

FRAUD STORY

Once upon a time a person of integrity, respected as a business professional, as a wife, a mother, a friend, a community volunteer, stepped across a boundary into a world she had never before experienced. She entered the world of insurance fraud. And she entered it as a criminal. This story is not a fairy tale. It is my story and it is painfully true.

The story actually began many years ago when I received a beautiful diamond ring from my husband. More recently, for no particular reason other than curiosity as to its value, I got the ring appraised. I was surprised to learn it was now worth about \$6,000.00 as I had no memory of its original cost. I decided it needed to be insured and intended to add it to my house insurance immediately. During the following year my husband was seriously ill for a few months and that, added to the rest of life's large and small dramas, plus some procrastination thrown in, resulted in there being no insurance for the ring a year after the appraisal was done.

Then it happened. On a trip the diamond fell out of the setting. Some of the claws appeared to be broken. I was so angry with myself for not having the insurance schedule in place and that's when I began to have thoughts about how unfair it all was, and how I really deserved that money. It was so close. I almost had it insured. What difference would a couple of months make anyway?

So I went ahead and bought the insurance for the ring, not really sure at this time what I would do, if anything. Then I forgot about it for the next couple of months which included Christmas holidays and another business trip. After that trip I thought, "I could just as easily have lost the diamond on this trip as on the last one or the one before that. What's the difference really? The stone did fall out. It's not like I'm claiming something that didn't happen."

This thinking took me further and further away from my integrity and into a place where the rationalizations began to make perfect sense, and the voice of reason and warning and morality was somehow ignored. I didn't think at all about the serious criminal repercussions of such an action. Words I am now using throughout this story, such as fraud and criminal, were not part of my vocabulary at that time. I was ignorant and unaware of the legal consequences of making a false claim. Yes, it was wrong, but not that bad. Not bad like real criminals do. So I thought.

I phoned the broker, then I phoned the insurance company. An adjuster came to visit. She listened to my story and wrote it down. I read it and signed it. She left. Then the feelings started, beginning with an overwhelming feeling of remorse. I realized how difficult it had been for me to be dishonest. Almost instantly I regretted what I had done. The voice that I had silenced for so long was suddenly speaking with great clarity: "You are an honest person. How could you have made a choice to do this? You're the one who tells the salesperson when you've been undercharged. Being impeccable with your word is important to you. You have to stop this before it goes any further." But I had signed the statement. What would happen if I confessed now to lying? I was dealing with things foreign to me, things

with which I had had no experience, and I had no idea what to do next. So I waited to see what would happen. How I wish I had found the courage to speak the truth.

Two or three weeks later an investigator from the Insurance Bureau of Canada phoned me to make an appointment. I was somewhat alarmed and wondered if this was just a routine procedure, but decided to go through with the interview in the hope that everything would be all right. The investigator presented himself in a very non-confrontational manner, but was all business as he turned on his tape recorder and presented some evidence which appeared to contradict my statement. I attempted to answer a few questions, but I was so weary of this burden of guilt and shame I did a pathetic job of being a criminal. I felt so overwrought in my heart and soul, I just knew I did not want to carry on this deception any longer. The investigator was very good at his job and when he sensed my discomfort he made it easy for me to confess.

So it was a tremendous relief to be communicating in my comfort zone of honesty again. But it wasn't long before I realized I was not yet free of this web I had created. The investigator said he would report to the insurance company but couldn't say what they would do with the evidence. They might report it to the police. I was shocked as the reality of what I had done became more evident. I spent a very stressful three or four days until a registered letter arrived returning my ring setting, denying my claim and closing my file. Profound relief. It's over! But it wasn't. The worst was yet to come.

The next day a phone call from the investigator informed me that the insurance company had decided to report my crime to the police. I felt sick and sad and scared all at the same time. It was almost like my life began passing before my eyes and I could see every part of it that would be affected by such a horrendous thing happening to me. I don't remember ever feeling such desperation and such disgust with myself.

I thought of people in my life that I haven't trusted and realized I had become this kind of person to others. I thought how one foolish lie can destroy a lifetime of truth. I thought about my family, friends, work colleagues, and students, and I was overcome with grief. This could not be happening to me. I was devastated.

The only thing I could think to do was to phone and talk to someone at the insurance company. My call was directed to the claims manager. I was feeling desperate as I expressed my sincere remorse and implored him to grant a reprieve. He very emphatically stated that he had a corporate obligation to report the fraud, that his company had a policy of zero tolerance, and that people had to learn the seriousness of their crimes by facing criminal charges. He refused to be moved from his decision to report this occurrence to the police. I was really distraught now and couldn't imagine how I would handle the stress of waiting perhaps weeks or months for that moment when a policeman would knock on my door. The thought was unbearable. I comforted myself somewhat by thinking that maybe the police investigation would conclude there wasn't enough evidence to press charges. Maybe

they had much more important work to do than to prosecute little old me. But in the big picture this was small comfort indeed.

Then, a miracle. A phone call came the next morning from the insurance company inviting me to a meeting that afternoon with the claims adjuster, the claims manager, the vice president and the investigator. Of course I agreed because I felt hopeful that they had perhaps reconsidered their decision to report to the police. I pictured myself sitting in that meeting with those four people and it was difficult for me to imagine how I would face it. But at the same time I was extremely grateful that the door had been reopened and I was being given the opportunity to talk with them.

This story has a happy ending. The threat of criminal charges against me was dropped. In return I agreed to write this story. It will be used to educate people just like me. Ignorance almost cost me more than I could ever have imagined. Anything I may have received as a result of collecting on my claim is nothing in comparison. I sincerely apologize for my attempt to defraud the insurance industry and to each individual whose life was impacted in some way by my decision. I am profoundly grateful to everyone who has supported me in my effort to right this wrong. For a period of time I crossed over into a very frightening place. I had never been there before and I will never go there again.