

## **Some Thoughts About Deception**

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Deception is the denial of honesty; honesty is a learned value. Values are temporal and transitory; they change with age, maturity, situations,<sup>1</sup> and cultural change. Some educators claim it is unethical to teach values in school; that values belong in churches and homes. This essay agrees with Arthur Schwartz in his argument in favor of teaching values in the classroom.<sup>2</sup> Caution must be taken not to suggest that values are static, universal, or that they must be adopted or changed. Only teachers with demonstrated sensitivity and proven ethical teaching strategies ought attempt teaching values. I believe values can and should also be presented in the lower grades as well with caution, care, sensitivity, and with a non coercive approach.

Values are embedded in our culture, interpersonal relationships, organization cultures, politics, religions [ours and others'], and our legal system.<sup>3</sup> Most homes and churches do not present this spectrum of values, especially honesty vs. deception; therefore, our schools have to pick up the slack lest our children inherit a value void that may haunt them for the rest of their lives.

Recently, I visited two third grade elementary school classes, and two high school classes,<sup>4</sup> and I took a poll in my freshman college class; each was asked about lying. Many responses from each group were almost identical in wording and intensity. This shocked me as I anticipated some change in attitude and value and in sophistication from students in these various levels would occur with age and advanced learning. All these groups agreed that lying was common; that they, themselves, sometimes lied; that they were aware that they were frequently lied to – even sometimes while the lies were being spun; and that they rarely did anything about these lies. Some students in each group expressed curiosity about why I was making a big deal of lying. Lying seemed not to be much of a big deal for the students or their teachers. Most of the teachers openly deplored lying but claimed they were “powerless” to do much about most lies. It seems that deception is not a major value issue or an overt concern in

today's classrooms or by parents as measured by the dearth of questions or comments from parents and teachers during periodic conferences. Several teachers have told me that rarely does this topic arise except in the most egregious cases. Students are being harmed in the long run by not being taught about lies and lying. They grow up assuming that since everyone lies and is frequently lied to, the practice of deception is acceptable; even desirable, as a means of social interaction. Since it is rarely discussed and since observed and experienced lying is rarely confronted or criticized, students come to see lying as a competitive game where the best lies and liars are winners. Lying is thus not seen as a practice to avoid and condemn, but one to strive to sharpen and to receive praise for when it is done successfully.

Deception is pervasive; we all lie and are lied to daily. Lies are so common that we often do not recognize them for what they are. Strictly speaking, any statements that are made that are knowingly untrue, exaggerated, intentionally incomplete or masking needed details, or evasive are lies. Some people have lied so often and have been so seldom confronted with their lies, they no longer recognize lies from truth. Some individuals are incapable of discriminating between lies and truth; such individuals are called "pathological liars."<sup>5</sup>

Lies are so pervasive and are frequently accompanied by reasonable sounding motives that we have constructed names for "types" of lies.<sup>6</sup> These types are masked rationales for deception. These labels are compound lies in that they are lies about lies. They claim to be other than lies, but in reality, they, too, are lies.

Such labels as: "white lies," "little lies," ways to "soften the blow," statements meant "not to hurt someone," and "tact" are examples of these "non-lie" lies. Each of these deception types have a noble sounding motive; however, they are not the truth; therefore, they **are** lies. Such efforts to mask lies make detecting other lies harder. Distinguishing truth from deception is thus fudged.<sup>7</sup> Parents and classroom teachers need to take the responsibility to include lessons about deception so as to inculcate honesty in young minds and hearts. Honesty is not mere practice; it

is a value that requires frequent nourishing, support, and affirmation.

Lies occur for varied reasons. (1) Some lies are formed to cover up misdeeds or omitted deeds.<sup>8</sup> These generally are stated to avoid detection, criticism, or punishment. An example is a child claiming the wind broke a window instead of admitting he broke it. Another example is when an employee or a student calls in sick when she really wants to do something other than work. (2) Other lies are told ostensibly to avoid being seen as blunt, cruel, embarrassing, or impolite. An example of this lie type occurs when we tell others our relative is "fine" when, in fact, she is very ill. Another example occurs when we say a movie is "alright" when we really think it stinks. (3) Yet another lie type exists when we try to cover for or protect another.<sup>9</sup> An example of this is when an older sibling protects a mischievous younger brother by taking the blame for a small incident to avoid the younger boy's punishment. Another example would be if a retired worker took the blame for an industrial decision to protect currently active decision makers. (4) A less common but forceful lie type is scapegoating.<sup>10</sup> Scapegoating occurs when some individual, group, or institution becomes the blame target for others' wrongs. An example is when the media was blamed for losing the Vietnam war; another example of scapegoating is blaming Nixon for endemic Washington corruption. Scapegoating puts genuine blame off on a dead, defenseless, despised, or demonized other rather than accepting all or partial blame yourself.

We lose faith in truth's value when confronted with such pervasive deception; we become cynical about being honest when neither we nor others expect it, notice it, nor reward that behavior<sup>11</sup>; and we come to interpret lying as natural, necessary, inevitable, and acceptable. Lying then gets confused with being kind, not wanting to hurt, being "cool," or not being a tattletale. Lying is corrosive; it corrupts and it subverts honesty. Honesty's value is diminished when lying is seen as conditional.<sup>12</sup> Parents and teachers need to fold examples and explanation of the deleterious effects – long- and short; personal and corporate; and social, political, and spiritual –

of deception. Such instruction can easily be melded in with writing, reading, social studies, and science classes.

We need to come to a social agreement that honesty **is** the best policy. We collectively need to accept the pain, the reality, the responsibility, the potential embarrassment, and the consequences of honesty or we face the horror of passing to our children the image of honesty and deception being indistinguishable from each other. If children hear adults lying and those lies not being challenged and sanctioned, they undoubtedly internalize what they observe and start marching down that same deception path.<sup>13</sup> Too soon, unless the young are effectively taught not to lie, we will likely see lying as the lingua franca of our children's time.

We see how deceptive advertising has become;<sup>14</sup> some ads are so outrageous that they are mocked and ridiculed by comedians and by children as well as their parents. Unfortunately, these mockings rarely include serious discussion of how to recognize many advertising strategies as lies; how to avoid being victimized by such deceptive practices; and how to make proper judgments about such lies. Some advertisements are so silly and devoid of credibility that even young children see through them. Yet public outcry is seldom heard. We encounter such ads so frequently that we either accept them as part of media discourse or we falsely come to believe there is nothing that can be done to stop the rampant deception. Infrequent but potent protests of some highly demeaning and deceptive ads have clearly shown that loud, public protests have rapid effects on such offensive ads. If we give up fighting deception, it will win in the galaxy of ideas. We hear lawyers twist the truth for what they claim are noble ends; they convinced one juror panel who witnessed to Rodney King's awful beating on repeated videotape showings that the police acted in a lawful way. One lawyer, in a televised symposium<sup>15</sup> claimed "I will do *anything* to defend my client." The implication clearly was that "anything" included lying if he could get away with it. Rarely do criminal defendants plead guilty to major crimes. Most are guilty, but we expect and accept their innocent pleas; these are technically lies. We hear

politicians lie so often and so egregiously that we don't even seem to notice any more.<sup>16</sup> These are but the tips of the deception iceberg; we face a time in the near future when deception will out number truths if we do not take immediate corrective action. School children know the difference between truth and lies; but their awareness is dulled by the absence of lies being punished, pointed out, and discouraged. Lies seem to increase and they tend, in too many cases, lead to rewards for the deceiver. Teachers have an awesome responsibility not to foster this occurring for their charges.

Our schools and homes are where truth telling and confronting lies need to be initially taught. Parents and teachers hold great sway over children's values, beliefs, and behavior patterns. Too little time and emphasis is placed on truth telling. We need to emphasize honesty, reward its presence, and work hard to decrease its absence. Honesty cannot flourish in silence; we must talk about honesty and deception; its virtues, and its consequences.

We can learn not to lie when we come to value truth. The family, the church, and the school are the places children learn what truth is, why it is valued, and what happens when people lie. If these institutions abrogate their duty to teach truth telling, our social order is doomed. Institutions cater to constituent demands. Churches, schools, political bodies exist due to our support. If we condition our support to their honesty and stick to that demand, honesty's value will rise. When families value and practice honesty, children mature valuing it as well.

#### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Richard L. Johannesen. (2002). *Ethics In Human Communication*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed. Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press, ch. 5 [Situational Perspectives], pp. 77-86.

<sup>2</sup> Arthur J. Schwartz. (2000, June 9). It's Not Too Late To Teach College Students About Values. *Chronicle of Higher Education*, p. A68.

<sup>3</sup> See Johannesen for chapters on each of these ethical [value] facets.

<sup>4</sup> These visits were invited lectures on the author's part.

5. See for example the 1995 testimony of Detective Mark Fuhrman in the O.J. Simpson case as well as the multi/contradicting stories by O.J. relevant to his activities the night of the murders.
6. See William Lutz, Double-Speak, Harper and Row for a discussion of deception's pervasiveness.
7. See Jeanne E. Clark, "Sanctuary Confronts the Court: An Unrepentant Prophet, in Andrew King (Ed.), Postmodern Political Communication: The Fringe Challenges the Center, Praeger for a discussion of institutional deception and of deception by clergy.
8. See any of the wealth of articles, books, or court proceedings relevant to Watergate.
9. See, for example, Michael Parenti, Inventing Reality: The Politics of News Media, 2nd ed. St. Martin's Press for examples of mediated institutional deception [esp. chapter 12].
10. See Kenneth C. Petress, A Decision Under Pressure: The Sentencing of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg, Louisiana State University dissertation, 1988 for examples of individual, group, and institutional scapegoating [esp. chapter 4].
11. See G. Gordon Liddy's testimony in Watergate; see also his talk show transcripts, and reports on campus speeches in the last 20 years for examples of cynicism towards truth.
12. This is a paraphrase of Leon Jaworski's statements in 1975 when he was special prosecutor in the Watergate case.
13. This idea was garnered from a discussion with Rev. Kenneth Phelps, Ph.D. at the University of Maine at Presque Isle, Sept. 1995.
14. See Kathleen Hall Jamiesen and Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, The Interplay of Influence, 3rd ed. Wadsworth for a riveting discussion of advertising deception.
15. Ethics in America. PBS Roundtable discussion series; 1989.
16. See Michael Parenti, Land of Idols, St. Martin's Press for a discussion of political deception [esp. chapters 1 and 12].