

STEPHANIE ERICSSON

## The Ways We Lie

*A screenwriter and advertising copywriter, Stephanie Ericsson, born in 1953 and raised in San Francisco, is also an author of self-help books, including Companion through the Darkness: Inner Dialogues on Grief (1993). "The Ways We Lie" originally appeared in the Utne Reader. Consider, as you read, how Ericsson breaks down the activity of lying into the different kinds of lies we tell but also manages to pull together the different sections of her essay to make a larger point about the role lying plays in our lives and our culture.*

The bank called today and I told them my deposit was in the mail, even though I hadn't written a check yet. It'd been a rough day. The baby I'm pregnant with decided to do aerobics on my lungs for two hours, our three-year-old daughter painted the living-room couch with lipstick, the IRS put me on hold for an hour, and I was late to a business meeting because I was tired.

I told my client that traffic had been bad. When my partner came home, his haggard face told me his day hadn't gone any better than mine, so when he asked, "How was your day?" I said, "Oh, fine," knowing that one more straw might break his back. A friend called and wanted to take me to lunch. I said I was busy. Four lies in the course of a day, none of which I felt the least bit guilty about.

We lie. We all do. We exaggerate, we minimize, we avoid confrontation, we spare people's feelings, we conveniently forget, we keep secrets, we justify lying to the big-guy institutions. Like most people, I indulge in small falsehoods and still think of myself as an honest person. Sure I lie, but it doesn't hurt anything. Or does it?

I once tried going a whole week without telling a lie, and it was paralyzing. I discovered that telling the truth all the time is nearly impossible. It means living with some serious consequences: The

bank charges me \$60 in overdraft fees, my partner keels over when I tell him about my travails, my client fires me for telling her I didn't feel like being on time, and my friend takes it personally when I say I'm not hungry. There must be some merit to lying.

But if I justify lying, what makes me any different from slick politicians or the corporate robbers who raided the S&L industry? Saying it's okay to lie one way and not another is hedging. I cannot seem to escape the voice deep inside me that tells me: When someone lies, someone loses.

What far-reaching consequences will I, or others, pay as a result of my lie? Will someone's trust be destroyed? Will someone else pay my penance because I ducked out? We must consider the *meaning of our actions*. Deception, lies, capital crimes, and misdemeanors all carry meanings. Webster's definition of *lie* is specific:

1. a false statement or action especially made with the intent to deceive;
2. anything that gives or is meant to give a false impression.

A definition like this implies that there are many, many ways to tell a lie. Here are just a few.

## THE WHITE LIE

*A man who won't lie to a woman has very little consideration for her feelings.* —BERGEN EVANS

The white lie assumes that the truth will cause more damage than a simple, harmless untruth. Telling a friend he looks great when he looks like hell can be based on a decision that the friend needs a compliment more than a frank opinion. But, in effect, it is the liar deciding what is best for the lied to. Ultimately, it is a vote of no confidence. It is an act of subtle arrogance for anyone to decide what is best for someone else.

Yet not all circumstances are quite so cut-and-dried. Take, for instance, the sergeant in Vietnam who knew one of his men was killed in action but listed him as missing so that the man's family would receive indefinite compensation instead of the lump-sum

pittance the military gives widows and children. His intent was honorable. Yet for twenty years this family kept their hopes alive, unable to move on to a new life.

## FAÇADES

*Et tu, Brute?* — CAESAR

We all put up façades to one degree or another. When I put on a suit to go to ~~see~~ a client, I feel ~~as~~ though I am putting on another face, obeying the expectation that serious businesspeople wear suits rather than sweatpants. But I'm a writer. Normally, I get up, get the kid off to school, and sit at my computer in my pajamas until four in the afternoon. When I answer the phone, the caller thinks I'm wearing a suit (though the UPS man knows better).

But façades can be destructive because they are used to seduce others into an illusion. For instance, I recently realized that a former friend was a liar. He presented himself with all the right looks and the right words and offered lots of new consciousness theories, fabulous books ~~to~~ read, and fascinating insights. Then I did some business with him, and the time came for him to pay me. He turned out to be all talk and no walk. I heard a plethora of reasonable excuses, including in-depth descriptions of the big break around the corner. In six months of work, I saw less than a hundred bucks. When I confronted him, he raised both eyebrows and tried to convince me that I'd heard him wrong, that he'd made no commitment to ~~me~~. A simple investigation into his past revealed ~~a~~ crowded graveyard of disenchanting former friends.

## IGNORING THE PLAIN FACTS

*Well, you must understand that Father Porter is only human.*

— A MASSACHUSETTS PRIEST

In the '60s, the Catholic Church in Massachusetts began hearing complaints that Father James Porter ~~was~~ sexually molesting children. Rather than relieving him of his duties, the ecclesiastical authorities simply moved him from one parish to another be-

tween 1960 and 1967, actually providing him with a fresh supply of unsuspecting families and innocent children to abuse. After treatment in 1967 for pedophilia, he went back to work, this time in Minnesota. The new diocese was aware of Father Porter's obsession with children, but they needed priests and recklessly believed treatment had cured him. More children were abused until he was relieved of his duties a year later. By his own admission, Porter may have abused as many as a hundred children.

Ignoring the facts may not in and of itself be a form of lying, but consider the context of this situation. If a lie is a *false action done with the intent to deceive*, then the Catholic Church's conscious covering for Porter created irreparable consequences. The church became a co-perpetrator with Porter.

## DEFLECTING

*When you have no basis for an argument, abuse the plaintiff.*

—CICERO

I've discovered that I can keep anyone from seeing the true me by being selectively blatant. I set a precedent of being up-front about intimate issues, but I never bring up the things I truly want to hide; I just let people assume I'm revealing everything. It's an effective way of hiding.

Any good liar knows that the way to perpetuate an untruth is to 15 deflect attention from it. When Clarence Thomas exploded with accusations that the Senate hearings were a "high-tech lynching," he simply switched the focus from a highly charged subject to a radioactive subject. Rather than defending himself, he took the offensive and accused the country of racism. It was a brilliant maneuver. Racism is ~~now~~ politically incorrect in official circles—unlike sexual harassment, which still rewards those who can get away with it.

Some of the most skilled defectors are passive-aggressive people who, when accused of inappropriate behavior, refuse to respond to the accusations. This you-don't-exist stance infuriates the accuser, who, understandably, screams something obscene out of frustration. The trap is sprung and the act of deflection successful, because now the passive-aggressive person can indignantly

say, "Who can talk to someone  $\equiv$  unreasonable as you?" The real issue is forgotten and the sins of the original victim become the focus. Feeling guilty of name-calling, the victim is fully tamed and crawls into a hole, ashamed. I have watched this fighting technique work thousands of times in disputes between men and women, and what I've learned is that the real culprit is not necessarily the one who swears the loudest.

## OMISSION

*The cruelest lies are often told in silence.* — R. L. STEVENSON

Omission involves telling most of the truth minus one or two key facts whose absence changes the story completely. You break a pair of glasses that are guaranteed under normal use and get a new pair, without mentioning that the first pair broke during a rowdy game of basketball. Who hasn't tried something like that? But what about omission of information that could make a difference in how a person lives his or her life?

For instance, one day I found out that rabbinical legends tell of another woman in the Garden of Eden before Eve. I was stunned. The omission of the Sumerian goddess Lilith from Genesis—as well as her demonization by ancient misogynists as an embodiment of female evil—felt like spiritual robbery. I felt like I'd just found out my mother was really my stepmother. To take seriously the tradition that Adam  $\equiv$  created out of the same mud  $\equiv$  his equal counterpart, Lilith, redefines all of Judeo-Christian history.

Some renegade Catholic feminists introduced me to a view of Lilith that had been suppressed during the many centuries when this strong goddess was seen only  $\equiv$  a spirit of evil. Lilith was a proud goddess who defied Adam's need to control her; attempted negotiations, and when this failed, said adios and left the Garden of Eden.

This omission of Lilith from the Bible was  $\equiv$  patriarchal strategy to keep women weak. Omitting the strong-woman archetype of Lilith from Western religions and starting the story with Eve the Rib has helped keep Christian and Jewish women believing they were the lesser sex for thousands of years. 20

## STEREOTYPES AND CLICHÉS

*Where opinion does not exist, the status quo becomes stereotyped and all originality is discouraged.* — BERTRAND RUSSELL

Stereotype and cliché serve a purpose as a form of shorthand. Our need for vast amounts of information in nanoseconds has made the stereotype vital to modern communication. Unfortunately, it often shuts down original thinking, giving those hungry for the truth a candy bar of misinformation instead of a balanced meal. The stereotype explains a situation with just enough truth to seem unquestionable.

All the “isms”—racism, sexism, ageism, et al.—are founded on and fueled by the stereotype and the cliché, which are lies of exaggeration, omission, and ignorance. They are always dangerous. They take a single tree and make it a landscape. They destroy curiosity. They close minds and separate people. The single mother on welfare is assumed to be cheating. Any black male could tell you how much of his identity is obliterated daily by stereotypes. Fat people, ugly people, beautiful people, old people, large-breasted women, short men, the mentally ill, and the homeless all could tell you how much more they are like us than we want to think. I once admitted to a group of people that I had a mouth like a truck driver. Much to my surprise, a man stood up and said, “I’m a truck driver, and I never cuss.” Needless to say, I was humbled.

## GROUPTHINK

*Who is more foolish, the child afraid of the dark, or the man afraid of the light?* — MAURICE FREEMAN

Irving Janis, in *Victims of Group Think*, defines this sort of lie as a psychological phenomenon within decision-making groups in which loyalty to the group has become more important than any other value, with the result that dissent and the appraisal of alternatives are suppressed. If you’ve ever worked on a committee or in a corporation, you’ve encountered groupthink. It requires a combination of other forms of lying—ignoring facts, selective memory, omission, and denial, to name a few.

The textbook example of groupthink came on December 7, 1941. From as early as the fall of 1941, the warnings came in, one after another, that Japan was preparing for a massive military operation. The navy command in Hawaii assumed Pearl Harbor was invulnerable—the Japanese weren't stupid enough to attack the United States' most important base. On the other hand, racist stereotypes said the Japanese weren't smart enough to invent a torpedo effective in less than 60 feet of water (the fleet was docked in 30 feet); after all, US technology hadn't been able to do it.

On Friday, December 5, normal weekend leave was granted to all the commanders at Pearl Harbor, even though the Japanese consulate in Hawaii was busy burning papers. Within the tight, good-ole-boy cohesiveness of the US command in Hawaii, the myth of invulnerability stayed well entrenched. No one in the group considered the alternatives. The rest is history. ■

## OUT-AND-OUT LIES

*The only form of lying that is beyond reproach is lying for its own sake. — OSCAR WILDE*

Of all the ways to lie, I like this one the best, probably because I get tired of trying to figure out the real meanings behind things. At least I can trust the bald-faced lie. I once asked my five-year-old nephew, "Who broke the fence?" (I had seen him do it.) He answered, "The murderers." Who could argue?

At least when this sort of lie is told it can be easily confronted. As the person who is lied to, I know where I stand. The bald-faced lie doesn't toy with my perceptions—it argues with them. It doesn't try to refashion reality, it tries to refute it. *Read my lips...* No sleight of hand. No guessing. If this were the only form of lying, there would be no such things as floating anxiety or the adult-children-of-alcoholics movement.

## DISMISSAL

*Pay no attention to that man behind the curtain!*  
*I am the Great Oz!* — THE WIZARD OF OZ

Dismissal is perhaps the slipperiest of all lies. Dismissing feelings, perceptions, or even the raw facts of a situation ranks as a kind of lie that can do as much damage to a person as any other kind of lie.

The roots of many mental disorders can be traced back to the dismissal of reality. Imagine that a person is told from the time she is a tot that her perceptions are inaccurate. "*Mommy, I'm scared.*" "No you're not, darling." "*I don't like that man next door, he makes me feel icky.*" "Johnny, that's a terrible thing to say, of course you like him. You go over there right now and be nice to him."

I've often mused over the idea that madness is actually a sane 30 reaction to an insane world. Psychologist R. D. Laing supports this hypothesis in *Sanity, Madness and the Family*, an account of his investigation into the families of schizophrenics. The common thread that ran through all of the families he studied was a deliberate, staunch dismissal of the patient's perceptions from a very early age. Each of the patients started out with an accurate grasp of reality, which, through meticulous and methodical dismissal, was demolished until the only reality the patient could trust was catatonia.

Dismissal runs the gamut. Mild dismissal can be quite handy for forgiving the foibles of others in our day-to-day lives. Toddlers who have just learned to manipulate their parents' attention sometimes are dismissed out of necessity. Absolute attention from the parents would require so much energy that no one would get to eat dinner. But we must be careful and attentive about how far we take our "necessary" dismissals. Dismissal is a dangerous tool, because it's nothing less than a lie.

## DELUSION

*We lie loudest when we lie to ourselves.* — ERIC HOFFER

I could write the book on this one. Delusion, a cousin of dismissal, is the tendency to see excuses as facts. It's a powerful lying tool because it filters out information that contradicts what we want to believe. Alcoholics who believe that the problems in their lives are legitimate reasons for drinking rather than results of the drinking offer the classic example of deluded thinking. Delusion uses the mind's ability to see things in myriad ways to support what it wants to be the truth.

But delusion is also a survival mechanism we all use. If we were to fully contemplate the consequences of our stockpiles of nuclear weapons or global warming, we could hardly function on a day-to-day level. We don't want to incorporate that much reality into our lives because to do so would be paralyzing.

Delusion acts as ■ adhesive to keep the status quo intact. It shamelessly employs dismissal, omission, and amnesia, among other sorts of lies. Its most cunning defense is that it cannot see itself.

*The liar's punishment [...] is that he cannot believe anyone else.*

— GEORGE BERNARD SHAW

These are only a few of the ways we lie. Or are lied to. As I said 35 earlier, it's not easy to entirely eliminate lies from our lives. No matter how pious we may try to be, we will still embellish, hedge, and omit to lubricate the daily machinery of living. But there is ■ world of difference between telling functional lies and living a lie. Martin Buber once said, "The lie is the spirit committing treason against itself." Our acceptance of lies becomes ■ cultural cancer that eventually shrouds and reorders reality until moral garbage becomes as invisible to us as water is to a fish.

How much do we tolerate before we become sick and tired of being sick and tired? When will we stand up and declare our *right* to trust? When do we stop accepting that the real truth is in the fine print? Whose lips do we read this year when we vote for president? When will we stop being so reticent about making judg-

ments? When do we stop turning over ~~our~~ personal power and responsibility to liars?

Maybe if I don't tell the bank the check's in the mail I'll be less tolerant of the lies told me every day. A country song I once heard said it all for me: "You've got to stand for something or you'll fall for anything."

### *For Discussion and Writing*

1. What are the different kinds of lies Ericsson catalogs?
2. How many kinds of lies does Ericsson describe? How does the number of kinds of lies help her make her larger point about lying?
3. What might Ericsson have to say about what William F. Buckley Jr. describes in "Why Don't We Complain?" (p. 64)?
4. Imagine a day in which you ~~lead~~ told no lies of any kind. Write a narrative telling the story of that day and the consequences of your total honesty.

STEPHANIE ERICSSON  
**The Ways We Lie** (pp. 120–29)

**SUGGESTED APPROACHES**

Unfortunately, given the current state of world affairs, this essay has immediate appeal and relevance, and students will have no difficulty finding contemporary examples of the categories that Stephanie Ericsson enumerates. Investigations surrounding 9/11, the war in Iraq, politics at the local and global levels as well as celebrity gossip are fodder for student writing about different types and modes of lying to oneself and others. To focus more narrowly and encourage student reflection, the teacher might discuss Ericsson's categories through examples of cheating. When is cheating, for instance, merely a "white lie," or what kind of "omission" is there in failing to cite something from the Internet that is not part of an official Web site or publication?

The structure and style of Ericsson's essay is another important topic for analysis. Essentially, she has an introduction and a conclusion with a series of topics in between. Each topic is introduced with a subheading, followed by a quote, defined, and then illustrated with one or more examples. Does this become monotonous? Is it easier to read than a more discursive essay? Furthermore, Ericsson employs a rather breezy style, describing someone who "looks like hell," including phrases such as "all talk and no walk," and referring to the biblical Lilith saying "adios" as she left the Garden of Eden. Such informality speaks to the audience, as do the author's many similes that seem more at-the-ready than original. Students' evaluations of these techniques will inform their ideas about propriety and intended audience.

Finally, it is not out of the question to use an accessible essay such as this one to introduce a much less accessible longer work, such as *Heart of Darkness*, to students. Further suggestions are provided in the Connections section.

**QUESTIONS ON RHETORIC AND STYLE**

1. Why does Ericsson use a similar reference or discussion point to open and close—and thus to frame—her essay? In what ways does this strategy lead to cohesion?
2. Identify examples of informal language in this essay. Is it appropriate and effective or is it distracting?
3. Examine one section where Ericsson defines a type of lying. How would you describe this structure? Examine another selection. Is she repeating or varying the structure?
4. Do any of Ericsson's "types" of lying seem similar to logical fallacies? Which ones? (For instance, is "deflecting" the same as a red herring?)
5. What is the intended purpose of the quotations at the start of each type of lie? Are they meant to be humorous, inspirational, ironic?
6. Ericsson uses her personal experience to illustrate some but not all of her categories of lying. Is her allotment of personal reference effective, or does it fragment the essay?
7. List the sources of Ericsson's examples (such as a business acquaintance, different authors, the Bible, Pearl Harbor). Does this variety help her meaning, or is the range too wide to be effective?
8. Who is Ericsson's audience for this essay? Is her purpose to accuse them, make them think, dare them to stop lying—or something else?
9. How would you describe Ericsson's tone?

Choose 5—Type  
Be complete!

**SIMULATED AP ESSAY QUESTIONS**

1. **Rhetorical Analysis.** Carefully read paragraphs 1 through 9 of "The Ways We Lie." Write an essay analyzing the rhetorical strategies the author uses to achieve her purpose.

## MULTIPLE-CHOICE QUESTIONS

*These multiple-choice questions refer to the entire essay.*

1. Judging from her explanations and examples, it can be inferred that Ericsson believes that people
  - a. are unaware that they lie in many different ways
  - b. do not recognize the difference between "functional lies" and harmful ones
  - c. fail to understand the true consequences of their lying
  - d. have learned to tolerate lying as a necessary part of contemporary life
  - e. lie unintentionally more often than they lie intentionally
2. The sentence "We exaggerate, we minimize, we avoid confrontation, we spare people's feelings, we conveniently forget, we keep secrets, we justify lying to the big-guy institutions" (paragraph 3) is an example of
  - a. a run-on sentence
  - b. a complex sentence
  - c. polysyndeton
  - d. asyndeton
  - e. a cumulative sentence
3. Which of the following outlines the shared structure of "The White Lie" (paragraphs 8 and 9) and "Omission" (paragraphs 18–20)?
  - a. personal experience, explanation of consequences
  - b. definition, explanation of consequences, examples
  - c. definition, personal experience, general examples
  - d. personal experience, explanation of consequences
  - e. explanation of quotation, personal experiences
4. The section "Façades" (paragraphs 10 and 11) includes all of the following EXCEPT
  - a. hyperbole
  - b. metaphor
  - c. personification
  - d. colloquialism
  - e. metonymy
5. What is the rhetorical function of paragraph 36?
  - a. to engage readers by accusing them of wrongdoing
  - b. to summarize each of the types of lying that have been discussed in the essay
  - c. to encourage readers to contrast "functional lives" with "living a lie"
  - d. to repeat the most important points that the author has made in her essay
  - e. to encourage the reader to accept her stated claims
6. Which of the following best describes the tone of this essay?
  - a. didactic and moralistic
  - b. sarcastic and acerbic
  - c. lively and provocative
  - d. nonchalant and informal
  - e. confrontational and instructive