

Openness versus isolation—and what we can do about it.

Read the following story aloud to your students.

Here's what I wish I could take back...

I wish I could take back the silence. I wish I could take back the pretense that things were better than they were—that I was better than I am.

I'd been married four or five years, which made me some kind of expert to my friend who was just getting started. We went to lunch and talked about life in general. But there was something more on his mind. We were in the parking lot before he finally got it out. What he really wanted to talk about was a little sexual compulsion. It was nothing that can get a guy thrown in jail, he just expected it to go away when he got married. It didn't. So he felt confused and embarrassed and more than a little bit unfaithful to his bride. And he felt weak and alone because getting married was supposed to take care of such things. We all thought that in those days. It's what our fathers let us believe. I guess they were silent too.

My friend was embarrassed. He danced around the truth, trying to say it delicately. I was embarrassed too. But I hung in there, making a lot of eye contact, nodding as he spoke. I did everything I could to make him believe I understood his struggle. He thanked me when we said goodbye. I said I would pray for him.

What I didn't say was that I was wrestling with the same sexual compulsion. I stood there in a parking lot, listening and nodding and making my friend believe I understood—never once telling him why.

I was too ashamed of my own failure and, I suppose, startled by his openness. I was caught up in a false responsibility to be this guy's example or mentor or something. And then the moment passed and I was too embarrassed to back up in the conversation and tell the truth. So I didn't. I blew some smoke about praying for him, and I let him leave that conversation alone with his pain.

I left the conversation alone with my pain too—and with the realization that I was a liar.

If I could take that back, I think I would tell my friend, "Thanks so much for letting me into your struggle. That makes it easier for me to let you into mine, because I'm struggling with the same thing. Frankly, I thought I was the only one. I really hate it, but I don't know how to stop. Will you pray for me, because I'll sure pray for you. In fact I'd love it if you'd ask me how I'm doing with this about once a week. I think just knowing you're going to ask would help me."

I can't take it back. I haven't seen that guy for 20 years. The damage is done. I hope God was as persistent and generous with my friend as God was with me. Because eventually God helped me find a way of dealing with that sexual compulsion. But that's another story.

A few years ago, I tried to track down my friend. I didn't find him. I was surprised at how many men there were in that part of the country who have the same name. Here's what I wanted to tell him. I wanted to say, "I'm sorry I lied to you. I'm sorry I let you tell your story so honestly while I held on to my own story. Please forgive me. You were the better man that day."