

The Lies that Blind: The Truth that Sets You Free

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The late, great Joseph Campbell said, “*The privilege of a lifetime is being who you are.*” The journey towards self-discovery is one I’ve experienced myself and witnessed in the lives of myriad executives I’ve coached over several decades.

Most of us like to think of ourselves as truthful, fair and honorable in our business dealings, friendships, and family affairs. We even pride ourselves on it. Sometimes we hold back in order to be diplomatic in business or politics, or to not hurt a loved one’s feelings and damage a relationship beyond repair, and we justify these exceptions accordingly. But experience has taught me that there are other limits to how open we can be with others – and those stem from our capacity to be honest with and about ourselves.

“I’m good at faking it.” ~ Janet Evanovich, *Eleven on Top*

Before assorted epiphanies allowed me to achieve the self awareness that is the foundation of *emotional* intelligence, of which self-honesty is the critical component, I was more in touch only with my *intellectual* intelligence. That and the socio-political values with which I was raised allowed me to get a high-status education, quite a few significant jobs, and participate in social action that served others – all of which I very much wanted to do.

Through my late twenties, I created a polished persona and it worked! I was a classic wounded healer, and while I accomplished a great deal, these masked internal demons were relentlessly driving me with little self-awareness. I acted from fear-based adaptive behavior that had served well as a protective shield from childhood traumas, but that I no longer needed and in fact, were damaging. I was knee-jerk reacting rather than proactively making choices.

The word “no” was not in my vocabulary. But I thought this was just what life was: difficult, filled with more downs than ups, and that *everyone* did what I was doing. I often found myself dealing with people I didn’t like, projects that were beneath my abilities, or other inappropriate situations.

“To thine own self be true” ~ Polonius in *Hamlet*, William Shakespeare

I made the conscious decision in my early thirties to understand who I really was, what I truly wanted, and initiated the ability to assess my genuine talents *and* shortcomings. I learned how to say “no” when it was in my best interest or that of others I cared about and/or wanted to serve. I mustered the courage to “unpeel the onion,” looking deep into my “shadow” self – with trusted and experienced support – facing injuries I’d unconsciously nursed that had impelled me. I started to become a happier, healthier, more honest and, thus, more effective person with others and myself.

I simultaneously discovered that I cannot control anyone else’s behavior but only my reaction to it, and *even* that takes enormous effort. It’s certainly not a one-shot-done act but instead, an ongoing odyssey I’ve been on for three-plus decades and I’m determined to continue for the rest of my life. I’ve finally accepted that it’s not possible to *be* perfect – just to be the best I can be, and to make time to take care of myself as well as serve others.

As the CEO of an international consulting firm and an affiliate of IMD Business School, I design and facilitate executive programs for leadership development, organizational change, strategic planning, stakeholder engagement, improved governance, and other activities that help institutions achieve their goals.

Not surprisingly – because I’m far less wounded and continue to heal myself at ever deeper levels – I can recognize the wounds that others carry when I interact with them in one of these programs and/or as an executive coach. I gently try to help them

consider taking the same type of internal expedition to find their true selves, flaws and all. Obviously, some are more responsive than others.

“Be the change you wish to see in the world” ~ Mahatma Gandhi

I’ve worked with people who hold the highest-level senior positions in enterprises from all sectors – multi-national corporations, heads of state, leaders of global non-profits, etc. I’ve observed that the ones who are able to admit that their organizations are dysfunctional and take the right action to fix them are the ones who are the most personally self-aware and honest. In business, as in all other areas of life, this is what distinguishes a great leader from someone who is simply in charge.

A great leader faces facts; willingly accepts both positive input and criticism from others; is willing and able to change, even take risks; doesn’t feel the need to take credit for everything good or find a scapegoat for everything bad; values stakeholders as much as shareholders; and understands that having power and authority is not the divine right of business kings, but the sublime privilege of those who know how to motivate cooperation, faith, sight of the big picture, and increased effort in others.

She/he knows how to recognize and sincerely praise and/or constructively correct the stakeholders in whom it is worth making an investment, and, clear out the “deadwood,” even when such decisions are difficult. A great leader knows how to manage time and effort; delegate; and inspire participation, unity, flexibility, and respect. He/she knows how to ask for help. A great leader knows how to turn the ship around. A poor leader goes down with the ship – often never knowing why it floundered.

“If you tell the truth you don't have to remember anything” ~ Mark Twain

Another important aspect of knowing who you are and learning how to not lie to yourself – whether the “you” is a person, family or corporation – is the ability to recognize denial when it’s in play and put an end to it. I recently saw a marvelous independent documentary, *Little White Lie* (2014, by Lacey Schwartz and James

Adolphus) that brilliantly illustrates the human capacity to be blind to just about anything – if the desire to hide/deny the truth is strong enough.

The film is about Lacey Schwartz, a young woman born into a loving, white Jewish family in upstate New York. But since childhood, Lacey was troubled by the fact that she was darker than anyone else in her family. She was told it was probably because of her dark-skinned Sicilian great grandfather, and she and the entire immediate and extended family believed this – for years.

But when Lacey was in her teens, her parents divorced, for a number of reasons – not the least of which was that Lacey’s father learned that his wife had had an affair early in their marriage she never told him about. And, it turned out that her lover had been black and Lacey was their biological biracial daughter.

None of the above is a cinematic “spoiler alert,” because all of it is revealed quite early in the film. That’s because what the film is really about is a search for truth and identity, as well as the poison of secrets and lies. Lacey’s story is unique. But many a life (and institution) has been destroyed by denial, by secrets and lies. There’s a saying in 12-Step programs: *“You’re only as sick as your secrets.”* Yes, sick, unhappy, dysfunctional, and a stranger to yourself.

You can convince yourself that the secrets never happened, the lies were never told, and everything is fine. But the truth is that the empty spaces where a secret or lie lives create voids that haunt you as “ghosts” – the dead spirits of truths that cannot find peace because their existence has been denied.

To me, the irony is that they don’t have to be especially big or significant secrets or lies. Just enough to keep you in the dark, where nothing is familiar, everything is frightening, and due to budget cutbacks, the light at the end of the tunnel has been extinguished until further notice.

“It takes strength and courage to admit the truth” ~ Rick Riordan, The Red Pyramid

While it does take enormous courage and strength, admitting the truth – of yourself, your family, your business unit, your company – is ultimately liberating. I’ve discovered this in my own experience and witnessed it in the lives of countless others. So, take that leap of faith and look honestly in the mirror. While you might initially be frightened by what you see, you open the possibility of emerging more whole.

“Above all, don't lie to yourself. The man who lies to himself and listens to his own lie comes to a point that he cannot distinguish the truth within him, or around him, and so loses all respect for himself and for others. And having no respect he ceases to love.” ~ Fyodor Dostoyevsky, The Brothers Karamazov