

The Truth About Lying

by Judith Viorst

Every culture holds up truth as a virtue, while lying is condemned as something that damages people's lives; however, most people accept the fact that at least some kinds of lying are a part of the daily life of our society. In the following analysis of the widespread practice of lying, Judith Viorst classifies the different kinds of lies people regularly tell. As the writer reviews the different types of lies, consider how many of them you yourself encounter on a regular basis.



I've been wanting to write on a subject that intrigues and challenges me: the subject of lying. I've found it very difficult to do. Everyone I've talked to has a quite intense and personal but often rather intolerant point of view about what we can-and can never *never-tell* lies about. I've finally reached the conclusion that I can't present any ultimate conclusions, for too

Social Lies

Most of the people I've talked with say that they find social lying acceptable and necessary. They think it's the civilized way for folks to behave. Without these little white lies, they say, our relationships would be short and brutish and nasty. It's arrogant, they say, to insist on being so incorruptible and so brave that you cause other people unnecessary embarrassment or pain by compulsively assailing them with your honesty. I basically agree. What about you?

Will you say to people, when it simply isn't true: "I like your new hairdo," "You're looking much better," "It's so nice to see you," "I had a wonderful time"?

Will you praise hideous presents and homely kids? Will you decline invitations with "We're busy that night-so sorry we can't come," when the truth is you'd rather stay home than dine with the So-and-sos?

And even though, as I do, you may prefer the polite evasion of "You really cooked up a storm" instead of "The soup"-which tastes like warmed over coffee-" is wonderful," will you, if you must, proclaim it wonderful?

There's one man I know who absolutely refuses to tell social lies. "I can't play that game," he says; "I'm simply not made that way." And his answer to the argument that saying nice things to someone doesn't cost anything is, "Yes, it does-it destroys your credibility." Now, he won't, offer his views on the painting you just bought, but you don't ask his frank opinion unless you want *frank*, and his silence at those moments when the rest of us liars are muttering, "Isn't it lovely?" is, for the most part, eloquent enough. My friend does not indulge in what he calls "flattery, false praise and **mellifluous** comments."

When others tell fibs he will not go along. He says that social lying is lying, that little white lies are still lies. And he feels that telling lies is morally wrong. What about you?

Peace-Keeping Lies

Many people tell peace-keeping lies; lies designed to avoid irritation or argument; lies designed to shelter the liar from possible blame or pain; lies rationalized (or so it is **rationalized**) designed to keep trouble at bay without hurting. I tell these lies at times, and yet I always feel they're wrong. I understand why we tell them, but still they feel wrong. And whenever I lie so that someone won't disapprove of me or think less of me or holler at me, I feel I'm a bit of a coward, I feel I'm dodging responsibility, I feel ... guilty. What about you?

Do you, when you're late for a date because you overslept, say that you're late because you got caught in a traffic jam? Do you, when you forget to call a friend, say that you called severaltimes but the line was busy? Do you, when you didn't remember that it was your father's birthday; say that his present must be delayed in the mail? And when you're planning a weekend in New York City and you're not in the mood to visit your mother, who lives there, do you conceal with a lie, if you must-the fact that you'll be in New York? Or do you have the courage-or is it the cruelty?-to say, "I'll be in New York, but sorry-I don't plan on seeing you"?

Dave and his wife Elaine have two quite different points of view on this very subject. He calls her a coward. She says she's being wise. He says she must assert her right to visit New York sometimes and not see her mother. To which she always patiently replies: "Why should we have useless fights? My mother's too old to change. We get along much better when I lie to her." Finally, do you keep the peace by telling your husband lies on the subject of money? Do you reduce what you really paid for your shoes? And in general do you find yourself ready, willing and able to lie to him when you make absurd mistakes or lose or break things?

"I used to have a romantic idea that part of intimacy was confessing every dumb thing that you did to your husband. But after a couple of years of that," says Laura, "have I changed my mind!" And having changed her mind, she finds herself telling peace-keeping lies. And yes, I tell them too. What about you?

Protective Lies

Protective lies are lies folks tell-often quite serious lies-because they're convinced that the truth would be too damaging. They lie because they feel there are certain human values that **supersede** the wrong of having lied. They lie, not for personal gain, but because they believe it's for the good of the person they're lying to. They lie to those they love, to those who trust them

most of all, on the grounds that breaking this trust is justified. They may lie to their children on money or marital matters. They may lie to the dying about the state of their health. They may lie about adultery, and not-or so they insist-to save their own hide, but to save the heart and the pride of the men they are married to. They may lie to their closest friend because the truth about her talents or son or psyche would be-or so they insist-utterly devastating.

I sometimes tell such lies, but I'm aware that it's quite **presumptuous** to claim I know what's best for others to know. That's called playing God. That's called manipulation and control. And we never can be sure, once we start to juggle lies, just where they'll land, exactly where they'll roll. And furthermore, we may find ourselves lying in order to back up the lies that are backing up the lie we initially told.

And furthermore-let's be honest-if conditions were reversed, we certainly wouldn't want anyone lying to us. Yet, having said all that, I still believe that there are times when protective lies must nonetheless be told. What about you? If your Dad had a very bad heart and you had to tell him some bad family news, which would you choose: to tell him the truth or lie? If your former husband failed to send his monthly child-support check and in other ways behaved like a total rat, would you allow your children who believed he was simply wonderful-to continue to believe that he was wonderful? If your dearly beloved brother selected a wife whom you deeply disliked, would you reveal your feelings or would you fake it? And if you were asked, after making love, "And how was that for you?" would you reply, if it wasn't too good, "Not too good"?

Now, some would call a sex lie unimportant, little more than social lying, a simple act of courtesy that makes all human intercourse run smoothly. And some would say all sex lies are bad news and unacceptably protective. Because, says Ruth, "a man with an ego that fragile doesn't need your lies-he needs a psychiatrist." Still others feel that sex lies are indeed protective lies, more serious than simple social lying, and yet at times they tell them on the grounds that when it comes to matters sexual, everybody's ego is somewhat fragile. "If most of the time things go well in sex," says Sue, "I think you're allowed to **dissemble** when they don't. I can't believe it's good to say, 'Last night was four stars, darling, but tonight's performance rates only a half.'" I'm inclined to agree with Sue. What about you?

Trust-Keeping Lies

Another group of lies are trust-keeping lies, lies that involve triangulation, with *A* (that's you) telling lies to *B* on behalf of *C* (whose trust you'd promised to keep). Most people concede that once you've agreed not to betray a friend's confidence, you can't betray it, even if you must lie. But I've talked with people who don't want you telling them anything that they might be called on to lie about.

"I don't tell lies for myself," says Fran, "and I don't want to have to tell them for other people." Which means, she agrees, that if her best friend is having an affair, she absolutely doesn't want to know about it. "Are you saying," her best friend asks, "that if I went off with a lover and I asked you to tell my husband I'd been with you, that you wouldn't lie for me, that you'd betray me?" Fran is very pained but very adamant. "I wouldn't want to betray you, so ... don't ask me." Fran's best friend is shocked. What about you?

Do you believe you can have close friends if you're not prepared to receive their deepest secrets? Do you believe you must always lie for your friends?

Do you believe, if your friend tells a secret that turns out to be quite immoral or illegal, that once you've promised to keep it, you must keep it? And what if your friend were your boss-if you were perhaps one of the President's men-would you betray or lie for him over, say, Watergate? As you can see, these issues get terribly sticky. It's my belief that once we've promised to keep a trust, we must tell lies to keep it. I also believe that we can't tell Watergate lies. And if these two statements strike you as quite contradictory, you're right-they're quite contradictory. But for now they're the best I can do. What about you?

Some say that truth will come out and thus you might as well tell the truth. Some say you can't regain the trust that lies lose. Some say that even though the truth may never be revealed, our lies pervert and damage our relationships. Some say ... well, here's what some of them have to say.

"I'm a coward," says Grace, "about telling close people important, difficult truths. I find that I'm unable to carry it off. And so if something is bothering me, it keeps building up inside till I end up just not seeing them any more." I lie to my husband on sexual things, but I'm furious," says

Joyce, "that he's too insensitive to know I'm lying."

"I suffer most from the misconception that children can't take the truth," says Emily. "But I'm starting to see that what's harder and more damaging for them is being told lies, is *not* being told the truth."

"I'm afraid," says Joan, "that we often wind up feeling a bit of contempt for the people we lie to." so And then there are those who have no talent for lying. "Over the years, I tried to lie," a friend of mine explained, "but I always got found out and I always got punished. I guess I gave myself away because I feel guilty about any kind of lying. It looks as if I'm stuck with telling the truth."

For those of us, however, who are good at telling lies, for those of us who lie and don't get caught, the question of whether or not to lie can be a hard and serious moral problem. I liked the remark of a friend of mine who said, "I'm willing to lie. But just as a last resort-the truth's always better." "Because," he explained, "though others may completely accept the lie I'm telling, I don't." I tend to feel that way too. What about you?

Questions for Critical Thinking

1. Judith Viorst set out to make some conclusions about lying, but she tells us in her introduction that the task turned out to be very difficult. Instead, she classifies some different types of lies and presents the moral dilemma that is raised by each type. Take a poll in your classroom by asking the following question: Is it always wrong to tell a lie? Did the essay change anyone's opinion?
2. What is the definition Judith Viorst gives for each of the four types of lies? How many examples does she give in each category that further explain her categories?
3. In the course of reading the essay, did you come across any examples that describe lies you have told? Discuss with the class what you believe would have happened if you had told the truth in each case.
4. Whether or not a person gets caught in a lie, Judith Viorst wonders what the effect is on the person who lies. Is a sense of guilt too great a price?
5. Explain the conclusion of the essay. Why does she end with a question?

Writing in Response

1. Write an essay in which you give your own examples to illustrate the types of lies that Judith Viorst classifies. You could also, of course, construct a different classification system of your own.
2. Write a narration that tells of the effects of someone telling a lie. This could be a true story or a story that you imagine.
3. Children very often are caught lying. Some people say these children really don't fully understand the difference between what is real and what is imaginary. Write an essay in which you discuss how parents and teachers should deal with children who are caught lying. Be sure you to include some discussion of the age of the child and the seriousness of the lie.
4. Write an essay in which you argue for or against the telling of lies under certain circumstances.
5. Most of us have had a painful experience in which we have been honest with a friend only to find that they are terribly offended by our comments. Relate an experience in which your honesty caused problems. Would you do it again? Was there perhaps another way you could have handled the situation?