

# Lies

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In this commentary, I want to take a stab at two important but vexing questions. The questions themselves are straightforward and easy. The answers, which amount to nothing more than my opinions, are initially equally straightforward and easy, but almost immediately their implications morph into something else, becoming twisted and difficult. It's one thing to ask a question and get an answer. It's another thing entirely to know what to do with the answer.

Question #1: *Who lies?*

Answer: ***Everyone.***

I mean that literally, not figuratively. I don't mean some people or even most people. I mean *everyone* — every single human being, all of us. We are all liars. Damn near everything we say is untrustworthy and cannot be taken literally or as gospel. Oh, and by the way, the Gospel itself — you know, the Bible — is lies.

Question #2: *How much of what we see, hear, and read is lies?*

Answer: ***Most of it.***

That's a non-specific answer, of course. I don't have an accurate percentage, like 57% or 83%. I prefer to leave this answer a little vague. But the word *most* has a pretty obvious meaning. The great bulk of what we see, hear, and read is untrue. It's lies — either partial or complete. Lies of omission, usually, but also lies of commission. Sometimes it's truth that's been twisted around to serve some agenda. Often it's a mix of truth and lies in a kind of tasty but toxic stew. On rare occasions, it's just complete and utter bullshit, without even the adornment of any truth at all, not even as a seasoning.

Sure, totally true statements do exist and can be expressed. "*The Moon is not made of green cheese.*" This is true, absolutely and completely. It's just that statements such as that one — simple facts, with no added interpretive layers to muddy the waters — comprise only the tiniest fraction of all the information we communicate and share with each other, including the thoughts inside our own heads that are effectively private and may or may not ever be shared.

Although I've been aware of the prevalence of lies in our culture since I was an adolescent, I didn't start writing about lies until this current 21st century, and,

even more pointedly, not until 2016, when Donald Trump's entry into politics signaled that a sea change long coming in America had finally arrived, namely, that lying — which had always played a significant role in shaping our country's history — had become a dominant theme in our relations with each other and in the ways business is conducted in America.

Earlier, during the 20th century, lies were threads woven throughout our varied interactions in all the many realms of our experience, including the personal, interpersonal, familial, religious, medical, educational, historical, scientific, marketing, military, and governmental. In these realms (and all the others I didn't note), truth danced with lies in ways that made it difficult for us to discern where one stopped and the other began. Yes, some truth got told, but it was often fudged and less than total. Sometimes truth just left the building entirely.

There's a scene we've all watched a thousand times in courtroom dramas on TV and in movies. It's the one where a witness is being sworn in before testifying. A bailiff holds a Bible. The prospective witness puts his or her left hand on the Bible while raising the right hand to take the oath. The bailiff asks, "*In your testimony before this court, do you solemnly swear to tell the Truth, the whole Truth, and nothing but the Truth, so help you God?*" to which the witness always answers, "Yes." Even as a kid back in the 1950s, I knew that was bogus. For one thing, the truth is too slippery. For another, some witnesses clearly intend to lie. And even if they mean to tell the truth, human memory is badly flawed and all too fallible. Still, the oath remained an ideal — a high standard worth aspiring to.

All that changed with the onset of the new century. In fits and starts, but to an ever-increasing extent, we gave up on the truth entirely and settled into getting comfortable with a growing torrent of lies, a tsunami of untruth. Trump was the avatar and poster child for this, but the Donald didn't start it; he just grabbed his surf board and gleefully hopped onto that huge wave as it arrived. He'd been tireless in practicing and perfecting lying for his entire life (remember the birther conspiracy, Trump's endless promotion of Obama's non-citizenship?). Having already established his awesome credentials as a Big League Liar, Trump was completely stoked to join the Liar's Hall of Fame when the time was ripe. In fairness, though, P.T. Barnum was doing the same stuff more than a century before Trump. But then, every salesman, politician, lawyer, doctor, parent, and teacher has always peppered their presentations with lies. This is not new.

We should have known that lies would win out. The famous quote attributed initially to American humorist Mark Twain, but more often to that pugnacious bulldog Winston Churchill, has always applied: "*A Lie can travel halfway 'round the world before the Truth has a chance to get its pants on.*" The fact that we can't find anything even close to that glib assertion in the writings of either of those two famous men is oddly well-suited to the quote.

The problem is that the truth is boring and difficult. Truth needs to be precise, carefully qualified, and limited in scope. Even scientists have trouble with that, and they of all people should know better. All the Big Truths suffer from endless

exceptions. "*We are all One.*" Well, yeah, sort of, but sort of not. Lies, on the other hand, are sexy. They're sloppy, overly general while seeming authoritative, and so well-greased that they're slicker than goose shit. Lies appeal powerfully to human emotions. People like lies. Algorithms love them. [Algorithms are not designed or coded to track peace, harmony, and maturity. What they notice is when we get hot and bothered emotionally and act impulsively on those feelings. Lies are provocative, and they're ideal for algorithmic data-collection and behavior reinforcement.] And so, the rise of social media quickly became the perfect vehicle for accelerating lies to warp speed and disseminating them around the world in an instant.

Lies are viral, and we don't have any effective vaccines to immunize ourselves against them. All that's required for serious vulnerability to infection by lies are emotions and biases, and everybody's got those. Sure, SARS CoV-2 is scary, but surviving that virus is a lot easier than weathering the pandemic of lies we're facing now. And while herd immunity might eventually neutralize COVID-19, there's no herd immunity for lies. Every lie spawns ten others.

Not a week goes by without at least some revelation about how we've been hoodwinked by lies from every direction. This past week it was RussiaGate. How oddly satisfying to learn (or rather, have confirmed) that the whole sorry-ass narrative of massive Russian interference in our elections, as well as Trump's "collusion", was concocted initially by Hillary Clinton's DNC minions. Ah yes, fake news indeed. Well, it just goes to show you that everyone's mistrust of damn near everything is entirely justified.

It's far too easy and seductive to assume that one side of the political spectrum is righteous, correct, and sane, while the other side is corrupt, wrong, and crazy. But that's not the way things are. Regular people on both sides have been led down the primrose path by liars, cheats, and thieves.

Lots of folks are worried as hell about the great divide within the American public and the increasing lack of faith and trust in our institutions. Why is that breakdown happening? Because more and more people agree with me about the answers to the two questions I posed at the beginning of this commentary. Those answers were: Everyone lies, and too much of what is offered as "authoritative information" cannot be trusted.

OK, but then, what is true, where do we turn to find it, and how will we even recognize it? We are so deeply mired in the swamps of illusion and deception (including self-deception), and we've been lost there for so long, that no good answers to those questions are likely to be forthcoming in the foreseeable future.

I'm not suggesting that the truth is gone, but rather that it's been buried under such an immense and steaming load of bullshit that digging it up will take a long, long time. If we're lucky, we may eventually find some of it, but the effort will be accompanied by a distinctly unpleasant smell.