My father and stepmother sat at one end of the table, my grandma beside them and my siblings, our significant others and I had claimed the benches and nooks and crannies around the remaining edges of the dining room table. We had a pretty amazing feast laid out for Christmas dinner, everyone having done their part to ensure that all, including the gluten-intolerant, vegans and vegetarians among us, would not go unsatisfied over the holiday. We opened Christmas crackers and wore the paper crowns as we ate, shared stories, took jabs, and laughed at times gone by and exciting things for the future.

Near the end of our meal my father took out a Christmas card and asked if he could read it to us. I had seen him writing it earlier that afternoon as we watched Lord of the Rings on television (for goodness knows what reason, it was absolutely available on Hulu) and happily gorged on ginger molasses cookies.

Dad thanked us all for coming to visit him, he was truly moved that we all came to spend the holiday with them. He talked to us about family and plugging-in to the strength of our loved ones when we feel lost or depleted. And then he told us something about himself.

He told us he suffers from clinical depression.

You have to understand: In my mind this man moves mountains without breaking a sweat. He was and is a rock to all who know him. He’s a healer, a good one. Having started his own practice, run programs in rural hospitals and taken trips to Papua New Guinea to provide medical services to tribes without much access to modern medicine, I had never truly seen the dents in the armor. But having time to think about it, the signs have always been there…

Dad went on to talk about finding his light in the darkness, his family and friends. He talked about continued struggles and moments of exhaustion and numbness. He asked us to remember that no matter where we were or who we were with the power of connecting with family could be empowering and uplifting. He ended by asking us to share something about ourselves that most of the family had not heard before.

The authenticity floodgates had opened.

We talked about family members dying of cancer, job opportunities, new milestones, cutting-off toxic relationships and grappling with personal traumas. We cried, like a lot, there were happy and sad tears shed by all. And in the end we may not have felt lighter or even better than before, but we all left the table feeling more stable. Perhaps more connected to each other and even more connected to ourselves. I was particularly struck by the fact that this change in all of us hadn’t come out of the good stuff, perhaps because what’s real isn’t always lovely. It doesn’t have to be great all the time, because it isn’t great all the time. Life can be messy and complicated. Sharing in the hard stuff is what made the good stuff worth it, as scary as it was to talk about.

I was and am incredibly grateful for the experience I had with family last Christmas. I believe it was a beautiful, poignant and well-timed reminder of the importance of authenticity and the ability to be real with another person. Particularly in my work as a counselor.

I may not share my own stories as freely as I did with family in my work with individuals and couples.

I may not share that I also have an anxiety disorder.

I may not share that there is a history of abuse in my family.

I may not share that eating disorders, major depressive disorder and bipolar disorder are common ailments in every generation of my family tree.

But I believe being true and raw and real with yourself is the kind of authenticity that just permeates you. And it permeates your work and your relationships and your life in the most extraordinary ways.

I came back to work before the new year and found myself… invigorated by having shared and by what had been shared with me. It even shifted my work, I believe, for the better. I used more of myself in the room, I offered up stories of mine that I felt had a therapeutic benefit or challenged clients to think differently about an issue. I reflected personal experiences more often with my couples and it moved us all in ways I’m not sure could be captured in words.

I also cussed more often in session and found that to be both hilarious and awesome.

The act of being a real, open and honest person in my sessions has made me a better counselor. And as my dad taught me over the Christmas holiday, being authentic with those around you is the only way for both of you to recharge, to renew, to replenish yourselves.

Plugging-in is the only way.

* Anonymous

*While being an article about authenticity, this article does contain protected health information. The author has therefore chosen to remain anonymous in order to protect the identities of persons in the events depicted.*