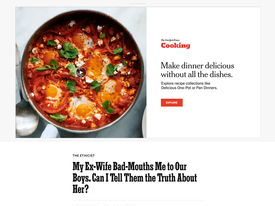

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My Ex-Wife Bad-Mouths Me to Our Boys. Can I Tell Them the Truth About Her?

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Illustration: Tomasz Jedrowski

By Kwame Anthony Appiah
Feb. 5, 2020

After a decades-long marriage, my wife and I divorced. We have two sons, now grown. Before we separated, our relationship became increasingly distant. During that time, she refused my physical closeness, telling me, "That part of my life is over."

When my kids left, it was for a "trial separation" (her idea). Our younger son stayed with me. Our elder son had been out of our home for several years and has had problems with drug addiction (not he was a teenager, with multiple stints in jail and several stays in rehab. He is currently in jail).

After my wife left, I initiated divorce proceedings, and we were finally divorced about a year later. As is most separation agreements, there was a clause requiring each of us to refrain from disparaging the other to the children. I have done my best to abide by this clause.

Not long after our divorce, she asked to meet as we could discuss some things. She proceeded to tell me about things she had done during the years we were married, because she wanted "to try to be a better person." At any rate, she confessed to multiple affairs, some long, and to some one-night stands that she initiated. She said she left me to pursue a long-term relationship and marriage with a specific man she was involved with. She said the "trial separation" idea was so that if she could not persuade the man to marry her, she could come back (he was also married). This information pretty much blew me away.

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I have not told either of our children anything about this behavior by their mother. I have tried not to criticize her, except when one of the boys complained about something she had done and asked me if it was right or proper. I'm not saying I have been perfect in my life, but I have been faithful and loyal to my family. I am confused by her, however, since this revelation, she has continually criticized, disparaged and run me down to the boys. They tell me about this. She places the sole blame on me for every problem ever experienced by our family, including the drug addiction of our elder son. When I recently contacted her about visiting him in jail, she said she didn't want to see me. I contacted him and found that this was not true.

Finally, I am tired of this. My question is whether I can tell my sons the truth about my wife, this person who I thought I knew was struggling with this for some time. I'm not sure they will eventually see the truth for themselves, in light of the constant disparagement of me by their mother. I am now happily married to a wonderful woman and have become financially secure. My ex-wife is still single and claims to be financially struggling. Name Withheld

There are two separate issues here. One is what would be good for the children to know. In the hardcover edition of adult autonomy, as I've said before, it's generally a good thing to know the truth about important circumstances of your life — and the cause of your parents' divorce is such a circumstance. Children usually have a hard time getting a clear picture of this, though, after a divorce, the parties often have sincere disagreements about the history of their relationship. If, as you suggest, your ex-wife seeks to undermine your relationship with your children, it isn't unreasonable for you to want to give them an honest account of what happened as you can. (I'm assuming that one of the things she blames you for is the divorce — and that her sentimental involvements, even if you weren't aware of them, had effects on her behavior and consequently on yours.) Protecting your relationship with your adult children and providing them with a more accurate account of the circumstances of their lives are both grounds for telling them what really happened.

The second issue is what might to give the nondisparagement clause, which presumably is still binding. (With disparagement, unlike defamation, truth is no defense.) Because your ex-wife is evidently in violation of the agreement herself, she would probably not rush to seek a court remedy. Still, you should ask a lawyer about the legal consequences of breaking the agreement.

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But if the facts are as you say they are — a critical caveat — the ethical mission looks quite straightforward. Given that she violated that agreement herself, she has lost her moral claim to hold you to it. Moreover, the information about the affairs you was not available to you when you agreed to the nondisparagement clause, and it's reasonable to think that it would have changed your position. You might not have agreed to it had you known, and you can reasonably insist that it was materially relevant to what you were committing to.

The object here is not to punish your ex-wife but to safeguard your children's relationship with you.

Finally, though *divorcing* adults use nondisparagement agreements to protect their reputations, a principal moral concern in a case like yours is to protect the children, especially minor children. That's why, with or without a legal agreement, a policy of nondisparagement is generally a good one. Even if, in your children's upbringing, we naturally want to minimize their exposure to the toxic effluent of divorce — the usual acrimony of failed matrimony. Your "boys," however, are well into their adulthood. You would be justified, then, in telling them, as dispassionately as you can, what really happened. Remember, though, that the object here is not to punish your ex-wife but to safeguard your children's relationship with you and allow them a better understanding of a troubled family history.

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My wife and I are longtime donors to a 501(c)(3) organization. Occasionally, staff members from the organization will visit our city and ask us to host them. We, and our friends, enjoy these representatives tell us about new developments in the organization, with the hope that we will continue or increase our level of support. We live in an expensive city, on a lunch for three was already over $100. The organization has a fund-raising budget that can cover meals, but of course, that budget comes from donations from people like us as well as corporate sponsors. If we pick up the tab, it increases the money available to the organization, but we already make a generous donation each year that we budget for. I have been comfortable allowing the organization to pay.

Recently we had lunch with a staff member who didn't make any more to take out his wallet when the check came, and I ultimately took care of the entire bill. Is it ethical for me to expect the charitable organization to pay when they invite us to a meal in part their donor-cultivation efforts? Or should we foot the bill? Name Withheld

First, the practicalities. Your direct donations to the organization are tax-deductible. The lunches may or may not be — ask your accountant — but even if they were, it could be a better to keep track of them. Easier for you, then, to make a donation that, in your own mental accounting, covers the lunches (among other things), and let the organization pay for the occasional meal. There's no reason not to share your understanding of the situation when a staff member is ignoring the check.

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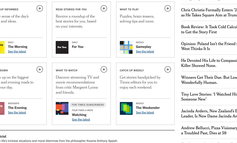

So why didn't you? I expect that $100 is a small amount in relation to your total donations; you may have been worried that fussing about it would make you look cheap. Indeed, the staff member probably thinks of you as the kind of prosperous and generous person for whom that amount isn't worth much notice. He might have viewed the restaurant tab as part of your support and failed to realize that you consider the meals as, in effect, covered by your donation — that you might feel pressured upon.

What happened, then, was surely a result of a pardonable misunderstanding. Still, while your conversations are no doubt friendly, your relationship with the staff member is a professional one, and you should politely make it clear what your expectations are. Sometimes, as at this lunch, avoiding a moment of embarrassment can leave you with a lingering sour taste.

I am a journalist who has done ghostwriting in several formats, including autobiographies. Midway through one such project, I learned that the client was claiming credit for things others had done. Not wanting to be party to this rip-off, I quit.

Now, years later, the man I was writing about, a major celebrity, is claiming credit for other things he didn't do. I want to expose his duplicity. Can I recount my experience on the autobiography? We had no contract or nondisclosure agreement. Name Withheld

There are strong forms of privilege. We may assume that fairly unconstrained is what they tell their physician, their therapist or their priest. The understanding that obtains between ghostwriter and client — that the writer will be discreet about what he or she has done and learned — is of a distinctly weaker class of privilege. In the absence of any legal agreement, this understanding can be overridden by the sort of misbehavior you refer to. It matters, too, that yours was a merely commercial, not a personal, relationship.

To be sure, we don't have a general obligation to reveal acts of dishonesty we happen to know about. But in a world in which minor celebrities — and (above) very major celebrities — profit from misrepresenting their achievements, it's not a bad thing to try to correct some part of the record.

Kwame Anthony Appiah teaches philosophy at N.Y.U. His books include "Cosmopolitanism," "The Honor Code" and "The Lies That Bind: Rethinking Identity." He solved a query. Send an ethical question to ethicist@nytimes.com. Follow him on Twitter @KwameAppiah. Subscribe to Magazine, 620 Eighth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10018. (Include a daytime phone number.)

A version of this article appeared in print on Feb. 16, 2020, Page 10 of the Sunday Magazine with the headline: My Ex-Wife Bad-Mouths Me to Our Boys. Can I Tell Them the Truth About Her? | Order Reprints | Today's Paper | Subscribe

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