

Lying About Lying

Submitted by Sarah Fitz-Claridge on 19 September, 2003 - 23:08

Published in *Taking Children Seriously*, the paper journal (TCS 29)

by **Sarah Fitz-Claridge** (<http://www.fitz-claridge.com/>)



On 16th January, 1999, Henry Hyde closed his Senate address calling for the President's impeachment by reading a letter from a child

“in the third grade,” on the subject of *lying*. The child suggested that as a punishment for lying to the American people, President Clinton should be made to write an essay on the theme *Why it is Wrong to Lie*.

This platitude is so familiar to us, especially in the context of children, that it received little or no critical attention despite the saturation media coverage of every aspect of these proceedings. In particular, no one seems to have noticed the colossal irony in forcing a child, or a President, to reaffirm his allegiance to this universal truth: *lying is wrong*. Step back for a moment, try to see beyond your own childhood conditioning, and consider whether that really *is* a universal truth, or not. Surely not! When, in 1944, the Allies systematically spread lies about the location of the D-Day landings, they were doing right, not wrong, weren't they? When a spy revealed the truth of that matter to the Germans, it was a profoundly evil act, wasn't it? The fact is that telling a lie, like throwing a stone, is neither right nor wrong in itself. Its morality depends on the circumstances. The intentions, the obligations of the parties concerned, whether good or harm is done – all these things are relevant to whether a lie is right or wrong, just as the morality of throwing a stone depends on what you are throwing it at, and for what purpose, and at what risk of harm to other people or to yourself, and so on.

The strange thing is that everyone knows this – every functioning adult, that is. In particular, Henry Hyde knows it, and President Clinton knows it. So if the President were to write an essay “explaining why it is wrong to lie,” his explanation would necessarily be a cynical concoction, designed to give specious justification to a known falsehood; that is to say, it would itself be a pack of lies. So the President's punishment for lying to the nation would be to write a letter to the nation lying to the nation.

Or more precisely, lying to the nation's children – for the adults are in no danger of believing such an absurdity. But it gets worse. For in a postscript, the child's father explained how the letter had come to be written. He had forced his son to write it as a punishment for lying. Since it was forced, perhaps it was a lie too – perhaps the son is really a staunch supporter of the President, and opposed impeachment – who knows? Anyway, the father went on to explain that his son is now having difficulty understanding that lying is wrong, *because of the President's bad example*.

Can that assertion be anything other than yet another barefaced lie? Are we really supposed to believe that the child had lied to his father *because* the President had lied about his affair? Or that the father seriously believes that this was the cause? Surely everybody, including the father and the child, including the Republicans bringing the case, know that that is a complete fantasy, invented on the spur of the moment to make a facile point about the political issue of the moment. But they asserted it anyway. Why? And why were they in no danger of being contradicted? For the same reason they tell

their children that it is bad to lie and punish them when they lie. Because there is an enforced separation between the values people *have* and the values they *espouse*, and this separation is especially sharp when it comes to raising children.

Wherever there is coercion, lies follow as certainly as night follows day. That is why, in our society, children lie all the time and the parents tell them that lying is bad and punish them for it, even though the parents themselves lie all the time too and know that it is not true that it is always wrong to lie.

Not only do parents lie all the time to their children, they often punish their children for *not* lying. Most parents *force* their children to lie. For example, they insist that their children express gratitude they don't feel, for gifts they don't want. Imagine what would happen if in response to a question about the meal Great Aunt Griselda has served, the children answer truthfully, that it was the most disgusting meal they have ever had the misfortune to be served. Just as you know what would happen – severe punishment – so do they, and that is why they lie, and are rewarded later by praise for their tact and good manners.

On Larry King Live on CNN, Linda Trip implied that she disapproved of Monica Lewinsky's lie, saying she “has a different moral compass.” But what was Linda Trip herself doing when she taped her conversations with Monica Lewinsky, if not lying by omission?

But it just isn't true that lying is always wrong, is it?

Keeping a confidence, for example, often involves lying. When a reporter asked Congresswoman Mary Bono about her (and Cher's) ex-husband Sonny's prescription drug problem and other embarrassing issues, she felt obliged to tell the truth. Cher is said to be very angry that Mary just couldn't bring herself to lie to protect Sonny's reputation in death. Would that have been morally wrong? Mary Bono admitted that perhaps she should have refused to answer some of the questions. But sometimes merely refusing to answer a question is not enough, is it?

“Did Sonny have a drug problem?”

“I prefer not to answer that.”

That is the same as saying yes, so to avoid giving an affirmative answer, she would need to have looked the reporter in the eye and lied through her teeth.

I can remember several occasions in my own life in which I have been asked direct questions about other people where, had I not lied, I would have given the questioners information that was not mine to share. Indeed, had I even hesitated before answering, that would have violated confidences. I didn't. I told downright lies. And I am quite sure that I did the right thing, and that not lying would have been very, very wrong. Moreover, I personally would think twice about trusting anyone who does not share my view that lying is not always wrong, and sometimes the only moral course. I might end up with a friend like Mary Bono.

The British Parliament has quite an obsession about ministers “not lying to Parliament.” But even they make exceptions – one of them being where a lie is necessary to protect a legitimate secret. For instance, on one famous occasion when a British spy was arrested in Moscow on spying charges, and the Minister was asked about it in Parliament, he lied, saying indignantly that the man was just an innocent businessman. Later, when the truth emerged, no one called for the Minister's resignation. No one said he should have been a little less indignant in his denial. That would have been insane, wouldn't it?

A President who would strictly never lie or deliberately mislead anyone would probably be committing treason the moment he started negotiating with any foreign power. Civil servants who wouldn't lie would violate their oath under the Official Secrets Act. A company employee who would never lie might destroy years of hard work by her colleagues who trusted her.

Lying is sometimes not merely not wrong, but *right*.

Of course there are many circumstances under which it is indeed wrong to lie. Perhaps the most important of these is when parents or other trusted adults (including politicians!) are talking to children, especially about issues of morality. Children are trying to build up a good set of moral theories. They have a right to be told the truth about morality. It is wrong to mislead them about their parents' real values and beliefs. It is wrong to mislead them about right and wrong. Henry Hyde did the wrong thing when he used that particular argument.

to post comments

Comments

your grey area of lying

Submitted by a TCS reader (not verified) on 30 June, 2004 - 11:35

Saying Auntie's meal is "horrible" in a very demonstrative way, is just the sort of thing a child "would" do, maybe just because the child's palette is not developed, as that 'can' often be the case, or/and has been more used to a different type of food because they don't go to Auntie's that often, rather than their actually being any thing really distasteful about the food. I'm sure if they went to Auntie's more often she and the child/ren would become more used to each other and find a common ground for sharing food tastes in a wonderful way.

to post comments

George Lakoff

Submitted by a reader (not verified) on 26 October, 2004 - 14:22

This whole argument is interesting because it brings up George Lakoff's thesis of the "strict father" figure versus the "lenient father" figure. When Henry Hyde says he should be made to write an essay about why lying is wrong, he's taking on the "strict father" figure, a prominent figure in conservative/right-wing/reactionary circles. Take a look at George Lakoff's [Moral Politics \(http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0226467716/takingchildrseri\)](http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0226467716/takingchildrseri).

to post comments

Liyin'

Submitted by Gale Buhner (not verified) on 14 November, 2004 - 20:25

I have found that circumstances beyond ones self can justify about anything!

to post comments

Well, yes, you know that.

Submitted by Relsqui (not verified) on 3 December, 2004 - 06:03

And if the parents, and auntie, have even a shred of sense, they know that too. The child doesn't (and although they could tell him, it's a fair bet he wouldn't understand until he got older).

My point is just that for exactly the reasons you mention the child should be free to give an honest opinion. The right reaction by his family would be laughter.

(Naturally, he should be taught--or will likely learn on his own--that there are times not to be honest. You don't tell your boss she just served you the worst meal ever. ;)

[to post comments](#)

great aunt whatever's meal

Submitted by a reader (not verified) on 4 April, 2006 - 14:47

Lying may or may not be wrong- but do parents really want their kids telling someone that the meal is delicious when in all honesty it's disgusting. No. They just want them to thank the person for making it for them. Or to be appreciative of what the person, maybe aunt, did for them. The kids don't have to like it, but the parents DO want them to be grateful that their aunt put time and work in that meal for them. Anyway.. just because we don't accept that lying is wrong doesn't make it so.

[to post comments](#)

great aunt;s whatever meal

Submitted by derek (not verified) on 9 April, 2006 - 21:46

Would the parent tell the great aunt that the meal was awful, no because that would be rude so letting children say that would also be rude.

we do not need to punish children to show them that their behaviour is unacceptable. in life they need to know that some things are unacceptable just because they are, this is not up for debate children need to know this.

How would the great aunt feel if they said this she would be hurt she would not be saying oh these kids are delightful they are so honest same thing if an adult said this the person making the meal would be hurt. i would tell the children right there this is not acceptable but i also would before going over to the aunt;s house tell the aunt what my children liked to eat.

and we would talk to the children about what is polite and what is not polite . i would expect my children through our teaching of moral values would not say the food was awful just say they don't like that particular food because i already previously went over with the aunt what they did;nt like or even better get the children involved in telling the aunt what they liked to eat.

[to post comments](#)

The white and the black

Submitted by a reader (not verified) on 26 October, 2006 - 07:23

My job as a parent is not to teach my child absolutes, as they do not in fact exist. Every situation is dependent on the thousands of variables that make that situation specific. We have to teach our children to be morally discerning, rather than morally correct. Every person I have ever met who sets themselves up to be "of a high moral standing" has turned out to be a hypocrite upon closer inspection.

[to post comments](#)

lying

Submitted by j (not verified) on 9 October, 2007 - 00:32

It seems to me that lying is always wrong/hurtful, because every circumstance in which people feel it is necessary to lie is based on a million other lies. for example, in a company, when you feel the need to lie for a coworker, the company itself may be functioning in the realm of lies.

Or, in the case of protecting a coworker from discrimination by telling a lie, either the person who would discriminate is discriminating on the basis of lies they believe, or the coworker is actually doing something that should be brought to light. (and i mean discrimination not just in the obvious ways, let's say homophobia, but also in other ways - let's say you are lying to protect a coworker who overslept or didn't do their work- by everyone always telling the truth, employers might need to face the fact that employees are not robots, and that more understanding and tolerance of mistakes and "weaknesses" is a necessary thing, instead of creating a world where a person "needs" to lie to protect a decent person from being discredited for not being a robot)

The need to lie in government is a situation that has been created by lies that each country has told it's people/or it's governing few. When all truth is told, what need would there be for any war, except a REAL lack of survival needs (food water), and by telling the truth about that, the problem could be solved. Every other reason for war is based on various lies. The same is true for company competition and so forth.

Who could be harmed by companies having to tell the truth about their products? no one except people who are exploiting others, and in fact, they would even be helped themselves by everyone being always honest. There is no reason to lie to aunt so-and-so about her terrible food, because if the truth is that you care about her, what difference does it really make to her how the food tastes to you. If she is basing her worth to you on how her food tastes, then the truth should be told to her that you love her regardless of your taste buds.

Being honest forces people to understand that being different doesn't matter (but the intent to hurt does, and should be known anyway -if you don't love your aunt and only care about her food- so she can tell you to leave and protect herself). The more "brutally" honest everyone is about everything, the more chance for real love to grow between everything, and the more chance for real harm to be prevented.

There is no reason to ever lie to a child (if you feel the need to lie, you are probably doing something you don't think is right), and if the subject is something that is too complex, you can always tell the child that you will explain when they can better understand- not a lie, but the truth.

[to post comments](#)

For what it's worth...

Submitted by a reader (not verified) on 18 November, 2007 - 18:36

I'd like to start out by saying, this makes sense in my head. Whether or not I can clearly express my sometimes rambling thoughts to others effectively is doubtful.

Anyway, lying. It is a part of our lives that will never disappear. Humans have had it since the beginning of time and will continue to. The old testament deems it necessary to have one of its ten rules for life concern lying: *thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor* . "Is lying acceptable?" is a question that will be debated and questioned throughout the ages.

My question is, "Does it matter?".

Ok so it sounds a little strange. But honestly, would it make much of a difference? Tell a child, and adult, anyone, lying is wrong, fine. Will that stop him from lying to try and keep himself out of trouble? Will it stop a cheating husband from lying about his whereabouts? A desperate parent from lying to protect her child? A murderer from lying about his guilt? A student trying to explain away why he forgot his homework? A girl from telling her friend her new haircut is, er, lovely? Most likely not.

Everyone holds their own moral standards. Not everyone has the same beliefs, and thats fine. Society has a tendency to develop our beliefs for us. Or at least try to.

There is no right or wrong answer to is lying right or wrong. You can relate it to more controversial or obvious questions: Is killing another human acceptable? Well, to some people it depends. Self defense? Mercy killing? The victim's character? To others its a straight cut "never". It doesnt matter. It may be wrong, but thats not going to prevent it from happening.

That's just my two cents. Feel free to disagree.

And, for what it's worth, I think circumstantially lying is ok. I'd be lying if I said I never lied or if I said lying is wrong. But thats just me. Pay no mind.

to post comments

More articles

- [When Toddlers Get Upset](#)
- [Taking Education Seriously](#)
- [Respecting Other People's Wishes](#)
- [Reacting to an Angry Child](#)
- [Requiring Children To Do Chores](#)
- [Waste Not, Want Not](#)
- [Don't Wait Until You're Perfect](#)
- [The Cognitive Capacity Argument](#)