

# The Virtue of Lying

Mark Twain

SPEAKING BEFORE AN AUDIENCE, the American writer Samuel Clemens, known as Mark Twain, had this to say:

I do not mean to suggest that the *custom* of lying has suffered any decay or interruption. The Lie, as a Virtue, A Principle, is eternal; the Lie, as a recreation, a solace, a refuge in time of need, the fourth Grace, the tenth Muse, man's best and surest friend, is immortal, and cannot perish from the earth.

My complaint simply concerns the decay of the *art* of lying. Not one of us can contemplate the lumbering and slovenly lying of the present day without grieving to see a noble art so prostituted.

No fact is more firmly established than that lying is a necessity of our circumstances. The deduction that it is then a Virtue goes without saying. No virtue can reach its highest usefulness without careful and diligent cultivation. Therefore, it goes without saying that this one ought to be taught in the public schools—even in the newspapers. What chance has the ignorant uncultivated liar against the educated expert? What chance have I against a lawyer? *Judicious* lying is what the world needs. I sometimes

think it were even better and safer not to lie at all than to lie injudiciously. An awkward, unscientific lie is often as ineffectual as the truth.

Now let us see what the philosophers say. Note that venerable proverb: Children and fools *always* speak the truth. The deduction is plain: adults and wise persons *never* speak it.

Parkman, the historian, says, "The principle of truth may itself be carried into an absurdity." In another place in the same chapters he says, "The saying is old that truth should not be spoken at all times; and those whom a sick conscience worries into habitual violation of the maxim are imbeciles and nuisances."

That is strong language, but true. None of us could *live* with an habitual truth-teller; but thank goodness none of us has to. An habitual truth-teller is simply an impossible creature who does not exist, and never has existed. Of course there are people who *think* they never lie, but it is not so; and this ignorance is one of the very things that shame our so-called civilization. Everybody lies, every day; every hour; awake; asleep; in dreams; in joy; in mourning; in silence. Hands, feet, eyes, attitude—all convey deception.

We are liars, every one. Our mere howdy-do is a lie, because we do not care how you did. To the ordinary inquirer you lie in return; for you make no conscientious diagnostic of your case, but answer at random, and usually miss it considerably. If a stranger calls and interrupts you, you say with your hearty tongue, "I'm glad to see you," and say with your heartier soul, "I wish you were with the cannibals and it was dinner-time." But you did no harm, for you did not deceive anybody nor inflict any hurt, whereas the truth would have made you both unhappy.

I think that all this courteous lying is a sweet and loving art, and should be cultivated. The highest perfection of politeness is only a beautiful edifice, built, from the base to the dome, of graceful and gilded forms of charitable and unselfish lying.

What I bemoan is the growing prevalence of the brutal truth. Let us do what we can to eradicate it. An injurious truth has no merit over an injurious lie. Neither should ever be uttered. Whoever speaks an injurious

truth in fear of damnation for lying, should reflect that that sort of a soul is not strictly worth saving. Whoever tells a lie to help a poor devil out of trouble, is one of whom the angels doubtless say, "Lo, let us exalt this magnanimous liar."

An injurious lie is an uncommendable thing; and so, also, and in the same degree, is an injurious truth. Lying is universal: we *all* do it. Therefore, the wise thing is for us diligently to train ourselves to lie thoughtfully, judiciously; to lie with a good object, and not an evil one; to lie for others' advantage, and not our own; to lie healingly, charitably, humanely, not cruelly, hurtfully, maliciously; to lie gracefully and graciously, not awkwardly and clumsily; to lie firmly, frankly, squarely, with head erect, not haltingly, tortuously, with pusillanimous mien, as being ashamed of our high calling. Then shall we be rid of the rank and pestilent truth that is rotting the land; then shall we be great and good and beautiful, and worthy dwellers in a world where even benign Nature habitually lies, except when she promises execrable weather.

Joking aside, I think there is much need of wise examination into what sorts of lies are best and wholesomest to be indulged, seeing we *must* all lie and we *do* all lie.

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