



TRUE to YOUR WORD



White lies. Gossip. Unkept promises. They all cost you your personal integrity.

Here's how to earn it back.

BY CAT THOMPSON

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 good people also lie quite frequently.

How often, for example, have you lied in order 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 couples regularly 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”)?

How often do you lie to yourself (“Tomorrow I’ll go to the gym” or “I’ll pay off that credit card next month”)?

We may think our lying is for a good reason: to keep from insulting or wounding someone we care about, to avoid our own discomfort, to smooth over conflict or to make someone happy. Really, though, we most often lie to make our own reality more comfortable.

We may feel that lying gives us more control of our lives: We get to avoid the

pain of disappointing someone, of facing a difficult truth or of being the bearer of bad news. We may insist that we lie because we’re trying “to be nice” to ourselves and others. But lying — as with other careless uses of language, such as making false promises, or gossiping, or trying to sound authoritative on topics we don’t fully understand — has a great many negative consequences.

When our words don’t match our actions, we lose a measure of healthy ownership and control over our lives. Careless language undermines our relationships, chips away at our sense of self and decreases our personal power.

Words and language patterns are powerful forces of creation. They articulate our reality. They put our dreams and goals out there for the whole world to see. They define our agreements. And they are the cornerstone of personal integrity.

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 how well we maintain our integrity with our words and language choices. →



Telling lies fills your life with a tangle of half-truths and deceptions that can leave you feeling divided, anxious and exhausted. Fib frequently enough and you may come to feel like you don't fully know or trust yourself.

HOW DECEPTIONS DIMINISH US

What exactly is integrity? According to the *American Heritage* dictionary, it is the “steadfast adherence to a strict moral or ethical code,” and “the quality or condition of being whole or undivided; completeness.” Integrity, then, is having high principles and keeping those standards consistent throughout all the different realms of your life.

One of the first places integrity issues show up is in our language patterns. When we are “in integrity,” 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.”

You've probably seen this dynamic in action many times. Do you know someone who agrees to things readily but then never seems to be able to show up for his or her agreements? Do you have friends who tell white lies or who “stretch” the truth? Do you know individuals who present themselves as experts on topics they have little or no experience with — who have plenty of opinions but little applicable knowledge to back it up? Do you have friends who say critical things behind each other's backs, or who say disempowering things about themselves? These are just a few

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, small fibs, or passionate views on topics we don't fully understand, when we use language destructively or we say things we don't really mean, we lose personal power. We lose the ability to manifest and embody our highest choices and dreams.

The more lies you tell, the more versions of reality you must live with.

Personal power comes from being in integrity and diminishes whenever our integrity is undermined. And lying is one of the ways we do that.

The dictionary offers several subtly different definitions of the word “lie,” but all of them are unified by one common theme: the intent to deceive. Of course, the act of deliberately deceiving someone is at complete odds with the commonly valued ideal of “being nice.” And yet, at some point or another, most of us catch ourselves thinking: What does it hurt to tell a little white lie every once in a while?

What lying does, as a rule, is to cre-

ate multiple realities. When you lie, reality splits, or “dis-integrates.” You now have one reality that you know and live in, knowing the “truth” about a particular issue, and you have another 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.

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 play out 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.

The more lies you tell, of course, the more multiple versions of reality you create and must live with. That's an enormous responsibility, and it can be very energy draining because it literally costs your integrity — the state of being connected, sound, consistent and undivided. You may feel pulled in a thousand directions, or plagued by the fear and potential shame of having all these “custom-made” realities come crashing down around you. You may even start to feel unsure of whether you can fully know or trust yourself.

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.”

In explaining this agreement, he says: “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.”

That is phenomenally good advice — guidance that provides the essential basis for personal integrity. But how can we be sure we’re speaking the truth, and speaking it with full integrity, not using our truth “against” ourselves or others?

Most of us have had at least one ugly experience being on the receiving end of someone who just had to “speak his or her truth” — and who *also* seemed intent on making us wrong, guilt-tripping us or hurting our feelings in the process. We’ve all been in situations where someone says something totally unkind or inappropriate and then uses, “Well, it’s true!” as an easy 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 refer to 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

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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.

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. →

Sometimes you may have to speak a truth that hurts or angers someone close to you, but that is necessary for the benefit of a larger group or purpose. When this happens, strive to use the power of your words constructively, with clear intent, and with appropriate care and timing.



RECLAIMING YOUR TRUTH

Want to upgrade your integrity and sharpen your truth-telling instincts? Here are some easy ways to get started:

Identify your triggers. Sit down and think about where you most frequently break 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? Take some time to reflect on why that person or situation acts as a trigger for you. Awareness of what is causing you to lie or use disempowering language can go a long way in helping you correct course.

Perceive your language patterns. 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”? Do you sometimes say you’ve completed something you haven’t, or fib about how far you’ve gotten? Do you idly agree to do something and then, when the time comes, conveniently “forget” your promise, or don’t have the time, or don’t want to allocate the resources

necessary to keep your word? Knowing how you use language in disempowering ways is important information to have as you work to bring more integrity to your language.

Take small steps toward honesty. Once you can identify where and when you’re not keeping your word, you can make the necessary adjustments toward telling the truth, even in small ways. Start by practicing with situations that feel the safest for exploring truth-telling. What could this look like in practice? Here’s an example: When your sister-in-law, with whom you’re close and whom you think will respond positively to the truth, calls to invite you over for Friday-night cocktails, and you’re not certain you’re up for it, be honest. 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 let her know what you’re doing instead: “No thanks; I’ve committed myself to spending the evening clearing off my desk.”

Examine your relationships. 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. Look at it this way: If some of your relationships go out with the recycling, you’ll have more room for building relationships with people you can be honest with.

Give your word less often. If something is a “maybe” for you, say so, being clear that you are choosing to withhold your commitment until a later time. Or err on the safe side, and decline. Realize that your commitments matter; if you are consistently breaking your word, your relationships will never be fully satisfying. 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.

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How often do you say yes when you have no real intention of following through? When are you most tempted to hide or stretch the truth? Noticing when and why you lose integrity can help you find valuable opportunities to reclaim it.



As the power of your words and commitments grows, your reality will begin to reflect that. Your relationships will become deeper and more satisfying, and both your personal capacity and sense of possibility will expand.

BUILDING A BETTER REALITY

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* (Random House UK, 2004, originally published in 1925), Florence Scovel Shinn writes, “After man knows the truth, he cannot be too careful of his words.” What she means is that once you realize the potential 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 sloppy language plummets accordingly.

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 or broken commitments 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 clear 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 a direction of personal power. 🌟

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How to Say No With Integrity

SAYING NO CAN BE TOUGH, but it’s essential to establishing high-integrity relationships and a reputation for trustworthiness. Here are some examples of common types of requests for your time and energy — and ways to say no with integrity. A general tip: Keep it short. The more words you use to say no, the more others will suspect you are lying — or open to negotiating.

1) You’ve got plans for the weekend. On Thursday your boss sticks his head in your office and says, “We need another volunteer for the company tournament this weekend. Can we count on you to be there?” You respond: “I appreciate you thinking of me, but this is my weekend for [catching up around the house, taking the kids to my mom’s, resting up for the big presentation on Monday, or whatever it is you have planned for the weekend]. I’ll look forward to hearing how it all went on Monday!”

2) Your mom calls and wants you to come to dinner — tonight. You respond: “That sounds like fun; I’d love to have dinner with you. Tonight won’t work for me, but let’s look at the calendar right now and find a good time. And if you let me know a bit in advance next time, I can keep the calendar open.”

3) Your college-age child calls to ask you to fix or take care of something she could (and should) probably be handling herself. You respond: “You know, this is one of those adult responsibilities that I have a lot of confidence you can now take care of all on your own. If you want some suggestions on how to get started, let me know. Otherwise, just do your best with it. I’ll be excited to hear how it turns out.”

4) A former workmate contacts you for a recommendation you don’t want to give. You respond: “I appreciate your thinking of me, Dan, and wish you all the best in your job hunt; I think there are other people who might be a better choice for that kind of recommendation, though. Why not contact your former supervisor and ask her for the referral? I am sure she would be happy to help.” Or, “Dan, as you know, I’m an accounting guy. I’m better with numbers than words. Just thinking of writing this makes me sweat! Could you find someone else to do it? Maybe your old boss? Thanks!”

5) A friend asks to borrow your truck, and you’re not entirely comfortable with the idea. You say: “Sorry, I’m not comfortable loaning my truck out, but I could easily drive you to a rental center where I know you can rent one for less than \$50.”