

**A More Exciting Life**

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**Others**

## Learning to lie less often

Our image of liars is so negative, our sense of their motives so dark, our presumption of their primal sinfulness so unyielding, it is no wonder that we generally deny the possibility that we might be liars ourselves.

However, it would be much more honest, and more liberating, to accept that we spend a lot of our lives lying in one way or another, and to grow sympathetic to and curious about the reasons why we do. We tend to focus on the delinquent or semi-criminal aspects of lying – as though deceitfulness always happens in relation to a schoolteacher, an angry father, a gang or the police – and so miss out on its more subtle, everyday psychological varieties in which we, the law-abiding, careful, ostensibly moral majority, are enmeshed.

Despite our disavowals, we are continually lying about some of the following:

### Hurts

We lie about the many almost imperceptible hurts that others have inflicted on us but that we lack the vocabulary and the confidence to complain about cleanly. We lie about a range of minor resentments that have made

us bitter and irritable and have choked our capacity for warmth and spontaneity. We lie about the number of other humans we are in a (quiet) sulk with.

### Guilt

We lie about how sorry we are about certain things we've done, and about how much we long to check in with certain people and apologise, if only we knew that they would greet our confession with a measure of forgiveness.

### Tenderness

We lie about how moved we are by many things that busy grown-ups aren't supposed to care too much about: a parent and child walking together hand in hand; the sky at dusk; the face of a stranger in the street; a bad film with a happy ending; a picture of our family decades ago in better times. We disguise the fact that beneath an often confident, brusque adult exterior is a pensive, weepy child.

### Anxiety

We lie about how alarming it is to be alive; how frightened we are of the responsibilities we carry; how unsure we are of our path; and how little we understand even at our moments of ostensible authority and competence. In certain moods we might long to utter a despairing 'I don't know ...' at much that comes our way.

### Sexuality

We lie about a majority of things that turn us on – and about many that really don't but apparently should. We lie about the sensual details that we rehearse in our minds alone late at night and the unfaithful dreams that coexist alongside our public commitments.

### Pleasure

We pretend to be having fun skiing and in nightclubs, at the theatre and reading the long novel that won a very important prize. We pretend to love our friends. We lie about how bored we are. We strive not to admit to what we really do like: staying in; eating strange things in a disgusting way alone in the kitchen late at night; plotting revenge; seeing no one; wasting time; buying gadgets; and looking up the fate of ex-lovers and colleagues from long ago.

In the process, without meaning to, we perpetuate a world in which everyone else has to lie along with us. Because everyone refrains from uttering their truths, the price of breaking cover remains impossibly high. We collude in a mass conspiracy to suggest that love, sex, work, family life, friends and holidays unfold in a way we know in our hearts they simply don't. We remain at the dawn of any collective capacity to acknowledge what fundamental parts of life are actually like.

A lack of love holds us back. We are emotional liars because, somewhere during our upbringing, we failed to imbibe a robust sense that we might be acceptable in and of our essence. No one said with enough conviction that we were allowed just to be. We were given convincing lessons in how not to speak our more dangerous thoughts clearly. We became experts at complying. We came to associate being good and normal with being someone else.

How much more interesting it might be if we dared to be a little braver, and conceived of many encounters as opportunities to risk the sharing of new truths. We might realise that our picture of what might happen if we are honest derives from outdated or irrelevant contexts: childhood, the company of narrow-minded schoolmates, obvious bullies, social media ... Learning not to lie would not only be of egoistic benefit; our vulnerability would invite, and rehabilitate, that of others. Every confession we could muster would allow our companions to let go of a part of their own loneliness. Every move towards greater honesty would edge us towards a less needlessly isolated and painfully shame-filled world.

## Leaning into vulnerability

For many of us, whenever we feel scared, sad, anxious or lonely, the last thing we would think of doing is sharing our distress; a confession threatens to make an already difficult situation untenable. We assume that our best chance of defending ourselves and recovering our self-possession is to say nothing. When we are sad at a gathering of friends, we smile. When we are terrified before a speech, we try to change the subject. When we're asked how we're coping, we say, 'Very well indeed, thank you.' We aren't deliberately out to deceive; we are practising the only manoeuvre we know and trust in response to our vulnerability.

What we fear above all is judgement. We are social creatures who have come to equate being accepted with appearing poised. We assume that we could not explain what is really going on inside us and survive unblemished. In our eyes, the price of safety is the maintenance of a permanent semblance of composure.

However, there might be an alternative to this punishing and isolating philosophy: rather than insisting on our well-being at moments of fear, sadness, anxiety and loneliness, we might actually reveal that things aren't

perfect for us; that we're pretty scared right now; that we're finding it hard to talk to people or maintain faith in the future; that we feel anxious and in need of company.

Although we might be alarmed at the prospect of divulging such sentiments, it might help us arrive at some surprising discoveries. We might immediately feel lighter and less oppressed; our connection with those around us might become significantly deeper by sharing more of the turmoil of our inner lives; and, most unexpectedly of all, the revelation of our vulnerability could make us appear stronger rather than weaker in the eyes of others.

Some of our regrettable furtiveness comes from imagining that all disclosures of fear, sadness, anxiety and loneliness must be the same. But this is to ignore a critical difference between a revelation that comes across as an insistent, desperate demand for rescue, and one that frames a problem with an attitude of sober, sad dignity. There is a distinction between begging never to be left alone again and revealing that one has been finding one's evenings a bit quiet of late. There can be a firm and dependable barrier between neediness and vulnerability.

Furthermore, rather than merely not threatening our dignity, revelation may be the very ingredient that enhances it.

However impressive it may superficially be never to show weakness, it is much more impressive to have the courage, psychological insight and self-discipline to talk about one's weaknesses in a boundaried and contained way. It is the mark of a real adult to be able to disclose, with a mixture of aplomb and tact, aspects of one's childlike self: that one has been going through a dreadful time; that one really doesn't want to be here; or that one is very worried about seeming like an idiot. True toughness isn't about maintaining a facade of military robustness, but about an artful negotiation with, and unfrightened acceptance of, one's regressive, dependent aspects.

The ability to pull this off relies on a further piece of maturity: the knowledge that everyone is, at heart, as scared, sad, lonely and anxious as we are. Even if they choose not to reveal this, we can make an empathetic leap of faith that they do so, not because they are fundamentally different and more robustly constituted than us, but because they are scared.

We are all hemmed in by an image of what it means to be a serious adult that doesn't allow us to share our vulnerable reality, and thereby makes us all sick and alienated from ourselves and from one another. We should accept that it is normal to be lonely, even though everyone is meant

to have all the friends they need; that it is normal to be sick with worry, even though we're meant to have faith in the future.

In revealing our weaknesses, we are proving we are like our audiences in their true, but hitherto needlessly hidden, reality: we are somersaulting over a social barrier and generously creating a space in which others too may come to feel safe enough to show their fragility and humanity. We can lean into our fears rather than treating them as shameful enemies. Every confession, ably executed, alleviates rather than enforces our burdens. Rather than seeing the world as an entity that we must constantly impress, and our reality as something we must perpetually hide, we can dare to imagine that others would not mind us showing more of our true selves. There might be nothing more generous or impressive we could offer our neighbours than a tranquil disclosure of our feelings of sadness, isolation, worry and existential despair.