

Tell the Whole Truth

CLINTON KORVER

How can you tap the transformational power of the truth?

How can you use it to turn ordinary relationships into extraordinary ones? The answer is to grasp the truth in its fullest sense, and then practice using it skillfully, with discretion and wisdom.

American children learn how six-year-old George Washington, the first president, chopped down a cherry tree outside his father's house. The story, long believed, is a legend. It was created by biographer Mason Locke Weems in 1809.

But Weems, though a liar himself, apparently understood how to create a powerful ethical parable. Not only did George admit to felling the tree with his new hatchet. His father responded to the truth with joy: "Run to my arms, you dearest boy, run to my arms; glad am I, George, that you killed my tree; for you have paid me for it a thousand fold. Such an act of heroism in my son [has] more worth than a thousand trees, though blossomed with silver, and their fruits of purest gold."

We eagerly embrace such stories. We embrace them not just in myth, but in the media, in movies, and everyday moments in life. In movies, the same pattern repeats: The protagonist reaches a point of insight. Equipped with a deeper truth, he or she spurs reconciliation with friends or loved ones.

Before developing our truth telling skills, we must first explore why we lie. Understanding the causes of our temptations will help us overcome them.

BEWARE TEMPTATIONS TO LIE

If the facts be known, many of us are practiced liars. By lying, I mean we tell someone something we know not to be true with the intention of misleading them. How many times a day do you indulge in such fibbing?

In one study, 147 college students and community members kept daily diaries of lying. The students reported telling an average of two lies per day, the community members one. None thought their lie telling was serious. (Of course, none of them asked the people they lied to.)

In studies of thousands of students by the Center for Academic Integrity, over 70 percent admitted to one or more instances of test cheating. Over 40 percent admitted to plagiarism.

Serious lying is rampant even in places you wouldn't expect. In a study of medical residents, one of three said they would lie to colleagues to avoid swapping shifts. One out of eight said they would fabricate a laboratory value.

What do you think about this picture of people's trustworthiness? Does it lead to integrity and extraordinary relationships?

BEWARE TEMPTATIONS TO DECEIVE

We are equally practiced in deception. By deception I mean intentionally giving a false impression with or without telling a lie. Have you ever failed to correct an inaccurate impression? Or feigned ignorance? Or withheld information? Or sugarcoated the truth? Was this in keeping with your vision of yourself?

What about deceiving through gesture, disguise, inaction, or even silence? Or making statements that are “technically” true? “I did not have sexual relations with that woman, Miss Lewinsky,” President Bill Clinton so infamously said.

Deception turns up frequently even among people of supposed integrity. Of 1,768 scientists surveyed in 2005, 6 percent admitted to having failed to present data that contradicted their previous research. Over 10 percent withheld details of methodology or results in papers or proposals. Over 15 percent dropped observations or data points from analyses because of a gut feeling the information was inaccurate.

We often think of lying, at least “white” lying, as indispensable to life. But lying and deception don’t serve our needs nearly as often as we think. We always have alternatives. Only our lack of understanding prevents us from enjoying opportunities for better living through complete truthfulness.

DO NOT FOOL YOURSELF

To live up to our vision of our higher self, we have to ask: What stories have I fabricated to give myself permission to lie and deceive? Most of the time we will find the story behind your lies is a rationalization—a process of constructing a justification for a decision we suspect is flawed. Rationalization is characterized by contrivance and self-dealing. It purposefully blurs right and wrong.

Of course, you may intend to use reason—a process of analysis for forming judgments that clarifies the distinction between right and wrong action. But it's easy to think something is justified when it isn't—a lesson we have all learned, probably to our embarrassment. When we rationalize, we devise specious but self-satisfying reasons for acting. Or ascribe our actions to high-mindedness when our motives are actually otherwise. Or employ a faulty analogy or wishful thinking. In effect, we create a story that holds together but, upon examination, doesn't hold up.

We commonly rationalize to avoid embarrassment, get ahead, or be kind. When we double-book ourselves and then tell a client we have to break the appointment to see the doctor, we tell a story about how a mistruth preserves an important relationship. When we lie about our software skills in a job interview, we tell a story about how we can do the job anyway. When we tell our mother she looks great in a dowdy dress, we tell ourselves our fib will make her feel better about herself.

Unfortunately, rationalization can become more than an isolated error. It can become a habit. With practice, you can ethically desensitize yourself to the point that you repeatedly do the wrong thing. This is when the movie of your life ends with a dissatisfying thud. You, the lead character, lose your sense of higher self and create permanent barriers in your relationships.

SUBJECT TEMPTATIONS TO THESE TESTS

But relationships don't have to fall flat because of your ethical foibles. You can avoid bad endings by distinguishing reasoning from rationalization. Here are a few easy self-tests to help you do so:

Other-shoe test.

Ask yourself the age-old question: how would you feel if the shoe were on the other foot?

Front-page test.

Would you think the same way if your actions were reported on the front page of *Wall Street Journal* or *The New York Times*? Or in your hometown paper?

Role model test.

Would you do the same if you were role modeling behavior for your children?

Loved-one test.

Would you change your mind if a loved one were on the receiving end of your mistruth?

Mother's test.

And the simplest of all: What would your mother think?

If the script you're writing of your own life disappoints you, or those around you, it's time to think again. When your loved ones view your actions, you don't want them to squirm in their seats.

APPRECIATE THE FULL COSTS OF LIES

In case you doubt the cost of lies, even small ones, consider their often-ignored consequences:

Lies ruin integrity

One lie can put your integrity into question forever. When other people discover you deceived them, they begin to wonder about the past: “How many other lies were there?” And they also wonder about the future: “What is true and what is not?” The most common way trial lawyers challenge the credibility of witnesses is by catching them in a lie.

Lies exact a psychological cost

Even if no one else sees your lies, *you* see them. You may feel extenuating circumstances justify your acts. Still, you may suffer embarrassment under the light of your own conscience. To protect your pride, you may try to keep lies private—and out of the papers and gossip mill. Or you may dwell on the errors or block them out. Either way, if you tell a lie, you may find you remember it for years, as if you told it yesterday. A lie can clash with your vision of yourself and weigh on your character.

Lies hurt good decisions

How many times have you lied or deceived to save another’s feelings? Next time consider: Most people do not like being lied to, regardless of how smart and caring you are. Whether the recipients of your lies are loved ones or coworkers, they feel manipulated and put in the dark. They chafe at being cheated out of valuable news about their lives. Deprived of control in choosing wisely, they feel like stooges.

If you get a lousy haircut and someone is kind enough to tell you, you can have it redone. If you get a cancer diagnosis that is bleak and someone is honest enough to tell you, you can prepare

yourself for coming to terms with your future. If everyone gives you only good news, you don't have the opportunity to weigh alternatives or consider real choices.

We begin to fool ourselves

If we engaged in rationalizations on only the big decisions, we might expect we could catch ourselves simply by being more vigilant. But we rationalize on many small ones as well and so distort our thinking at every level. One compromise can lead to another as we let our standards slip. To reclaim the feeling of alignment between our values and actions, we may trivialize the lies, breaking down the psychic barriers to bigger lies. We slide down the slippery slope of self deception.

Lies hurt relationships

Just as in the movies, what causes most people the greatest pain is a mistruth that creates barriers in relationships. If you engage in deceit, you will find certain subjects hard to discuss. You will lose spontaneity and authenticity while socializing. You will have to expend energy to maintain your deceptions. This effort creates a kind of mental overhead. People sense your distance as you try to cover your tracks, and in turn, distance themselves from you.

If the script you're writing of your own life disappoints you, or those around you, it's time to think again.

DEVELOP YOUR TRUTH-TELLING SKILLS

So if you tote up the numbers in a cost-benefit analysis, how's your balance look? If not so good, what do you do?

If you want to shine the bottom line, you need to reduce the mistruths that cost you dearly. And you need to invest in what I call the "whole truth." The more you practice truth telling skills, the less overhead you carry—and the greater returns on your relationships.

Simple example: Your boss asks you to play golf after work. You would prefer to spend the evening with your family, given that you've recently had little time with your children. You tell your boss you have a lot of work to do, which is true. Still, you don't really plan to open your briefcase unless you have to.

Imagine the next morning when she asks whether you got your work done. You reply accurately but deceitfully, "Not as much as I would have liked."

Wrong answer: You just took on overhead. You reduced returns on your relationship.

Find the whole truth

Telling the truth is a skill. It takes effort and practice to do it well, even in seemingly simple situations such as this one. And "telling the whole truth" doesn't simply mean admitting to your boss that you chopped down the cherry tree. It means examining what's behind your lie. Ask yourself, "Why am I tempted to deceive?"

Maybe your first reaction is that your boss is a jerk for asking you in the first place. Hasn't she seen all of the long evenings you have been putting in? Doesn't she care that you have no life outside of work?

But the whole truth is more subtle than that. You have probably camouflaged it behind your fears and assumptions. You may worry that your boss will think you are not committed to work. Or you're not willing to put in time to be a team player. Maybe your boss is new and you're worried about making a good impression.

Telling the whole truth does not mean saying everything that comes into your head...
It means choosing an alternative, skillful way of responding.

Express the whole truth

In telling a "white" lie to your boss, you saddle yourself with overhead. But the concept of the "whole truth," however, gives you an enticing alternative. The challenge is to express that truth effectively.

Try something like this: "Thank you for inviting me to play golf. I hope you don't mind me saying that I prefer not to go tonight. I am afraid when I say this, you may think I do not value your company. I do. I would be happy to go another time. But I have not seen my family much recently, and so I would like to spend tonight with them. Let me know tomorrow how you played."

Telling the whole truth does not mean saying everything that comes into your head. It does not suggest that truth telling be blunt or biting—calling your boss a jerk. It means choosing an alternative, skillful way of responding. An old rule of thumb suggests asking yourself before you speak: Is it true; is it kind; is it useful? If it is not all three, you have not found a skillful way to communicate.

As Gandhi is reputed to have said, “Whenever you have truth it must be given with love, or the message and the messenger will be rejected.”

Magic happens when, as part of the whole truth, you give voice to your fears—you describe the reason you are tempted to deceive. An expression of vulnerability invites a deeper relationship.

As an aside, the next time you lie to “save another’s feelings” do not confuse this with being kind. It is selfish. It is avoiding the time and effort to search for the whole truth. It is saving you from discomfort. Skillful sharing of your true feelings and beliefs shows the kindness upon which long-term relationships grow.

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USE THE TRUTH TO TRANSFORM RELATIONSHIPS

Words like “kind” and “whole truth” sound soft. Perhaps they sound foreign to you. But the leader who understands kindness uses diplomacy to inspire people to exceed their former performance. The leader who finds and tells the whole truth rejects rationalization that hobbles rational decision making.

In the nonprofit sector, one manager who demonstrated how to transform a lying culture is Charles Anderson, CEO of the United Way of the National Capital Area in Washington, D.C. Anderson took over that local United Way in 2003, after the jailing of former CEO Oral Suer for fraud. Anderson was faced with rebuilding donors’ trust in the organization, and he chose radical transparency and accountability to do so.

Anderson took his job in July 2003, just six weeks before the release of a forensic audit of past misdeeds. In his job interview, the board asked him how he would handle the audit’s bad news. “I’d take that sucker and put it right on the web,” he recalls saying. “Let the whole world read the good, the bad, and the ugly about this organization.” The audit released damning truths about former practices, like cashing in annual vacation and sick leave, paying for expenses without receipts, disbursing pension payments in advance, and reimbursing the former CEO for his own charitable pledges.

The report concluded the United Way affiliate had been looted of roughly \$1.5 million. The organization needed a radical transformation. Two-thirds of the forty-five-person staff left or were eliminated by Anderson. Anderson then opened all of the organization’s files to the public, except confidential donor and personnel records. In a rare move for a charity, the chapter chose to voluntarily comply with the appropriate provisions of the Sarbanes-Oxley Act of 2002, including some of the costly Section 404 internal controls procedures aimed at preventing fraud in corporations.

Anderson’s efforts stabilized donations, which had plunged by two-thirds after the earlier scandal. He continued to use relentless candor to bring back donors. When he was accused in 2006 by his own chief financial officer of misstating sums raised in the 2004-2005 campaign, he ended a long-running

practice of using projected rather than actual contribution figures—even though it was and remains standard elsewhere in the United Way system.

Like all managers, Anderson ran the risk that candor would give critics ammunition to attack him. *The Washington Post* did so—challenging his integrity for using the projected figures.⁷ The newspaper called the practice a “stumble.” But Anderson’s candor defused talk of misconduct and simply led to stronger relationships with stakeholders. As proof, the number of donors rose from under 100 in 2005–2006 to 176 in 2006–2007.

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DO NOT LET CIRCUMSTANCES TURN WRONGS INTO RIGHTS

Many people reject a commitment to always telling the truth for a simple reason: There are two venerable schools of moral philosophy that guide ethical decision making, and depending on your philosophy, lying may appear more ethical in many situations than truth telling. This is a misunderstanding worth clearing up.

One school of thought is action-based ethics, connected with the philosopher Immanuel Kant. The other is consequence-based, connected with Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill. In action-based, we judge an act based on whether the act, in isolation, is ethical. Lying on your resume is wrong, no matter the potential benefits.

In consequence-based, we judge an act based on the results of the act. We should not misinterpret consequence-based as a low standard. The argument that lying on your resume is right, if by doing so you win a job good enough to overcome the ethical costs misses the high standard Bentham and Mill hoped to set. They encouraged people to think broadly about the ethical implications of their actions, to include the far-reaching and long-term consequences on others and ourselves.

One of our students told the story of preparing for a software exposition. The student's company had invented a program to solve standard problems twice as fast as a competitor's software. To show this off, the company designed a demonstration pitting its software head-to-head against its competitor's.

But just before the show, a technical problem unrelated to the software made the competition impossible. The student's manager, however, asked him to run the demonstration anyway, using files from earlier sessions to make it appear as if the software were working. The engineer was not to reveal the fakery—and he didn't.

Imagine the pressures faced by this student. He is young and ambitious, he wants to do a good job, and his boss has asked him to do something he finds ethically uncomfortable. In the throes of this time-pressured situation, the engineer may find it difficult to resist authority long enough to clearly think through all of the consequence-based implications.

But a cavalier reliance on consequence-based ethics is nothing more than a rationalization. What would have happened if the engineer, instead of caving into his boss's pressure, had insisted on honesty? What if he had said, "Look boss, this really makes me uncomfortable. I like to think of myself as the kind of person who tells the truth, and I like to think of this organization as one that tells the truth."

How would that have changed his relationship with his boss? Perhaps an irate boss would fire him or sideline him, but if he worked in a company that valued honesty, his comment would certainly come across as a wake-up call. It might even earn him respect as a person who 'speaks truth to power.'

So before you side with the consequence-based approach, be sure you're not just using a selective choice of moral philosophies as a cover for rationalization. Ask yourself, "Isn't there another alternative that is true, kind, and useful?" How do I want my story to end?

When is it ok not to tell the whole truth?

Yes, there are times telling the whole truth is probably never the right thing—but the exceptions are as rare as quiet moments in an action film. If you feel there are exceptions, identify them in advance. Don't wait until the moment the boss asks you to play golf. The most common exception is to accept lying when it prevents someone's harm or death.

One other caveat: Uncovering the whole truth and telling it in a helpful way takes time. You may feel some people are just not worth the effort. We all have limited time and attention. So you could decide that the effort to tell the whole truth should be reserved for people whom you care about. For everyone else—those pesky telesales reps—you might settle for not deceiving.

GIVE IT A TEST

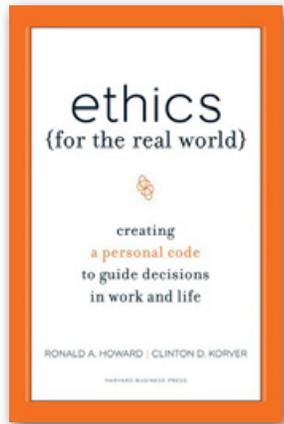
You may doubt the power of the whole truth to transform. If so, give it a try. Next time you find a white lie forming on your lips—lying to friends about why you can't come to their party—dig for the deeper truth. Express your needs and feelings. The truth transforms.

In fact, the truth transforms in such a profound way that it can sometimes change our lives. In a self-discovery session attended by my co-author, Ronald Howard, a participant, a father, told how his terminally ill son filled the spaces in his coloring books by using only one crayon: the black one. The father was in anguish. He could not tell his son he was going to die, or how aggrieved he was.

A week later, the father returned to another session. He had finally gotten to the truth with his son. He had told him that life was short, that he loved him, and he would miss him. A barrier seemed to fall as the father told the truth, told it kindly, and told it in way useful to improving something the son cherished: an honest and deep relationship with his father. His son returned to his coloring books, but this time his approach was not dark: he used crayons of every color. 🎨

Footnotes

1. SIX-YEAR-OLD GEORGE WASHINGTON: See Mason Locke Weems, *The Life of Washington*, ed. Marcus Cunliffe, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press (Harvard University Press), 2001, Twelfth Printing), 12. The text of the book is also online: <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~cap/gw/weems.html>
2. IN ONE STUDY OF LYING: See Bella M. DePaulo, Deborah A. Kashy, Susan E. Kirkendol, Melissa M. Wyer, and Jennifer A. Epstein "Lying in Everyday Life," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 70, no. 5 (1996): 979-995.
3. STUDIES OF THOUSANDS OF STUDENTS: The Center for Academic Integrity posts results online. See http://www.academicintegrity.org/cai_research.asp
4. A STUDY OF MEDICAL RESIDENTS: The reports by medical residents give a stark picture of how frequently highly motivated professionals indulge in mistruths. See Michael J. Green, Neil J. Farber, Peter A. Ubel, David T. Mauger, Brian M. Aboff, James M. Sosman, and Robert M. Arnold "Lying to Each Other: When Internal Medicine Residents Use Deception with Their Colleagues " *Archives of Internal Medicine* 160, no. 15 (2000): 2317-2323.
5. PRESIDENT BILL CLINTON INFAMOUSLY SAID: For a wrap-up of the Lewinsky obfuscation, see Peter Baker and John F. Harris, "Clinton Admits to Lewinsky Relationship, Challenges Starr to End Personal 'Prying' " *The Washington Post*, 18 August 1998, A1.
6. SCIENTISTS ADMITTING TO MISBEHAVIOR: See Brian C. Martinson, Melissa S. Anderson, and Raymond de Vries, "Scientists Behaving Badly," *Nature* 435 (2005): 737-738.
7. IS IT TRUE; IS IT KIND; IS IT USEFUL? The origin of this advice is unclear. It appears in the writings of C.W. Leadbeater. However, it closely follows a passage in the *Tipitaka*, a part of Theravada Buddhist scripture: "Monks, a statement endowed with five factors is well-spoken, not ill-spoken. It is blameless and unfaulted by knowledgeable people. Which five? It is spoken at the right time. It is spoken in truth. It is spoken affectionately. It is spoken beneficially. It is spoken with a mind of good-will." Sutta Pitaka, Anguttara Nikaya 5.198 *The Tipitaka* is online: <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/index.html>
8. UNITED WAY OF THE NATIONAL CAPITAL AREA: The United Way story is based on reporting by Bill Birchard in April 2005 and May 2007, including two interviews with CEO Chuck Anderson. Birchard's work initially appeared in *CFO magazine*: Bill Birchard, "Nonprofits by the Numbers," *CFO*, July 2005, 50-55.



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