

Morality

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It was just another lie. I was in the third grade, talking to a girlfriend in the school hallway. I lied a lot. But this time, for some reason, another me was standing off to the side and watching. I saw myself lying and asked myself why. In this instance the truth would have been just as good, I noticed—there wasn't even any real advantage to me in lying. I don't remember what the lie was about, but that moment is a bright, indelible freeze-frame that marks the beginning of trying not to lie, seeing if I could stick with the truth instead.

My attempts to discover and develop my own morality are rooted in that decision. It wasn't just determining to work at being honest with other people, it was the process that comes before that—looking at myself with all the objectivity I could muster and finding out the truth about myself in the first place.

I believe that some of us (maybe even most of us) have a natural affinity for the truth. We turn our faces toward it the way sunflowers follow the sun across the sky. And it is an inch-by-inch continuous process of attending. If I'm honest about the little everyday things, I gradually shape myself around the truth. It becomes difficult to be anything else. Because I'm out of my element and uncomfortable when I'm lying, I'm prodded to investigate *why* I'm lying.

Maybe there's a good reason. Am I sparing someone's feelings? Honesty can be used as an excuse to be deliberately and gratuitously cruel. Am I justifiably guarding my privacy? I'm slowly learning that I am not bound to expose the details of my life to anyone merely for the asking. I still catch myself spilling way too many beans to people who are not friends and who ask questions only to satisfy their curiosity or gather gossip.

But when I'm reluctant to reveal something about myself, another question elbows its way to the front of the line: Do I just need to expand to accept this truth? Is it merely a human eccentricity, one of the many that make me who I am? Is it a nonconformity to be embraced openly and stood behind? Even if I know a trait or action is a product of a character flaw, can I take it in with compassion or a sense of humor, and then not be squeamish about revealing it to others? (Publicly identifying a mistake serves the purpose of putting extra pressure on me to change.)

I'm always cross-examining myself. I use questions like shovels to dig down to a place that's underneath everything else. That's where I excavated these questions (which are helping me to dig further): Do I have the courage to know the

truth about myself? Do I have the compassion not to be ashamed of the truth even when it *is* unflattering? Can I be respectful and *loyal* enough to myself to tell the truth?

One of my daily experiences while meditating illustrates how crucial self-loyalty is to me. I focus on my lower dan tian—the spot below and behind the navel that the Chinese believe is the main energy source and receiver in the body. (I recognized this place as the origin of my impulses and reactions long before being exposed to T'ai Chi and Chinese teachings, but I know this is not where everyone feels their center is.) While sitting, it's as if I reside in my dan tian and a second, outer-layer me sinks down into that space, encircling and embracing the first me. The image evokes the understanding that I am *with* myself; I can rely on me to love myself, and this love encompasses my whole flawed but struggling-to-be-better self. No matter what. These conjoined me's are at my core.

Ferretting out the truth amounts to burrowing into my center and joining forces with myself. It's the only chance, the only way I have to get to know me. If I don't do this, the separation, the estrangement, the division of my forces stunts my character and keeps me morally weak.

I've known people who don't bother to distinguish between lies and the truth. Expedience is everything. At any given moment, they say whatever enhances their image or prospects. Their instincts for self-knowledge and truth-telling are buried under fear, self-dislike, and loneliness. But I believe even the most inveterate liars and deceivers have a subconscious yearning for their lies to be uncovered, or at least harbor an underlying sense of guilt (and expend a great deal of energy trying to conceal it).

When I hear bedrock personal honesty coming from someone instead of empty, surface-smoothing words, I feel a sense of relief and release. I want to be that way too. It's liberating. Lies are the truth repressed. They stagnate, decay, and poison. Expressing the truth allows the unobstructed circulation of energy into and out of me. This powerful river cleanses and clarifies, nourishes and heals.

Until that epiphany at the age of eight, lying was a habit with me. I'd developed it to protect a shame-filled, self-doubting, wobbly little girl. As I started seeing that more often than not the truth wasn't so bad, I started seeing that *I* wasn't so bad, wasn't any worse than most. That made it easier to tell the truth. It started to snowball. My pervasive sense of inadequacy was evolving into healthy self-criticism.

I was gradually respecting myself more, liking myself better, and seeing this reflected in other people—mostly in positive ways. (Being self-honest doesn't always win friends. I can be a harsh mirror and an unwelcome model for people who aren't cultivating personal honesty.) Because it takes courage to be self-critical, I was

becoming more courageous too. Hand over hand, I was—and am now—pulling myself closer to merging with the sort of person that I admire.

The threads of truth-telling and self-respect are so intricately intertwined that it's hard to tell where one begins and the other leaves off. It's a chicken-and-egg thing—they engender and nourish each other. Together they form the embryo of morality.

Like many of us, I started my life without a sense of self-worth and self-respect. My parents were already emotionally overburdened by the time I arrived on the scene. It was clear that I wasn't welcome. Some people feel that if you are not loved by your parents, you can't love yourself or others; you can't receive love; and this can't be fixed. I think it's true that there's no substitute for growing up in a home where you feel valued as a unique individual and profoundly cherished. But I think I am succeeding, over the years, in handbuilding myself—in spite of (and in reaction to) the assaults launched on me from the outside when I was a child and the monkey-see-monkey-do assaults I have so often launched from within. I'm acquiring love and respect for myself and I'm frequently able to operate out of that reality.

The handbuilding process is a brick-by-brick job. The bricks are all those little day-to-day truths I work up the awareness and courage to tell instead of thinking or saying something more self-serving. They acclimate me to the truth, shape me around it, and gradually form a foundation for being authentic about the bigger, scarier, more intractable issues.

There's a parallel between compensating for the absence of love in my upbringing—handbuilding myself—and coping with my type-1 diabetes. I can't change the fact that, at the age of fifty, an essential part of my body broke and I stopped producing my own insulin. But I can be diligent about monitoring my blood sugar and manually injecting the right amount of insulin at the right time so that I lead a virtually normal life, avoiding the serious side effects that can mount if I don't keep up the day-to-day effort. Injecting insulin is not as exquisitely sensitive and effective as the islet cells would be, but—like handbuilding—it works pretty well.

When it comes to how I act in the world, I just want to always be consulting my moral compass. In most situations, if I take the time to think about it, I can feel that directional pull. I want to align myself again and again with the arrow that's reaching toward the most constructive action.

I try not to mimic destructive behavior, whether it's perpetrated against me or others. I have to consciously exert myself to do the opposite. It is hard work. A common excuse for doing something immoral or unethical is that someone else or "everyone else" is doing it. I could rationalize any atrocity on this basis. Every horrible act that a human can think up has been committed sometime by someone. When I was in my early thirties, I consulted a seventy-year-old man about a personal

dilemma. “You can’t let other people set your standards for you,” was his advice. Those words have come in handy many times.

I try not to retaliate in kind for overt and covert attempts to diminish me or those around me. (But bringing those tactics to light, if I’m quick enough and articulate enough, is almost always a good and appropriate response.) Because I often think envy is the dominant human emotion—that it’s responsible for much of our proclivity toward crushing each other’s spirits—I make a point of recognizing the achievements and contributions of the people around me, even when I am feeling quite envious.

These codes of conduct sprout from my own life experience. Morality has to be homegrown. There’s no place for dogma. Dogma is a thin veneer that can never truly fit whomever it overlays. And when push comes to shove, its inflexibility means that it cracks easily. It breeds hypocrisy, makes liars out of us, and is used as an excuse for hatred and war. Dogma is for lazy people.

That eight-year-old girl who was learning how to observe herself had a very narrow field of vision. As my observational abilities become more acute, the view opens up and I can see more lies and more clever *ways* of lying. It’s humbling. The ideal is to be honest with myself, respect myself, and have compassion and loyalty for myself, so that I treat others with these same qualities because I am *composed* of them. Veering from that behavior is naturally uncomfortable. Awareness and warranted guilt are hard to ignore; they heckle and clamor for redress. I try not to be embarrassed about correcting myself and just do it—whether it’s sooner or later. My morality is an organic thing, a personal work of art under continuous construction.