



Stephanie Ericsson

The Ways We Lie

Excerpts from Stephanie Ericsson's works have frequently appeared in such magazines as the Utne Reader. Her books include Companion Through the Darkness: Dialogues on Grief (1993) and Companion into Dawn: Inner Dialogues on Loving (1997). The following essay was composed from notes of the latter text.

Pre-reading Questions

1. Before reading this essay, jot down what you consider to be a lie. How do you or someone you know justify lying? Is a lie ever preferable to the truth? When? Where? Explain.
2. Make a list of all the "little lies" people use throughout their daily lives—such as "I'm busy for lunch" or "I love your hair"—in order to avoid conflicts or confrontations.

- 1 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.
- 2 I told my client the 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.
- 3 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 myself in small falsehoods and still think of myself as an honest person. Sure I lie, but it doesn't hurt anything. Or does it?

4 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 travels, 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 am not hungry. There must be some merit to lying.

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

6 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 a 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.*

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

8 **The White Lie:** 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.

9 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.

10 **Facades:** We all put up facades 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).

11 But facades can be dangerous 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 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 disenchanted former friends.

12 **Ignoring the Plain Facts:** 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 between 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.

13 Ignoring the facts may not in and of itself be a form of lying, but consider the context of the 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 perpetrator with Porter.

14 **Deflecting:** 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.

15 Any good liar knows that the way to perpetuate an untruth is to 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.

16 Some of the most skillful deflectors 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 as 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.

17 **Omission:** 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 the omission of information that could make a difference in how a person lives his or her life?

18 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 step-mother. To take seriously the tradition that Adam was created out of the same mud as his equal counterpart, Lilith, redefines all of Judeo-Christian history.

19 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 as 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.

20 This omission of Lilith from the Bible was a patriarchal strategy to keep women weak. Omitting the strong-women archetype of Lilith from Western religions and starting the story

with Eve the Rib helped keep Christian and Jewish women believing they were the lesser sex for thousands of years.

- ²¹ **Stereotypes and Clichés:** 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.

²² **Groupthink:** 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—ignorance of facts, selective memory, omission, and denial, to name a few.

²³ 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, U.S. technology hadn’t been able to do it.

²⁴ 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 U.S. command in Hawaii, the myth of invulnerability stayed well entrenched. No one in the group considered the alternatives. The rest is history.

²⁵ **Out-and-Out Lies:** Of all the ways to lie, I like this one the best, probably because I got 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?

²⁶ 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 thing as floating anxiety or the adult-children of alcoholics movement.

²⁷ **Dismissal:** 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.

²⁸ 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: “*Mommie, 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.”

²⁹ I’ve often mused over the idea that madness is actually a sane reaction to an insane world. Psychologist R. D. Laing supports this hypothesis in *Sanity, Madness & 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.

³⁰ 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.

- 31 **Delusion:** I could write a 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 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.
- 32 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.
- 33 Delusion works as an 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.
- 34 These are only a few of the ways we lie. Or are lied to. As I said earlier, it's not easy to entirely eliminate lies in our daily 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 a 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 a cultural cancer that eventually shrouds and reorders reality until moral garbage becomes as invisible to us as water is to a fish.
- 35 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 judgments? When do we stop turning over our personal power and responsibility to liars?
- 36 Maybe if I don't tell the bank the checks 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."

Post-reading Questions

Content

1. According to Ericsson, what are the kinds of lies we all tell?

2. What does Ericsson assume about the "white lie"?
3. Why are facades destructive?
4. Why does she say, "Of all the ways to lie I like this one [the out-and-out lie] the best . . . "?
5. What is the author's definition of delusion?

Strategies and Structures

1. What is the purpose of Ericsson's anecdote at the beginning of the essay?
2. Ericsson divides lies into several categories. In what way do her topic sentences frame her discussion of each type of lie? How does she illustrate the different categories of lies that she has devised?
3. There are three major parts to this essay. Identify them and explain their strategic purposes.
4. An author oftentimes uses a rhetorical question when he or she wishes to present an idea for consideration with no intention of receiving an answer from the readers. What are some of the rhetorical questions Ericsson uses in this essay, and how does she answer them?

Language and Vocabulary

1. Vocabulary: *haggard, pittance, facade, plethora, dioceses, perpetuate, harassment, Sumerian, Genesis, renegade, negotiations, patriarchal, psychological phenomenon, adhesive, staunch, amnesia, embellish, gamut*. Oftentimes when we write, word choices can indicate or suggest meaning or meanings beyond their literal definition. Go through the list of words above and show how the words you selected go beyond the dictionary meaning. Explain how these words give additional insight that just a dictionary could not provide.
2. Write a definition of each of the lies that Ericsson presents in this essay without referring back to the essay or to a dictionary or thesaurus.

Group Activities

1. In small groups, brainstorm your own categories of lies and then provide examples of each type of lie you come up with.

2. Divide into pairs and write a brief skit—a dialogue between two people dramatizing some “common lies” that people tell on a daily basis. Draw on personal experience and readings for additional material. Finally, after you present your skit to the rest of the class and get feedback from your classmates, write a collaborative paper with your partner analyzing the nature and effects of telling extemporaneous or premeditated lies. (You may have ended up using both in your sketch!)

Writing Activities

1. Have you ever been a victim of a lie of “delusion” at school, at work, or at home? What occurred? How did you come to terms with the lie? Write a short essay in which you reflect back and examine your experience. Use specific examples to illustrate how and why lies of “delusion” have been harmful to you.
2. Write an essay in which you offer your own categories of lies, providing examples to support your thesis. Use Group Activity 1 to generate ideas. You may wish to construct your paper much like Ericson’s with a definite introduction, the body consisting of your lies and an analysis of the lies you have categorized, and a conclusion wherein you reach some insight into the entire nature of lying.

Additional Topics and Issues for Illustration and Example Essays

1. Painters or sketchers often are called illustrators. Find a painting or drawing, either in a museum or a book, and in an essay describe what the artist is attempting to illustrate.
2. Attend a meeting of the student government body on your campus or a city council meeting where you live and, through illustration and example, write a composition showing what issues were discussed and how they were resolved. Show how the interactions among the members of the council contributed to the resolutions.
3. Illustrate what it is like (or what you believe it would be like) to work in a fast-food restaurant. Remember your ob-

- jective: You want to paint a vivid picture using words so your reader will be able to visualize what you are saying.
4. More and more frequently, people do not want to go out at night since they are afraid of being attacked. To what extent is this fear justified? Using examples and observations drawn from personal experience, develop a thesis supporting your point of view on this issue.
5. Illustrate the differences between what we refer to as “civilized” societies and those which are “underdeveloped” or “primitive.” In order to avoid stereotyping, support every general point with at least two specific examples.
6. Construct an essay wherein you illustrate the benefits of using animals, instead of humans, to test the effects of new drugs, wonder cures, and cosmetics. If you believe such a practice is inhumane, illustrate the negative side of this issue. Make sure you illustrate what you believe using specific examples; do not just tell your reader what you think.
7. Construct a paper illustrating and exemplifying the reasons one should pursue higher education, a corporate management position, or a political office. Be sure to supply readers with plenty of representative examples that demonstrate and support each discussion point.
8. Providing illustrations and examples drawn from personal experiences, observations, and readings, write an essay demonstrating how human beings can be insensitive and indifferent to the wants and needs of others. A variation of this same assignment might be to show how most people are compassionate and caring rather than cold and indifferent.
9. Illustrate what people can do to help stop the extinction of plants and animals by showing what will come about in the absence of them. If need be, do some research on the internet, or at your college library. To add greater authority to your essay, be sure to cite reputable sources of information, using parenthetical footnotes, as well as a list of Works Cited, see the end of Mark Charles Fissell’s essay, “Online Learning and Student Success” pp. 445.
10. Write an essay in which you illustrate the realities—both good and bad—of the mall culture, freeway culture, hip-hop culture, and so on. Provide a wide variety of examples, followed by an analysis to thoroughly explain each subpoint of your thesis.