

"Hiding in the Tumbleweeds"
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A few weeks ago I watched a TV news anchor apologize for misrepresenting the facts when he described an experience in Iraq in 2003. As I watched, I recalled events in my own life.

In September of 1958, I entered the second grade as a student at Robert E. Simpson Elementary School in Phoenix, Arizona. The first day of school the teacher told us the schedule, which included a fifteen-minute recess at 10:30 every morning. She explained to us the borders of our playground. To the west, beyond the school property, was a large open field filled with tall weeds, weeds as tall as we were. The teacher warned us not to go off the school grounds during the recess, not to go into the field. This, we were told, was for our own good.

However, I found the playground limited in its opportunities. The school had four classes of second graders, 120 students. Because it was a new school it did not have much in the way of playground equipment. When a new friend told me that he had explored the field and that it was really interesting, I did not hesitate to sneak off the school grounds with him during recess. Soon we were into the tall weeds and we felt like we were invisible. We could still hear the school bell. When it rang the two of us slipped back onto the school grounds and lined up to go back into class. No one had noticed our escape or our return. Having done something different than the other kids, I felt I was special.

When we walked home from school, we had bragged to other boys, describing the field. The next day at recess we headed out again. Other boys decided to join us. So instead of two of us sneaking away into the weeds, there were suddenly six or seven of us. We were standing among the weeds talking when a teacher saw us. "YOU BOYS! GET BACK HERE THIS INSTANT!" she shouted.

My friends plunged for cover in the weeds, but I decided it was better to walk to where the teacher was standing and face the consequences. When I reached the teacher, she yelled again at the other boys and I looked back in the direction of her shout. My friends were all visible through the weeds. The belief that the thick weeds hid us from the view of the teacher was an illusion.

My friends realized that their efforts to hide were not successful and they also came and joined me. We all stood sheepishly while she lectured to us about the dangers of what we were doing, and how disappointed she was in us.

The image that has stayed with me for many years is that moment when I looked back at my friends. They were trying to hide the fact that they had broken the rule and they hoped to avoid punishment. They thought that they were hiding. Nevertheless, everyone, the teacher and the other kids on the playground could see each boy clearly as they struggled to crouch down and hide. What got burned into my brain that day was a simple lesson in moral development. I learned that when I get caught breaking the rules, admitting what I have done is better than it is

to try to hide.

As I read how a TV news anchor blamed his misrepresentation of the facts on a “fog of memory,” I recalled another event in my life that occurred when I was seventeen, I went to a party with some friends and I met an attractive young lady and we struck up a conversation. She went to a completely different school far across town and did not know anyone I knew. I longed for her to talk with me, and I thought it was unlikely that we would ever meet again. Convinced that the real me was boring and uninteresting, I stretched the truth about myself.

I told her that I had been a disk jockey for a radio station at the Junior College where I was taking classes. In truth, I had never been anywhere near the college radio station and I knew absolutely nothing about being a disk jockey. I told her that I had hitchhiked to San Francisco the summer before and lived with hippies in the Haight-Ashbury District. In truth I had never been anywhere near San Francisco. It was all a lie, told to impress. To my surprise, at the end of the evening she gave me her phone number and asked me to call her. A week later I took her to the movies. After that first time together, I resolved not to make up any new lies about myself. However, I was already in trouble.

I had difficulty remembering what I had said, and I began to fear that I would say something now that would be inconsistent with the lie I had already told. I began to fear that when we went to the movies I would run into someone who knew me. They would know I had never been a radio disk jockey or to San Francisco, and would spill the beans. I began to fear that she would ask me questions that, based on my lies, I should be able to answer. A question like: "Where on the campus of the Junior College is the radio station?" I had no idea. My deception began to preoccupy me.

I liked this young woman, but after a few weeks I decided to end the relationship. I could not continue the deception about who I was and I could not face the embarrassment and shame in telling her how I had lied to her. I could not even end the relationship in a straightforward way. I stopped calling her, I did not return her calls and I was distant when she did reach me. After a few days she gave up on me and stopped calling. By my deception I had ruined what was a promising relationship.

At least, I thought, she lives across town and I will never see her again and never be reminded of my foolishness. I ran into her a few months later at Arizona State University and discovered we were attending the same school. We would see each other every three or four months over the next several years as we walked to and from class and we might stop and chat briefly. Each time seeing her reminded me of the lies I had told about myself the first time we had met. I know a mature person would have told her what he had done. However, I was not mature. The best I could do was to vow never to lie about myself to anyone again.

In the first experience on the playground I learned that when I try to deceive, I am likely to get caught. In the second experience I learned that even when I do not get caught, I feel so bad about the deception, the lying ruins any prospect for a healthy long-term relationship.

I have been talking about myself here, but perhaps these stories remind you of events in your

own moral development. Most of us learn through experience that the long term price we pay for deception is not worth the short term gain. We each have in our memories, moments when as children we tried to get what we wanted by deception and discovered that telling the truth was better.

However, as I grow older, I have found that I cannot say that lying is always wrong. I cannot apply the rule "thou will not lie" to all people, everywhere, in all situations.

I think of Bob Anders, my former brother-in-law. Bob lives in Maryland now and he is in his 80s, but for many years he worked for the State Department. Three years ago Hollywood made a movie called ARGO about an event in Bob's life, a movie that won the Academy Award for Best Picture in 2013.

Back in November of 1980 Bob Anders was stationed in the United States Embassy in Tehran. As you recall, Islamic students took over the Embassy and held the America staff at the Embassy prisoners. Bob worked in another building away from the main Embassy and he was able to escape with five others. After hiding in various places, Bob called an old friend, John Sheardown, a Canadian diplomat with whom Bob played tennis. Bob described his predicament. He and some others had been dodging militants for five days unable to find a decent hideout. Could Canada help?

"Why didn't you call sooner?" the Canadian responded.

When Bob explained that five other Americans were also looking for shelter, Sheardown didn't hesitate. "Bring 'em all," he said. They lived with the Canadians for three months until they walked through customs with fake Canadian passports.

In this situation lies were told, not only by Bob and the other Americans, but also by State Department officials, by President Jimmy Carter, and by Canadian officials.

Most people in the United States agree that elected officials can lie to protect hostages. One researcher called these "patriotic lies." Their purpose is to protect our community or our family. Such lies are especially acceptable when they are done to help others, instead of ourselves. I have talked with Unitarian friends in Transylvania. The older people remember the dictatorship of Nicolae Ceausescu. They have personal memories of a time when lying was one of the things parents taught their children. In Romania under Ceausescu leaning to lie was necessary for survival.

Moral theologians call lying to protect oneself or others the "principle of overriding right." The principle of overriding right recognizes that sometimes a more important principle than truth-telling is at stake, such as the need to protect human life.

So I am not a moral absolutist when it comes to lies. With the moral theologians, I believe in the principle of overriding right. I believe that there are times when a more important principle than truth-telling is at stake, such as the need to protect human life. At such times a lie is justified.

A second widely accepted form of lying is called the white lie. Most of us agree that some white lies may be acceptable in preserving harmony between people. How often do we tell these white lies? A study done at the University of Virginia asked 140 people to keep diaries of the lies they told. The study found that these 140 people recorded in their diaries, self-reported, an average of two white lies a day. I believe that small white lies are sometimes appropriate, perhaps two a day, when we mean them to spare embarrassment and maintain family harmony.

However, when it comes to serious lying, most of us are not confronted with a hostage situation. Also, although our government has faults, it is not a totalitarian dictatorship. Therefore, I believe that for us living in Sarasota today, situations where lying is justified are rare.

As a seven-year-old child, I thought I was special. The rules that the other kids followed did not apply to me. So I left the school grounds and explored the field. When we got caught, I walked back to the playground. I looked back at my friends hiding in the tumbleweeds and I could see them through the branches of the weeds. The image has stayed with me. Often when we try to deceive others they can easily see through our deceptions.

By the time I became a teenager, to impress a girl I was attracted to, I made up stories about myself. Afterward I feared the shame and embarrassment of being found out. The memory of this teenage experience has stayed with me. I recall it each time I am tempted to exaggerate my accomplishments.

So whether you are a car salesperson, politician, a religious leader, or a TV news anchor, unless you are living in a totalitarian state, it best to aim for candor. Honesty starts with being ourselves, and feeling that who we are is good enough. This is good for our spiritual and our emotional health.