

Stop Lying to Yourself About Who You Really Are

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Each of us seeks meaning, identity and structure in our lives. With that task comes the pursuit of authenticity in who we really are, as we strive to overcome the labels, aspirations, or projections that others may have for us. Often in life we see ourselves as the well-meaning, subtle lie told by others, or secretly pledged in our own minds over the course of our lives. For example, the phrase “Mom always thought I would be a doctor” turned out to be *her* aspirational statement that influenced the little white lie I told myself about what my career goals might one day become.

A reflective life is about sorting out these questions and challenging the lies we tell ourselves. At times it is our ego that creates the lie. “I am the best at what I do.” Other times, it is the morality or politics driven by our personal beliefs that set the lie. “Climate Change is not man-made because that man on Fox News said otherwise.” Our truths and meaning can sometimes be driven by the identities we seek. The labels we grow comfortable with – conservative, progressive, populist, intellectual – can Velcro a host of lies to our psychological needs to belong, identify or project.

It is human nature to lie to ourselves about others, and indeed, to kid ourselves about who we are. Some carry such internal lies to an extreme. Seinfeld character George Costanza famously said, “My whole life is a lie.” Anyone familiar with his television personality would agree, but how many of us confront our own tendencies to self-misrepresent the truth in our own lives?

Most of the time it seems OK to lie to ourselves. “I am not really that fat”, or “I don’t feel like I act that old”, when indeed we probably are or do. The late comedian George Carlin said, “The reason I talk to myself is because I’m the only one whose answers I accept.” As we try to find the meaning and identity in our lives, we sometimes get stuck in these small lies. In the communities in which we live, we often romanticize or promote the ambiance of our

neighborhoods beyond the realities on the ground. “We are a tight-knit Southern community where everyone knows everyone” may in fact describe more of a regional aspiration for a bygone era than the reality on the ground of a transient and sprawling suburb. American society more often resonates with wishful thinking about our cultural and religious roots as a nation and our past stature in the world than with present-day realities. The assumptions embedded in these false perceptions can influence everything from community property values to national public policy.

As a child, I told myself I was going to be a doctor when I really was a salesman. As a consultant I have believed I was a strategist for my clients, when I was really just a facilitator. I have had clients who thought they were trying to solve one set of problems, when in reality, their challenges and opportunities lay elsewhere. America as a country tells itself – and perhaps believes – we seek international peace, when our policies craft actions and results that promote our national self-interest, not necessarily peace or peaceful means. There is no question that we are capable of lying to ourselves – as individuals, as organizations or as communities or nations.

The real question we are drawn to consider is: “What does it take to confront the lie in our pursuit of our true, authentic self?” The importance of the question underlies the need to be realistic and honest in the rapidly changing and politicized world in which we now live. The political right strongly holds to “moral values” that may no longer be realistic; “principles” so heart-felt by the political left may no longer be achievable without compromise. At the personal level, as leaders, managers, parents or partners we face the same challenge in our families, organizations and self-perceptions.

A simple method to confront these patterns might best be described in the “I Think, I Want, I Need, I Do” exercise once taught to me by an experienced life coach and business consultant. I have come to call the reality check the “Cocktail Napkin” exercise. Simply provide a short answer to complete each sentence started with these words, and do the exercise three times in

rapid succession. For example: “I Think.... I am a good person who cares about my community.” Next, “I Want.... To be seen as a person who cares about their community.” Then, “I Need to act more like a person who cares about their community.” And finally, “I Do.... Not really care or act like I care about my community.” Repeat, finishing the sentences again with new reflection. Complete each sentence on a small piece of paper like a cocktail napkin.

By repeating the exercise two more times, completing each leading sentence starter with a brief answer, we are forced to confront the reality of our thinking in the context of what we really think, want, need and actually do. It is really quite amazing how our answers change and our new perspective addresses how to “Stop Lying to Yourself About Who You Really Are.”

Lying somehow seems part of our essence as humans. Thus, it is important to face up from time to time to who we really are – or have become – that is different from what we wished, thought, or were telling ourselves. In Mark Twain’s short essay, *On the Decay of the Art of Lying*, he wrote: “The lie as a virtue, a principle, is eternal; the lie, as recreation, a solace, a refuge in time of need, the fourth Grace, the tenth Muse, man’s best and surest friend is immortal.” Twain first shared the essay at an 1880 meeting of the Historical and Antiquarian Club in Hartford, Connecticut. His humor not only points out the veracity of this ancient practice, but engages us in learning what we can from the so often unspoken reality of the lie.