

## **The Diogenes Dilemma: Searching for Truth and Authenticity in an Evasive Society**

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*Lying is a hateful and accursed vice. We have no other tie upon one another, but our word. If we did but discover the horror and consequence of it, we should pursue it with fire and sword, and more justly than other crimes.*

Montaigne

*That's not a lie, it's a terminological inexactitude. Also, a tactical misrepresentation.*

Alexander Haig

When I was about seven years old, candy was my addiction of choice. And it was made all the more enticing since, in my family, it was registered as a controlled substance...perhaps not quite as evil as sugared carbonated beverages, but as close as makes no difference. With the exception of Halloween, Christmas and Easter, regulating my sugar consumption was an ongoing family battle. And to make matters worse, I lived within walking distance of the garden of good and evil: a small neighborhood candy store called, if my memory serves, the Sugar Bowl. Situated on a corner in the middle of a residential neighborhood, it was an artifact of the days before supermarkets. The local children would come in with their pennies and nickels and dimes, press their noses against the tall glass cases and take their time choosing between the red ones and the green ones and the licorice and the caramels and the chocolates.

I still dream about that store. I will find myself walking down the street looking for it, and though it's never quite in the same place every time, when I walk out of the bright sun into its dusty gloom, I feel the same old delight. It was probably a junky little corner store, and the candy none too fresh, but for me it was filled with the magic of sights and smells and choice and sensation. However, the times when Mom and Dad agreed that sending me to the Sugar Bowl with money sounded like a good idea were few and far between, and I needed my fix. So one afternoon, when my mother was probably upstairs putting my brother down for a nap, I made a beeline for her purse, opened her wallet, took a dollar bill and hid it in my pocket.

I don't remember much about the crime itself, so I can't say if I was excited or frightened of being caught, if I felt entitled and justified, if I planned it ahead of time or if it was a spontaneous act...those details of the story are lost to me. And I have only a vague recollection of the thrill of buying the great quantity of candy that a dollar could buy in the early '50s. I do remember standing before the counter in a kind of trance, saying "And some of these, and some of these..." I walked out of the store with a sizable quantity of illicit swag, and I can still feel the top of the paper bag crumpled in my hand, and the intoxication of its weight. I had apparently wanted to share this with someone, so I had invited Roger, one of the neighborhood boys, to be my partner in crime, perhaps to repay him for past good deeds, perhaps because he was of a similar criminal persuasion, perhaps just because he was there. But I agreed to split the loot with him if he would walk with me to the store, and even after we ate ourselves into insulin shock, we both went home with a stash. It never occurred to me that his inability to explain where all this stuff came from would raise a red flag, so we had no story prepared. I probably made him swear a blood oath to tell no one, but he was ultimately no match for his mother's detective abilities, and while I went unknowingly about my 7-year-old business, the little fink sold me down the river.

What does remain clearly etched in my recollection is the moment later that evening when, lying upstairs in bed, surrounded by my family of stuffed animals, clean and warm and almost asleep, I heard the telephone ring. My mother answered the phone, and I heard her say, "She did? They did? How much candy? Well, no, I didn't give her permission." Roger's mother. The jig was up. Roger TOLD! The dirty rat! I knew I was in for it. The

horror of being caught struck me hard. My body contracted, my brain stopped working, and my entire essence instantly distilled down to a small puddle of stark terror. My father was a strict disciplinarian, with an unambiguous code of right and wrong, and though my mother might have softened the blow for something more insignificant, I knew she wouldn't take my bullets this time. It was her purse I had filched from, after all. I lay trapped in my room at the top of the stairs, unable to escape the consequences. There was some quiet conversation, the rumble of my father's deep baritone. Silence. Maybe they'd let it go this time? But no, I heard two sets of footsteps climbing up to my room and then the overhead light went on, temporarily blinding me. I rubbed my eyes like I had been awakened from an innocent sleep, but no one was fooled, especially me.

Unexpectedly, they were calm, and they sat on either side of me at the edge of my bed and spoke to me gently. It was almost disarming. But I did what every good criminal does when apprehended: I lied. No, I didn't buy the candy. No, I didn't take any money out of Mom's purse. I didn't do it, I didn't do it, I didn't do it. For two hours, they tried to wear me down with repeated assurances that if I told the truth, they wouldn't be angry. Even at seven, I knew that was a fool's promise, so I kept to my story. But it got late, and I was tired, and also not feeling so well. The candy I couldn't tell anyone I had eaten had left my tummy feeling queasy and unsettled. And after all, I wasn't a trained secret agent, just a scared little kid, so I finally sobbed out my guilt and shame and waited for the axe to fall. But in a surprise move that earns my respect and gratitude to this day, they kept their word. I was not punished, yelled at, or deprived of privileges. Instead they hugged me, thanked me for being honest with them, told me how much they loved me, and quietly explained how hurtful it was to steal, how wrong it was to lie. And we all cried more than a little. It was a lesson in compassionate parenting that served me well when I eventually became a mother myself.

*Life is a system of half-truths and lies, of opportunistic, convenient evasion.*

Langston Hughes

I would like to say that as a result of this experience, I never told another lie, that I never did anything dishonest or even mildly illegal. That would, unfortunately, be a lie in itself. I am, last time I checked, a human being, and human beings have a long history of waffling the choice between truth and lie, legal and illegal. Some of our most common transgressions include driving over the speed limit, drinking underage, cheating on our romantic partners, fiddling our tax returns, inflating our accomplishments, making promises we don't keep. And we also mandate a set of social lies that provide the glue for a polite and civil society: that was a *wonderful* dinner; you look *marvelous* in that dress; no, really, I feel *fine*; of *course* I'm not angry. Truth distortion is, in fact, endemic in our species. It is found in every culture, at every age and stage, and in every conceivable situation. We start young, and depending on the degree of our early success, we continue the practice until we die.

We lie for many reasons. Michael Lewis, co-author of "[Lying and Deception in Everyday Life](#)," (Guilford Publications) says that there are four general categories of lies: self-deception, protecting the feelings of others, protecting oneself and hurting others. I would add to that list magical thinking, a process that, when it goes off track, moves beyond mere self-deception by creating a new version of reality that will ostensibly benefit all those who believe in it. And within each of those categories are an infinite number of variations on a theme. I have managed to sing a few of those songs in my lifetime, but one thing I never did again was steal from another person. My parents' quiet words on that night cut a deep valley in the jumbled terrain of my small psyche that I have not wanted to cross again. You see, I had never intended to harm anyone, I was simply out for personal gain. In my self-absorbed little way, there was only money between me and my desires. There was no concept of my Mother's side of the transaction, no thought of how few dollars she may have had to the end of the pay period, whether she worried, or looked for the money, or thought she lost it and blamed herself. In the aftermath of my unmasking as a budding criminal, I could no longer ignore the potential consequences of my actions. Mom and Dad made it personal for me, made me feel what it would be like if it had happened to me, how hurt and angry I might have been, how betrayed. And that was the end of that.

But there were other temptations. If I was counting calories, and sneaking to the refrigerator late at night for extra dessert, I'd tell the dietician I just couldn't understand why I wasn't losing weight, it must be my metabolism. Or if I forgot to mail my bills on time, I called the merchants and said I had been out of town and couldn't mail in the payment, could they extend the grace period? When I didn't want to accept a dinner invitation with an unwelcome suitor, I said I had friends coming in from out of town. Honesty, in spite of my family code, often seemed a risky proposition. I would be left undefended; I would be denied; I would make someone unhappy and they wouldn't be my friend anymore; I would be exposed as lazy or careless or forgetful or uncaring; I would be limited, trapped, ordinary. Most of my transgressions seemed victimless. After all, the store still got the money I owed them. Mr. Wrong's feelings were protected if he thought that other plans were the reason for my refusal. If chocolate cake was more important to me than losing weight, that was my business. Who was hurt in any of these transactions? No one I could identify.

It took me longer than I like to admit to reach a stage of consistent honesty. There seemed to be so much to gain by saying what was not so, as if I could somehow change reality with the force of my words, as if the words themselves were magic in some way, and the truth would never be discovered. And if I admitted out loud to my frailties...I couldn't control my craving for a late night snack; I didn't organize my week well enough to leave time for personal finances; I'm not socially adept enough to spend a pleasant evening with someone I'm not romantically interested in...then somehow I could be, would be, branded forever as hopelessly unworthy. I saw so many flaws in those younger days that I couldn't afford to admit to them all. And in addition, the rituals of social politeness brought me social acceptance. A few insincere compliments, a few little white lies, seemed a small price to pay for popularity and smiles all around.

Undoubtedly, when I speak of my personal history, I'm giving you my personality's perspective on this honesty dilemma, for our personalities are implicated in everything we do. I happen to belong to a family of personality types who, when unaware of their habits of mind, mask perceived deficiencies with a steady stream of stories about being unique and special and extraordinary. People of this persuasion often thrive on a steady diet of emotional intensity, and can find ordinary life flat and uninspiring. The actual facts of the matter, the plain truth can seem so, well, *plain!* A little drama, a little exaggeration, a wave of the wand and a toss of the head, and everything seems richer and more satisfying. Who cares what's actually so? After all, with very little effort, one can be the star of one's own movie. Giving up the intoxication of the drama of the trauma of my life was part of my passage into true maturity,

But being a particular personality type doesn't explain nearly enough. Each type, each person, will have his or her own peculiar set of barriers to and supports for an honestly-lived -- for an *authentic* -- life. And there is no predicting how honest or authentic a person will be by their personality alone. For example, I know a man who has an innate, finely-tuned sensitivity to right and wrong, but who was taught by the experiences of his childhood that honesty was likely to provoke a violent response. In spite of his powerful desire to follow the rules, do the right thing, be a good person and live an exemplary life, he struggles daily to live with integrity in face of a deeply-ingrained belief that it is not safe to tell the truth. When it comes down to it, the personality itself is a barrier to authenticity. Unfortunately, the most successful -- and possibly the most damaging -- lies we tell are usually the ones we tell ourselves. Think about the dialogue of our personality, the lies it tells us about the world and our place in it. As we become increasingly aware of how the personality distorts our experience, we can make more honest declarations, but it takes conscious effort, and with all the best intentions, we will slip back into the old groove from time to time. It's like a title on the cover of a tabloid...*True Confession! Millions Live a Lie!*

*The important thing is to stop lying to yourself. A man who lies to himself, and believes his own lies, becomes unable to recognize truth, either in himself or in anyone else, and he ends up losing respect for himself as well as for others.*

Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*

So... we deceive ourselves every day. Not news. Not *good*, but not news. But then sometimes our deception spills over into the public eye, or violates the public trust, or causes noticeable harm to lots of people, not just the ones we interact with every day. I could be talking about Watergate. Iran Contra. Enron. Tyco. Worldcom. Bill Clinton. Plamegate. Spammers and scammers and identity thieves. About the epidemic of BIG lies that have come at us, one after another, over the past several years. Our view screen is all of a sudden filled with very successful and powerful people who made it all the way up the corporate, political or social ladder without feeling the need to tell the truth. Or who think the rules don't apply to them. Or who enjoy dazzling the dorks and getting away with it, or creating their own empire and fleecing the peasants. Money and power. Greed and power. *So much* money, and *so much* power and *so much* greed and *so little* regard for the negative consequences of their actions by people who, one would assume, know better. It boggles the mind. I mean, I know human beings are capable of doing these kinds of things, but there have been so many of them so close together and there has been so little remorse displayed that I'm appalled, and more than a little frightened. And it has set me to wondering if my horrified reaction is justified. It could be one of those "well, it wasn't like this when I was a girl" reactions that begin to manifest as we reach our mature years and look back in horror as other people make the same mistakes we did. Or perhaps we are truly involved in a crisis of collective consciousness, in a battle for the salvation of our collective human soul. I want to be wrong about this, but I very much fear it is the latter. And from where I sit, the outcome is uncertain.

What I do believe is that people are pretty much the same as they always have been...some good, some bad, some in the middle...but that all are capable of being molded by the container in which they find themselves. For example, if I had been born under a totalitarian government, the criteria for my survival would have been very different than they were in this country of greater freedom, and I may have adapted my responses accordingly. Even though I may have had the same essential nature, the chances were excellent that I would have made very different life choices, because the pull-down menu of my life would have been different. Independence, assertiveness and self-determination would not have been on it. The ability to dissemble might have been highly prized as a premier survival strategy in a culture of scarce resources, where the ability to steal food and get away with it may have meant the difference between life and death. I have a great luxury to sit here in my dry office in front of an expensive computer and think deep thoughts about an authentic life. In many countries, an authentic life would mean I lived to see tomorrow without starvation, disease or war.

So it makes sense to look at the container in which we now find ourselves. Like all containers, it is a mixed proposition. The pace is out of control, the goal is all that matters, the greedy are rewarded, the dutiful are laid off. The media has lost touch with reality, and we are no longer given any right to personal privacy or family secrets. To succeed politically, you must be both comfortable with dissembling and good enough at it to get away with it. Oh, yeah, and ya gotta look good on camera. Image is everything. Votes are swayed by whoever has the most money for lobbyists and campaign contributions, so big industry has enormous influence over our political system. On the other hand, science is making great inroads into fighting disease, abuse of children and women is more likely to be punished than ignored, our workplaces are often highly creative, there is opportunity today for women and minorities that could not have even been dreamed of a century ago. After decades of "me first," God is making a comeback, and our spiritual lives are seeing a powerful regeneration. It is no longer as easy to get away with raping the environment for profit. And, most important, we have our friends, our families, our communities, our skills and our talents, our ability to reach out to others. Perhaps the connections to friends and family are even more precious to us as we find ourselves increasingly buffeted by the strong winds of culture shock.

Technology is, I suspect, both the potential savior and the potential destroyer of the fabric of our society. It is at the same time making us more known to one another and breaking down the communal bond that holds us together. We can talk to anyone on the planet from our desktop, so we feel connected, but we are forced to take his or her words at face value, because we are unable to validate them by any kind of direct observation. We have increasing amounts of information available through the media on what is happening in the rest of the world, so we are, in many ways, becoming a global family; our ability to witness the earthquake that strikes Pakistan puts real faces on the crisis, and increases our compassion and empathy for victims who not so long ago would have been ignorable, invisible others.

The down side is that, after days of world crises, we begin to suffer from compassion fatigue. All these people in trouble, and I'm only one person, what can I do? My inability to help finally wears me out, so I turn off CNN, stop reading the paper, and the rest of the world becomes invisible again. And then there's the internet. It took a while, but it has finally won me over. I love to be able to sit down, type a query into Google, and have all those answers pop up. I have benefited greatly from the connected databases of the web, researching my father's cancer, my son's hip fracture, quotes for articles, finding out-of-print books and sheet music. The small merchant and the purveyor of the hard-to-find are finally, easily accessible to me. But unfortunately, the power of the internet also makes it possible to lie, cheat and steal from people whose faces you will never see. They are the ignorable, invisible victims; it's almost like no one gets hurt at all. The first time I contemplated the prospect of an online dating service, I realized I had no way to verify the truth of *anything* in the profiles, including the photographs. Yes, I would meet people that normally I would never have an opportunity to meet, but they might not be real people.

So in this crisis, technology is not necessarily our friend, and society can no longer provide us with adequate support. The container is too flexible; it allows for too much acceptable leeway on issues of probity and trust. And though the backlash to the recent corporate scandals is giving rise to a wave of new rules and regulations, the barn door has been open a long time, and the horse may never be found. We must find other role models for integrity, other ways to guide us to our own, and our collective, authenticity. It makes sense to occasionally remember what life was like when our mutual survival was more closely aligned to our ability to trust one another.

*The greatest homage we can pay to truth is to use it.*

James Russell Lowell

My great-grandfather, John Fred Behm, was a power to be reckoned with. A young boy when he came here with his father from Germany, he was the youngest drummer boy in the Civil War, a frontier adventurer, a railroad contractor, and a scrupulously honest businessman. In those days there were scoundrels, for sure, but the social system marginalized them rather than lionized them. You could be ruined for life by scandal, and your family and your associates went down with you, whether they were involved or not. Deals were often consummated on a word and a handshake, and there was a perceived value within the society to keeping that word. At one point in his career, great-grandpa committed to digging a railroad tunnel through a mountain he had assessed to be made of relatively permeable rock. The amount was agreed upon based on the estimated time to complete the job, the crew was hired, and the work began. But after only a short time, the diggers were stunned to hit a core of solid granite, in those days a formidable obstacle for men and horses to overcome. Faced with a task that would take far longer than he had planned, John Fred bought several barrels of flour and other food staples for his family, sent them to live with relatives, and proceeded to bankrupt himself digging that tunnel because he said he would. And when he completed the job, he returned home stone broke, walked into a local bank, and was able to borrow more than enough money to restart his business on the strength of his reputation as a man who kept his word.

I have thought about that story many times in the past years, as "lying" went through its beauty make-over into "spin." I try to imagine Bill Clinton or George Bush – or any politician, for that matter – in my grandfather's position, acting as he did... not likely from where I sit. As the old joke goes, "How can you tell if a politician is lying? His lips are moving." It's a long way from George Washington and the cherry tree (oh, alright, I know it's probably an apocryphal story, but who would even try to tell one like it today?) to the 2000 Florida Election and Cigargate. And the cover-up of the sex abuse scandal in the Catholic church is so horrific and sordid as to be almost unbelievable. If we cannot look to our political and religious leaders for examples of how we should live, then we are in sad shape indeed. Who in contemporary public life would we find so exemplary that we would loan them the modern-day equivalent of \$3 million on a word and a handshake? Don't everyone speak at once...

So what are we to do? The first step, I believe, is to scope out the magnitude of the situation, and assess what it will take us to build our tunnel to a more authentic life. Like Diogenes of Sinope, who is said to have protested against the corruption in the society of Athens by wandering the streets in broad daylight with a lantern, looking in vain for an honest man, we need to shine a stronger light on the choices we are being offered in our society. Perhaps, from among them, we can fashion a life worth living. If not, it's time to create a new, more life-giving set of options.

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**About the Author:**

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She began her career with IBM, and has held management-level positions at Wang Labs, Motorola/Codex, Telebit, Centigram Communications and Cisco Systems. She received an M.B.A. from the Harvard Graduate School of Business, where her areas of concentration were Marketing and Organizational Behavior. A dynamic speaker and skilled facilitator, she conducts client engagements that offer a wide range of creative opportunities for professional and personal excellence.

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