoever. Many adults remain in a perpetual adolescence, locked in the protective confinement of a limited set of roles and rules. This protection kills. According to a study conducted by The Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta, 53% of the people who die prior to age 65 do so “for reasons directly related to *lifestyle*.”<sup>1</sup> Half of the people who die earlier than expected kill themselves by how they live. I say they kill themselves

compensating for the starvation of being cut off from the nourishment of commonplace experience. They smoke, drink, take drugs, eat fat meat, watch TV, and don't exercise. They work hard to survive and take care of themselves and their families. They try to have a good time and do the best they can. They are constantly doing the best they can and not having it be good enough. They kill themselves with the same socially acceptable poisons all their friends use. They all were very much in touch with being alive at one time and then got more and more lost in their minds. They miss something they can't quite get back to. They know a renewed love of life has something to do with escaping their own minds and the conditions of life their minds have set up, but they just can't seem to do so. Moralism, a disease of living in the mind without relief, kills them. They die, trapped in some country song, doing the best they can and trying to have a little fun, but never doing well enough to suit anybody, particularly themselves, or having enough fun to make up for the strain.

Freedom from such a "life" is a psychological achievement. The freedom achieved by people who grow beyond the limitations of their childhood conditioning is

freedom from their own minds. Freedom *from* one's own mind is freedom to create. But in order to have some say in creating life, you must be willing to tell the truth. Telling the truth frees us from entrapment in the mind.

The alternative to freedom is to live out a program imposed by prefabricated internalized moral resolves. Living this way is a gradual *suffocation*, which makes us simultaneously more dead and more desperate. Creativity, *using* the mind rather than being used by the mind, is the cure for all stress disorders. Willingness to tell the truth in order to be free from your secretly assessing, secret keeping mind creates the possibility of using your mind to make a future as an artist rather than as a victim.

## **Bullshit**

Bullshit is a highly technical term used throughout this book. I stole this term from Fritz Perls, the father of Gestalt Therapy. Abstraction from past experiences being mistaken for current experience itself is the major disorienting error of the normal garden-variety neurotic.

“I’ve been with you for 20 years-it should be obvious that I love you.” Evidence from the past doesn’t prove anything about current experience. We neurotics are people who make big generalizations to cover long periods of time. We say things like, “You *always*...” and “You *never*....” We attribute all of our power to circumstances and say things like “It makes me... .” When we say these things we usually have no idea we are living in an imaginary world of our own creation. Fritz Perls actually made three technical distinctions for poisonous assignment of value: chickenshit, bullshit, and elephant shit. Chickenshit is a normal greeting that doesn’t mean what it says, as in “Hello, how are you?” “I’m fine, how are you?” Bullshit is normal conversation in which people are simply whiling away the time with meaningless abstractions and generalizations. Elephant shit is any discussion of Gestalt theory or of Radical Honesty.

I use words that have “shit” in them to give a pejorative evaluation of evaluations themselves. I want people at least to consider the possibility that their most valuable values may not be so valuable. I want people to question their own certainty. (As Nietzsche said, “Not doubt, *certainty* is what drives one insane.”<sup>2</sup>) So, for simplicity’s sake, I will use “bullshit” as the

generic root word for all value-assigned abstraction or summations of remembered experiences.

Bullshit is any abstraction from experience your mind makes and assigns value to. “You don’t love me,” or “Those people are angry,” or “This is ugly (beautiful, good, bad, important, etc.)” all are *interpretations* of reality. Bullshit is a sales pitch for an interpretation of reality that comes with any interpretation of reality. *All* interpretations of reality are bullshit. Freedom is not being dominated by your own bullshit.

We believe our interpretations of reality intensely, and we want other people to join us in our interpretations to make us feel secure. We believe our interpretations *are* reality and if we can get enough votes we will prove it.

A few of us occasionally escape the bullshit jail of the mind. Most of us die in jail. All of us have the magnificent possibility of getting beyond the jail of our own minds, over and over again. The first step to this process is to doubt our minds. The truth turns to bullshit in the human mind just like food turns to excrement in the human body. Our minds work pretty much the same way our gastrointestinal systems work. A mind is developed to take good nourishing truth, absorb what it can, and turn the rest to shit. Unfortunately, the mind doesn’t expel its

wastes automatically like the body does. We have to do it voluntarily.

According to Hugh Thomas, author of *A History of The World*, the greatest medical advance in history has been garbage collection.<sup>3</sup> The greatest psychological advance in history is just around the corner and will also have to do with cleaning up. Cleaning up lies and “coming out of the closet” is getting more attention these days. Some day we will look back on these years of suffocation in bullshit in the same way we look back on all the years people lived in, and died from, their garbage.

## **Lying**

This book unfolds developmentally, beginning with an accounting of how a mind grows from nothing to what it is by the time it reaches adolescence. The central message of this book is that we human beings, in the course of growing up, get lost in our minds; and if we don't find our way out, our minds eventually kill us.

We all have minds, and we all come by them naturally. In learning how to survive from birth to adulthood, we start out using our *senses* as a primary

mode of orientation in the world and we end up as minded beings using *principles* of orientation. We abstract from our senses and build our minds. After a while we get so involved in mind development that we lose touch with our senses and get lost in our minds. Our minds are formed of interpretations about reality based on replicated experiences. After a baby experiences being nursed repeatedly, it starts anticipating being nursed again based on hunger and its little memory, and it cries for more milk. When more milk comes quickly a tiny little concept involving time has been born. The baby has an interpretation: “If I cry, I’ll get milk.” That interpretation has a memory in it and an expectation for the future.

As we grow, we learn to interpret our experience in order to survive. We eventually become capable of caring for ourselves, but our survival techniques can, and often do, eventually kill us. What kills us is intense attachment to our interpretations and failure to distinguish these interpretations from sensate reality. This process of learning to categorize experiences, and then forgetting the distinction between categories and experience itself, is what I call learning how to lie.

Learning how to pretend, interpret, evaluate, and imagine is a natural process for every human being. It's fun. Most of the learning that occurs in early childhood, pre-school and elementary school is an elaboration of these abilities. In every culture of the world, as infants grow toward adulthood, this learning of pretense is going on.

The long process of learning how to lie culminates in adolescence. Adolescents get lost in their imaginings about who they are. Erik Erikson says that the question being asked during adolescence is, "Who am I?," and the answer eventually reached is either fragmentary (role confusion) or unified (ego identity). In order to mature beyond the role-playing or pretending stage, the question "Who am I?" must get answered in some unitary way (the numerous roles kids try on for size have to become integrated into a consistent identity that remains even when new roles are adopted). This uniquely synthesized personality eventually has to predominate over role requirements as demonstrated by role models, or by ideal role performance. There has to be a "Jillness" about the way Jill plays the role of daughter, lover, and waitress that is there all the time she is talking to her mother, being with her lover, or waiting tables. This "Jillness" stands out regardless of whether

mother, lover, or customers are in the environment, and regardless of how she has seen the roles played on TV.

The duration of this developmental stage, the stage of pretending and trying on roles to establish or invent who you are, depends on the culture in which you live. The more technological the culture, the longer the stage endures. Bushmen have one year — from 11 to 12 years of age — to form their identities; by the age of 12 they have chosen a vocation, gotten married, started making babies, and assumed adult roles. In our culture, adolescence lasts from age 11 to about 30 or 35.

This extension of the time to choose vocational, sexual, and social identities in highly technological cultures is a mixed bag. *Right now the fastest growing death rate in our society is for people between the ages of 15 and 24.* Suicides, drug overdoses, accidents, and murder head the list of causes. We get a longer time to invent who we are, but the job takes a greater toll.

Even when people survive the years of adolescence, the great majority never get over the pretense of adolescence. Enormous suffering is caused by being lost in such pretense. Frequently, “helping professionals” recommend more pretending or more conventional pretending, because they don’t

understand that the job of psychotherapy is to re-ground people in the world of experience.

The stress that kills or cripples most of the population comes from people being too hard on themselves when they don't live up to their own imaginings about how other people think they should behave. We don't know who we are, and we try to guess who we ought to be in order to do the right thing and be happy. We get lost in the process and beat the hell out of ourselves before we even know we're hurt. It does no good whatsoever simply to change what we imagine others expect of us. We need to recover the ability to pay attention to something other than the whirlpool of questions and doubts about what is required or expected for acceptance. We have lost this ability to pay attention-to live outside the set of assumptions a mind is — and the only method of orientation left is given by the roles we have been trying on for size. Thus, we run around in the world while running around in our minds trying to live up to standards we imagine others are requiring of us, while we starve for the nourishment that comes from commonplace experience. We end up trying to eat the menu instead of the meal. Menus are nutritionally without value

and taste like shit no matter what pretty pictures decorate their surface.

Adolescents miss the security of childhood and can't stand the uncertainty of being between childhood and adulthood. Out of anxiety and intolerance for ambiguity they grasp onto roles or rigid standards to claim an identity so they can escape the interminable struggle over how to fit in. They become Christians or Hari Krishnas or gang members or hippies, or marry a childhood sweetheart, just to have a place to stand. They adopt the standards and principles of these groups to live by. Standards or principles to live by are all equal in this way: they are abstractions of the mind, summations based on past experience, not experience itself.

Adolescents of all ages become more passionately attached to standards the more insecure they feel. Strong attachment to principle only increases our rigidity, which further increases our feeling of insecurity. Such behavior doesn't guide us through our changing experiences. The world of experience is like a river. You are better off with a boat than with a post to hold on to while the water beats you to death. To grow beyond adolescence, people have to let go of, rather than tighten their grip on, the principles and standards with which they define

themselves. This is usually very scary, like falling backward into the unknown. What results is experience in the here and now. The re-emergence of this struggle, the struggle for identity that was put away by grasping onto an identity out of an intolerance of ambiguity, is the most valuable function of psychotherapy for people who are frozen in role definitions. These people are reborn from their mental jail into the here and now.

Such people learn to treat principles, not as rules engraved in stone, but as less important “rules of thumb” to be validated or invalidated by new experience. Rules of thumb can be revised or rejected or created anew if the people who hold them make allowances to include new experience. Alan Watts’ book, *The Wisdom of Insecurity*, is an elaboration of this point.

People who are intensely attached to moral principles notice only the experiences that justify the rightness of the principles and simply don’t notice anything else.

Fritz Perls, one of my teachers, recommended that people “lose their minds and come to their senses.” Unless people who have grown minds learn to lose their minds and come to their senses again — pay attention to gravity, their own bodies, the world of real objects and other beings out there —

they remain locked in their own tightly held notions of “how things are” and never notice any new experiences. Yogis, Buddhist monks, golf pros, a few psychotherapy clients, some musicians, and an odd assortment of others *regain* their ability to pay attention in spite of the minds they have developed. These people somehow progress beyond being trapped in and dominated by the “mindstream,” to the exclusion of everything else.

A mind is a terrible thing; waste it.

This book delineates the problems that result from *not* escaping your constantly interpreting, lying mind; of *not* growing beyond the developmental stage of learning how to lie. It gives examples of how withholding the truth from other people kills or gravely dampens the life of the withholder.

Psychotherapy is one way of learning how to finish growing up: how to get to creativity from the intermediate developmental stage of adolescent lying and fantasizing. What I have developed is a treatment for the problem of being stuck in adolescence, a problem I believe is shared by more than 75 percent of the population of the modern technological world. The essential treatment method is a clear intention, agreed upon between therapist and client together, to tell the truth to each

other and to everyone else the client knows personally, in order to find our way out of the maze. This holds the great promise of bringing us to a more adult way of living — grounded in experience, less superstitious, and less moralistic. Ironically, to mature fully, we must rediscover what we knew when we were less sophisticated. Once we have recentered ourselves in our experience, which is the position we inhabited as children, we can finally use our minds as instruments for creation rather than as defense systems for our image of who we are.

Ultimately, we can unite the real world of experience in the here and now with the world we “know about” from memory and interpretation. The secret of this union is to release energy by living out loud rather than spending all of our energy trying to control ourselves and others through withholding. The secret, in other words, is telling the truth. Growth into the personal power of telling the truth is the key to life beyond adolescent moralism.

Psychotherapy is one method of rescue from being choked to death by concepts which were learned for the sake of efficiency and to avoid unwanted experience. As I said, sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn't. The effectiveness of psychotherapy depends entirely on the client's commitment

to telling the truth and this applies to the client's behavior inside and outside the therapy room.

There are many ancient systems of thought dealing with the stages of growth beyond lying and posing. Most historical spiritual/religious/mythological teachings are based on the psychological growth of a few wise people who marked out a path for others to follow. In our age, the opportunity has come for all of us to learn the whole path.

If we humans are to be saved from ourselves, individually as well as collectively, we have to learn more about the art and science of speaking the truth. None of us can do it without a lot of help from each other.

## **Summary**

My clients and I have been learning from each other that the primary requirement for getting beyond adolescence is telling the truth. This book deals with the whole problem of telling the truth: the difficulty in telling the truth, how it hurts one not to tell the truth, how we are all liars, and how it works against our self-interest to lie. It is common for people to ruin their lives and kill themselves through withholding. It is normal

for people to stop growing and die from an accumulation of mild stress disorders over time. Being overweight, uptight, a heavy smoker, a heavy drinker, a nonexerciser, or some combination thereof, are the direct result of a more central ailment of the mind. These deaths come from remaining enmeshed in the mind-trapped in lies. Escape from the trap of lies is in learning, and improving through constant practice (just like learning to play golf or tennis), the ability to tell the truth.

We are all the walking wounded. Most of us are still interested in clarity and the truth, but at the same time we are interested in making a case for how our childhood was worse than average and how we're better than everyone else. The conventional way to suffer through life is to build a case for ourselves. That is what you get taught to value in Catholic parochial school and law school as well as all other schools (just not as efficiently as in those first two schools).

But at the same time we are all participants in a project to find out what being alive is. And when we lie or hide or avoid — essential tactics in case building — we don't discover anything new about life and we don't help others to discover anything new. Being interested in this common human project

of discovery is an important part of the great conversation in which we humans have been engaged for several thousand years. For my own good, I want to hang out with people who want to find out what it would be like to live in such a way as to leave no unspoken words, no unfinished business; I want to be with people who are hungry for the truth, who want to spend time learning and sharing what they have learned rather than defending their images or reputations. This book is for that group of people that is growing larger every day — those whose thirst for knowledge and willingness to share overrides their defense against embarrassment. I am writing for people who want to grow beyond the adolescence that currently passes for adulthood, for the couples who are fed up with acting and blaming, for individuals interested in integrity or wholeness over moralism and fitting into roles. This book is an antidote to that conventional suffering. I hope it will piss you off and hurt you and inspire you, and break your mind's hold on your spirit.



Now you'll want to read the rest of the book! Available at bookstores everywhere. **Ebook and audio versions available at**

**[www.RadicalHonesty.com](http://www.RadicalHonesty.com)**

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