

A close-up, low-angle shot of a person's leg and foot as they walk on a dirt path in a forest. The person is wearing a tan hiking boot with dark laces and a white sock. The path is covered in dry pine needles and small stones. A thin tree trunk is visible in the background, and the forest floor is lush with green undergrowth.

**Do you walk your talk?**

Say what you mean  
and mean what you say?

**Or does your language  
take you down roads  
you're not willing to follow?**

Taking a closer look at how  
your words and deeds  
connect — or don't —  
can help you see  
where you really stand.

# walking

PHOTO: PHOTODISC

By CAT THOMPSON

HOW'S THAT NEW YEAR'S RESOLUTION COMING ALONG? Were you able to stick to it? Are you still putting in the same kind of committed energy that you started with back in January? Or did you get off to a running start and then find yourself petering out six weeks later?

If you're not where you wanted to be, you may be wondering why. There are lots of reasons why we run afoul of our intentions. Sometimes we make a too-ambitious plan we simply don't have the skills or energy to execute. Sometimes we find ourselves facing emotional roadblocks that we don't know how to get through, so we run out of steam. But often, the forward movement comes to a screeching halt because we simply don't keep our word to ourselves. We make promises ("Tomorrow I'll get up early and go to the gym"), and then break them ("Awww, it's raining, I think I'll stay in bed. I'll go to the gym on my way home") — often for reasons we don't even understand. Which brings me to what might be an uncomfortable question: How good are you to your word?

Words are powerful forces of creation. They take our dreams and goals and put them out there for all the world to witness. Florence Scovel Shinn, a metaphysician of the 1920s, said, "There is always plenty on man's pathway; but it can only be brought into manifestation through desire, faith or the spoken word." Every time we speak, we create a road of some sort. The quality of that road, and how far it goes, will be directly related to the integrity of our word.

## Speaking With Integrity

What exactly is integrity? According to the dictionary, integrity is "the quality of possessing and steadfastly adhering to high moral principles or professional standards, and the state of being complete, undivided, sound or undamaged." Integrity, then, is having high principles and keeping those standards consistent throughout all the different parts of the self.

One of the first places integrity issues show up is in our language patterns. When we are "in integrity," we speak from a place of wholeness. Our words match our actions. As Dr. Seuss put it, "We say what we mean and we mean what we say." When we break from this pattern and say things we don't really mean, we move "out of integrity."

Can you identify someone in your life who uses language carelessly, who agrees to things readily but then never seems to be able to show up for his or her agreements? Do you know individuals who spend a lot of their time speaking about things they have no experience with — who have plenty of opinions but little real, applicable knowledge to back it up? Do you have friends who frequently gossip or who say disempowering things about themselves? These are some of the common ways that people deprive themselves of the potential power of speech.

Language is meant to power our dreams into physical reality. When we "spend" our language on half-baked ideas, or passionate views we may have heard about but have no direct experience with, when we use language destructively or we say things we don't really mean, we lose personal power. Personal power comes from being in integrity and diminishes whenever our integrity is undermined. Unfortunately, very few of us are taught the skills of using language as an integrity-building force. →

# Your Talk

## The Path of Personal Integrity

## White Lies

To find the roots of our dishonesty with ourselves, we need only look as far as our cultural patterns around language and lies. Most of us consider ourselves good people. We recycle our cardboard, give to charity and generally try to do the right thing when we have the opportunity. Yet most nice people also lie quite frequently. Why is that? And how has that become acceptable behavior?

The dictionary describes the word “lie” in the following way: *v* 1. to say something that is not true in a conscious effort to deceive somebody, 2. to give a false impression; *n* 1. a false statement made deliberately, 2. a false impression created deliberately.

**When enough “white lies” are floating around in your midst, your integrity becomes fractured. You may feel pulled in a thousand directions, and unable to make decisions without the fear that all these “custom made” realities could come crashing down around you.**

In all four of these descriptions, one thing stands out clearly: that lying is something we do deliberately — that our purpose for lying is to intentionally deceive. Obviously, this type of activity seems at odds with being “nice.” How is it that we can consider ourselves good people and include lying? We may think our lying is for a good reason: to keep from hurting someone’s feelings, to smooth over conflict or to make someone happy. Afterall, what does it hurt to tell a little white lie every once in a while?

What lying does, as a rule, is to create multiple realities. When you lie, reality splits — it “dis-integrates.” You now have one reality that *you* know and live in, knowing the “truth” about a particular issue, and the reality that the people to whom you’ve *lied* live in, which is designed around somewhat or totally different information. The people to whom you have lied make decisions and choices based on the reality they inhabit, but it’s a different reality than the one you inhabit, so that split will now influence your relationship and your common future.

Presumably, you told the white lie to make these other people’s reality “nicer,” but you probably also told it to make *your* reality more comfortable (i.e., by lying, you avoided “feeling bad,” disappointing them or being the bearer of bad news). The problem is, you are creating this potentially huge disintegration without having any real way of knowing what the repercussions of that reality-split will be down the road. You can’t know how this separate reality might circle back in the future, and you can’t really know whether the net outcome for this other person will be better or worse than the course of the reality that might have resulted if you had told the truth. All you can know for sure is that you’ve now created a rift in a continuum of both your own and these other people’s lives, and you’ve taken charge, if even in a

small way, of designing someone else’s reality.

The more lies you tell, of course, the more multiple realities you create and must live with. That’s an enormous responsibility, and it can also be energy draining, because it literally costs you integrity — the state of being connected, sound, consistent and undivided.

When enough “white lies” are floating around in your midst, your integrity becomes fractured. You may feel pulled in a thousand directions, and unable to make decisions without the fear that all these “custom made” realities could come crashing down around you. You may also not feel like you fully know or trust yourself at times.

## Learning to Splinter

Where do we get the instinct for all this multiple-reality creating? It’s easy to trace right back to childhood. For a child, reality is not the concrete experience it may be for adults. For children, fantasy is a very real part of reality. By this I do not mean that children can’t tell the difference between reality and fantasy. What I mean is that they have not yet *locked into* any one reality. Their imaginations are so vivid that simply being involved in an imagined reality makes it every bit as real to them as the reality their parents occupy.

Kids occupy many different realities in one day. This can lead to some confusion about what is “real” and what is not. If a parent is too rigid to understand his or her child’s rapidly developing imagination and flexible realities, the parent may insist on convincing the child that he or she is wrong in some way. This can imprint the child with the belief that it is wrong to tell the truth about what they are experiencing, and as a result, they may begin to tell their parents what they know will please them and make them comfortable.

As we grow older, we discover this works. It becomes



PHOTOS: CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: PHOTODISC, PUNCHSTOCK



easier and easier for us to tell these white lies as a way of avoiding the discomfort of seeing or knowing what we feel we shouldn't, the shame of being different or the fear of being ridiculed. Unfortunately, this dependence on lying in order to create comfort can deeply affect our ability to be true to our word, and our sense of personal integrity.

The fact is, one cannot simultaneously be using language with power while one is also telling lies. But how can we stop? Half the time, we hardly realize we are doing it. Most adults lie throughout the day, and do so quite consciously but without giving it much thought. That is, they know they are lying but feel that lying is acceptable under the circumstances (mostly because it makes life easier), and over time this instinct becomes almost automatic.

For example, how often have you lied to get out of a social request ("I'd love to come, but I'm busy that night")? How often have you lied, or asked your children or coworkers to lie on your behalf, when you get a phone call from someone you don't want to talk to ("Tell them I'm not here!" or "I'd love to chat, but I'm late for a meeting")? How many parents lie to each other for fear of hurting each other's feelings or getting into a conflict ("I'm not mad, I'm just upset about

work" or "Yeah, I'll be home in a minute")?

Unfortunately, regardless of the motivation behind them, lies like these indicate to us and our children that lying is okay. And when we grow up seeing that lying — constantly splintering truths for ourselves and each other — is considered acceptable or even desirable behavior, how can we ever hope to get back into integrity? The answer is, we need to rewrite our own rules.

## Resurrecting Honesty

In his book, *The Four Agreements* (Amber-Allen Publishing, 1997), author and Toltec wise man don Miguel Ruiz presents a simple but profound code of personal conduct based on adhering to four basic principles or "agreements." The very first agreement is "Be Impeccable With Your Word."

The word *impeccable* comes from the Latin *im*, meaning "without," and *peccatus*, which means "sin." So impeccable (which we generally think of as meaning "perfectly clean") really means "without sin." According to Ruiz, to sin is to go against yourself, in word or in deed. To speak something other than your highest choice and truth is a form of fragmentation.

In the first section of *The Four Agreements*, he advises: "Speak with integrity. Say only what you mean. Avoid using the word to speak against yourself or to gossip about others. Use the power of your word in the direction of truth and love."

Those are wise words, and they provide the basis for personal integrity. But if we accept that all of us are already wandering around in slightly different realities (thanks to each having access to different knowledge and experience), what is truth, really? How can we be sure we are speaking it, and speaking it with full integrity? How can we know when we are simply telling the truth, and when we are gossiping or talking out of turn? →



# Wielding Your Words

HOW OFTEN DO YOU MAKE AGREEMENTS WITH YOURSELF?

HOW MANY OF THOSE AGREEMENTS DO YOU KEEP?

DO YOU TRUST YOURSELF TO KEEP YOUR WORD?

DO YOU ALWAYS MEAN YES WHEN YOU SAY IT?

ARE YOU COMFORTABLE SAYING NO?

IF SO, ARE YOU DIRECT WITH YOUR NO?

CAN OTHERS DEPEND ON YOU TO KEEP YOUR WORD? ALWAYS?

IN WHAT SITUATIONS ARE YOU MOST PRONE TO FIB, OR TO WITHHOLD OR "BEND" THE TRUTH?

ARE YOU PRONE TO GOSSIP OR TO SELF-CRITICAL STATEMENTS?

DO YOU "WALK YOUR TALK," OR DO YOU TEND TO SAY ONE THING AND DO ANOTHER?

DO YOU RESERVE YOUR MOST POWERFUL LANGUAGE FOR BUILDING UP PEOPLE AND IDEAS, OR FOR TEARING THEM DOWN?

DO YOU HAVE A PERSONAL CODE FOR KNOWING WHEN TO SPEAK UP, AND WHEN TO KEEP SOMETHING TO YOURSELF?



At one time or another, most of us have been on the receiving end of someone who just had to “speak his or her truth,” but who also seemed to have had an agenda about making us wrong, guilt-tripping us or hurting our feelings. We’ve been in situations where someone says something totally inappropriate or unkind and then uses, “Well, it’s true!” as an excuse.

Insisting on speaking the whole truth and nothing but the truth *all* the time doesn’t seem practical or wise; it seems reckless and undiscerning. This is where we need to come back and revisit that last, very important bit of Ruiz’s counsel: “Use the power of your word in the direction of truth *and* love.”

That might mean love for another person, but it also means love of the greater good, for a principle or fundamental truth. Sometimes you may have to speak up in a way that hurts or angers someone close to you but that you feel is necessary for the benefit of a larger group or purpose. And yes, sometimes it means you may elect not to share a particular truth out of care or respect for another person. The intersection of love and truth is a complex territory. What you need is a personal code of integrity that you can live with and be proud of.

I once attended a conference with a wonderful woman who advised: “There are three questions to ask yourself before you ‘speak the truth.’ One: Are you certain it’s true? Two: Is it necessary? And three: Is it kind?” Ideally, your statements will pass all three tests. Occasionally, in the interest of ethics, you may find yourself called upon to say something that you know to be true and feel to be necessary, but that doesn’t seem particularly kind. In these situations, you have to examine your own intent (is it coming from a place of love or care for a greater good?). Then, if you do decide to share the information, do it with care and appropriate timing.

That advice has proven to be a wonderful gift, one I now regularly employ. I have learned that truth can be highly personal. I may have a huge insight or possess an important piece of information, but if it is neither kind nor necessary to share, it is probably not a good idea to dump my truth in someone else’s lap. Conversely, I’ve also learned that even when it is uncomfortable or potentially painful to share a piece of information, if I deem the information both true and necessary to reveal, it’s usually the best thing for me to do.

Of course, even this guideline does not eliminate all doubt. Nor does it eliminate the discomfort inherent in many “speak/don’t speak” quandaries, but it does give you a

structure for examining your motives, and a foundation for building your integrity with language — both in the words you speak to others and the messages you send to yourself.

## Beyond Words

Once we stop to examine the impact that language has on integrity, an important question looms: If we are out of integrity with language, can we be *in* integrity anywhere else in our lives? Think about your integrity in relationships, at work, in your body. If you are unable to speak honestly and kindly to yourself, will you speak kindly and honestly to others? If you are unable to keep your word to yourself, will it be possible for you to do it for anyone else?

Think for a moment about how reliably you keep your word. How often do you say yes when you really mean no — when you realize on some level you have no intention of following through on that yes? How often do you promise yourself something and then, when the time comes, you conveniently forget your promise, or don’t have the time, or don’t want to allocate the resources necessary to keep your word? All of these things sabotage our ability to achieve our goals.

So what can we do to get back into integrity? The first thing would be to examine our language and make the necessary adjustments toward telling the truth, even in small ways. When your sister-in-law calls to invite you over for Friday-night cocktails and you’re not certain you’re up for it, be truthful. Tell her, “I appreciate the invitation, but I’d like to wait to decide. I am having a tough week and I might be exhausted by then.” Or simply say, “No thanks, I’ve committed myself to spending the evening filing papers and

PHOTOS: CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: DIGITAL VISION, PHOTODISC

## INTEGRITY INVENTORY:

**WHERE** (work, relationships, fitness, priorities, money) are you in or out of integrity?

**HOW** can you improve your integrity, and how would it feel to reestablish integrity in all areas of your life?

**WHAT** excuses or mistaken belief systems are you currently using to stay out of integrity? At what cost to yourself or others?

**If you are afraid others will be offended by your truth, ask yourself if you really want to be spending time with people to whom you have to lie on a regular basis. It may be that for you to get into integrity, you have to do some housecleaning of your relationships.**

straightening my desk.”

If you are afraid others will be offended by your truth, ask yourself if you really want to be spending time with people to whom you have to lie on a regular basis. It may be that for you to get into integrity, you have to do some housecleaning of your relationships. And don't be fearful — if some of your relationships go out with the recycling, well, that's more room for building relationships with people you can be honest with.

## Getting Back on Course

Sit down and think about where you are most frequently breaking promises with yourself and others. What circumstances, relationships and patterns in your life are most littered with broken commitments and are most likely to result in diminished integrity? Once you can identify where your word is not “impeccable,” then gently begin breaking the habit of making agreements, unless you are absolutely energized by them.

Again, you can say “maybe” to someone and give yourself permission to withhold your commitment until a later time. But if you are consistently breaking your word, your relationships will never achieve the satisfaction your heart longs for. If keeping your word means you have to give it less often, then by all means, give it less often. The less it is given and broken, the more powerful it becomes. Over time, you will find yourself more energized to make commitments, and clearer about what kinds of commitments are right for you.

The next question to ask yourself is, *Why* do I break my word? I have met many people who make promises because their hearts are big and they genuinely want to do XYZ, or be able to help with XYZ, but then when the time comes for action, they find themselves unable to keep their promises. In the long run, no one depends on these individuals for much of anything, and it hurts them deeply.

There is a particular cycle of guilt to watch

out for in this area. Often, someone will give her word to show up for something and then be unable to either do it at all or complete it fully. This then makes her feel guilty, so she agrees to do something more to make up for her incompletion. She's then unable to complete the *next* agreement, and out of guilt and shame makes yet another. This can lead to a cycle of broken agreements with the same person over and over, until the relationship finally ends with a bang. Pay attention to why you are making agreements, particularly if you know up front that you are not energized to keep them.

If you are in the habit of breaking your agreements with yourself, you may need to dig a little deeper. For instance, there may be some part of you that doesn't feel you deserve to achieve your goal, and will thus sabotage your action plan to keep you from having to confront those underlying emotions. There may be a part of you that is frightened of success because of a childhood imprint that says success leads to criticism or loneliness. On the other hand, you may also be making agreements “with yourself” that are really more about pleasing or impressing *other* people, or fulfilling *their* agenda. Identifying a pattern of broken promises here may really point up a division in your own priorities, in which case you must decide whether you identify more strongly with the part of you that is making these promises, or with the part that is breaking them.

## Choosing Your Words

It may take you some time to break the cultural habits of white lies, broken promises and powerless language, but the results will be well worth it. In her book *The Game of Life and How to Play It*, Florence Scovel Shinn says, “After man knows the truth, he cannot be too careful of his words.” What she means is that once you realize the power of language spoken with integrity, you suddenly become incredibly aware of how much of our daily language is spoken without it. And your tolerance for careless, destructive and disempowering language plummets accordingly.

Shinn offers this example: “I have a friend,” she writes, “who often says on the phone, ‘Do come to see me and have an old-fashioned chat.’ This ‘old-fashioned chat’ means an hour of about five hundred to a thousand destructive words, the principal topics being loss, lack, failure and sickness. I reply: ‘No, I thank you. I've had enough old-fashioned chats in my life, they are too expensive, but I will be glad to have a new-fashioned chat, and talk about what we want, not what we don't want.’”

You will find yourself to be a much happier person when your words match your intentions and when your actions match your words. You will find yourself sleeping better when there are no niggling half-truths keeping you awake at night.

As your word becomes more and more powerful, your reality will begin to reflect that. As you speak from a place of integrity, and use powerful language in the service of your highest choices, you will start to manifest those choices very much as you have described them. When that happens, you'll know you are on the right path and headed in the best possible direction — the direction of your dreams. ●

Cat Thompson is *Experience Life's* emotional-fitness expert and a regular contributor. She can be contacted through [www.emotionaltechnologies.com](http://www.emotionaltechnologies.com).

