Lies: Essays by readers

Readers Write in the February 3, 2016 issue

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In response to our request for essays on lies, we received many compelling reflections. Below is a selection. This series is supported by a grant from the Frederick Buechner Center, which celebrates the work and concerns of the essayist, novelist, and pastor. The next topics for reader submissions are ***feast*** *and* ***power****.*

I started learning how to play the accordion when I was nine years old. For two months my parents drove me to my lessons. Then they decided I could get to the music school on my own. Their decision was the perfect setup for my agenda.

Every week I took a 25th Street bus to the West Side market, transferred to a Lorain Avenue trolley bus, got off at West 110th, crossed the street, ran up the stairs next to the greasy-smelling donut shop to the Lorain Accordion School, fumbled through the latest lesson, and scooted down the stairs and across the street to the gigantic Woolworth store. There one thin dime bought me a marvelous, flexible, plastic toy

soldier to add to my growing collection. Mission accomplished, prize in hand, I took my trolley and bus route home.

My perfect setup didn't last long. My mother started to figure out—from the sound of the music I was making—that something besides lessons was making me enthusiastic about my Friday afternoons. There was a confrontation with no preliminaries. Mom got right to the main event.

"If you want to take lessons, fine. If you want to buy toy soldiers, we're not going to pay for lessons. Now, which do you really go for?" she asked.

"For the lessons," I lied.

Yes, it was a lie. But it's a lie that I've never regretted, because later the music lessons were infinitely more important to me. They opened up worlds to me: people I would have never met, places I would never have visited, and working with or writing for world-class musicians. More important, I entered a new world of hearing, and perceiving, and self-expression, and, above all, a chance to create and get a sense of creation out of which all notes come.

John Corrado
Clinton Township, Michigan

The box in the trash said "pizza roll." So why did my teenage foster daughter tell me that she'd had rice and beans for dinner? When I picked up her jacket, quarters fell out of her pocket. How had she paid for bus fare to get home from school? The questions began to pile up.

I learned that my foster daughter was a compulsive liar. She was telling lies to gain power from me, a person in a position of authority. Lying was related to issues of low self-esteem; it helped her feel more in control.

We didn't last as a family. The story is complicated, but one piece is that it's appropriate for teenagers to pull away from their adult caregivers in adolescence. We were trying to build a family from scratch during this tumultuous time.

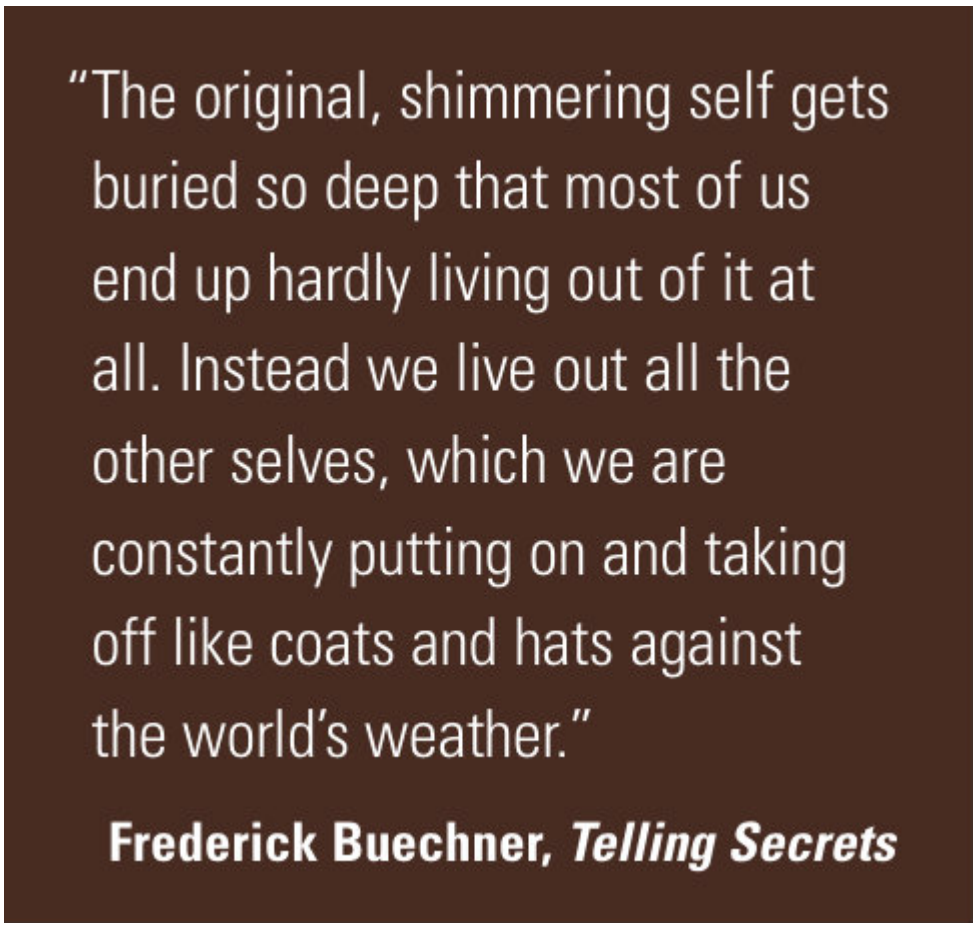
But I still wonder about the lie that *I* told *her,* the lie that my family would always be her family and my home her home. It came from a place of love, but life didn't follow

the plan that I was using.

Ten years later she called me, and we caught up on each other's lives. Some dreams had come true for both of us. I am married now. She's become a mom.

She wanted to know if I was disappointed in her or angry with her, and I said no, I have only love for her in my heart. I'm proud of her for making good decisions that hold her family together. I told her that I think about her when certain songs come on the radio and still have boxes of photos of her. She said she thinks of me when she goes by my church, and I told her to stop in anytime. We didn't talk after that. The truth can be hard to believe and receive.

Renée Wilson
Chicago, Illinois



When I was young my mother would slap my face whenever I expressed a strong feeling. When I was six years old, I decided to hold my breath until I died. My mother opened the bathroom door and there I was—red-faced, cheeks expanded, and holding my breath for all I was worth. She slapped me across the face and said I was too emotional.

At my seventh birthday party one gift I opened was a baseball mitt from my parents. I was so excited I spilled my grape Kool-Aid on the dining room table.

“I told you not to get so excited,” she said, and slapped me.

When I was eight, I scraped my knee and came home crying. “Big boys don’t cry,” she said. “Stop those tears now.” I turned them off like I’d turn off water from a faucet.

As the years passed I managed to do well in school and make some neighborhood friends. I was a good boy, and my mother’s slaps, smacks, and screeching occurred less often. But her words were engraved on my mind and heart.

Fifteen years later I was a student chaplain at Billings Hospital in Chicago, doing clinical pastoral education. I had just lost my first patient, a 16-year-old who died of heart disease. He was only eight years younger than me. As the chaplains processed “my” death as a group, someone asked me how I felt. I looked at him with a blank stare.

My female supervisor suggested I yell into a pillow.

“Why?” I asked.

“Just trust me and try it out,” she said.

So I did. She encouraged me to yell louder and louder. I yelled until I was screaming into the pillow, exhausted.

After a lot of introspection, emotional experiences, therapy, and support from my wife, I’ve discovered the lie behind my mother’s actions. I am not so emotional or too emotional. I am a man who is in touch with his feelings of being mad, glad, sad, and scared. When something comes to the surface now, I check in with my body to

see what emotion needs to be processed or expressed. I have a choice. I can live a lie or feel my feelings.

As one CPE student told me, “You are a Cadillac of feelings in a Volkswagen body.”

Richard Vantrease
Sarasota, Florida

It was 2:30 a.m. and I had just dozed off. Suddenly I heard a knock at the fellowship hall door of the church. The police officer asked if everything was OK, and I responded as usual: “Yes, officer, we’ve having our usual prayer vigil.” I’ve told more than one lie in my life, but this is by far the best one.

As a volunteer for the Divine Intervention Ministry at Tippecanoe Presbyterian Church in Milwaukee, I’ve gotten to know some wonderful people. Each night Earl painstakingly rolls the perfect cigarette and puts it behind his ear, patiently waiting for the designated ten minutes of outside smoking time at 11 p.m. Though Patty’s life has brought a series of disasters, she never loses hope that “things will get better tomorrow.” Sid fastidiously and cheerfully cleans the small bathrooms every hour on the hour. I am profoundly affected and transformed by these “street people” whose resilience, resourcefulness, and hope puts me, a retired white suburbanite, to shame.

When confronted with the “problem” of homeless people in her church’s neighborhood, Pastor Karen Hagen and her church refused to be daunted. They responded by developing a nightly “prayer vigil”—they would provide a warm, safe place for people to stay during the cold Milwaukee nights, but since there was no way this small church facility could meet the city code, they’d call the shelter an all-night prayer vigil, one that is now greatly appreciated by the local police and neighbors as well as those who take advantage of the shelter.

The genius of the ministry is that the guests have the major role in managing their program. I’ve witnessed the amazing transformation of seemingly helpless people into competent managers of their own situation. They turn away people who are intoxicated or otherwise unable to cooperate. They determine the timing of smoking breaks. They keep the church clean. They “have each other’s backs” as a community. I think this is what Jesus had in mind when he called together the most

unlikely people to be his disciples and support community—in other words, *church*.

I've been ashamed of some of the lies I've told. But I have been proud to tell a police officer in the early morning hours, "We're having our usual prayer vigil."

Howard Bowman
Oconomowac, Wisconsin

I was ten minutes late to meet my husband because of a phone call, but as I got into the car, several other reasons for my tardiness popped into my head: there was road construction, I was responding to a neighbor in need, the cat got out the door and I had to chase it. These reasons all sounded better than the real reason.

I was startled by my determination to find excuses, but the little untruths remade my delay into something that was beyond my responsibility and control. It wasn't me, I imagined for a moment, but the mysterious workings of the universe that got in the way of being on time.

I had no plans to use these little lies, but they were there, pinching the cheeks of reality just enough to give it a rosy glow. It wasn't the first time these lies had slipped into my thoughts, and it won't be the last.

Told or untold, such lies bend reality just enough to obscure a part of me I don't want to claim or explain: impatience (I'd love to stay, but . . .), peevishness (Of course I don't mind . . .), insincerity (Isn't that a beautiful dress/painting/haircut . . .), ignorance (Sure, I've read that book/seen that movie/remember you), or just inconsiderate behavior (Sorry I'm late: traffic). Lies construct a lovely facade that covers my shortcomings and selfish behavior—they are a kind of plastic surgery for my flawed character.

They shine a black light on the fear that this world and my life within it aren't good enough or holy enough as is. Honestly, that's the biggest whopper there is.

Johnna Fredrickson
Wareham, Massachusetts

When a colleague and I were invited to be part of a former student's installation service, we agreed enthusiastically and traveled together to his town. Joe had many family members coming to the service, so we were surprised when he told us that we were all going to eat out that evening. I wondered how 19 of us were going to get in and out of a restaurant in time for church. I suggested that my colleague and I go ahead to the restaurant and put our name on the waiting list.

The restaurant was packed. I wiggled through the crowd to the front of the line and found an Amish man standing behind an old pulpit. Next to him was a hand-carved sign: "Please do not give your name until everyone in your party is present."

I understood the reason for the restaurant's policy, but I also knew that it would take a long time for a table for 19 to be ready. I said, "Yes, the name is Graves, party of 19." The Amish man with his beard and hat looked at me and said, "And is your whole party present?" Haltingly I said, "Yes." OK, I lied. But it wasn't as if I were trying to beat the system. After all, even the smaller parties were waiting for 30 minutes, so we'd be putting in our waiting time too. No big deal.

But my colleague disagreed. "You lied to the Amish?" he said. "You shouldn't lie to the Amish."

"By the time they call our name," I said, "Joe and his family will be here." Two minutes later came the announcement: "Graves, party of 19." I went back to the Amish man and said, "Yes, the Graves party—well, uh, we're not all here yet." I was nervous now, and I may have giggled a little. The man looked me in the eyes and asked, "Did you lie?" Dead silence. It was as if we were in church. The people immediately around us waited, wide-eyed and wondering.

I replied softly, "Yes, I lied." "Come with me," he said. I couldn't imagine what he was going to do. What kind of punishment do the Amish hand out to liars? I pictured stocks or caning. We followed him through the restaurant to the back, where he opened the door to a banquet room. A huge table was set with bread and jams. He offered a gentle smile. "Have some bread. You are forgiven."

Mike Graves
Kansas City, Missouri

It was 1960 at Melbourne Heights Elementary School in Louisville, Kentucky, and Miss Grote (pronounced “Groaty”) was telling us second-graders a Bible story. She could do that in a Kentucky public school in the 1950s and early ’60s. Miss Grote liked scary stories, like the one about Lot’s wife being suddenly reduced to a pillar of salt. Really? Just for looking back? The story haunted me because I knew that I would have looked back: in regret, in fear, or out of curiosity.

Miss Grote’s Bible stories shocked and frightened me. I did not grow up in a churchgoing household, so I had no church family to mediate these stories for me. My parents told me that I started developing migraine headaches in the second grade. I also began to pray. Miss Grote had told us the story of a child who went to bed without saying his prayers. In the morning his parents found a pile of dust where his body had been.

When second grade ended, Miss Grote lost her power over me, and eventually so did the stories. I forgot to pray one night, and nothing happened.

Many years later I started to read the Bible for myself. The scary stories were still there, but so were many wonderful stories. I saw Jesus sitting on a sunlit hillside telling stories of divine love and mercy. I saw a starved, bedraggled, and disobedient son welcomed into his father’s arms. I heard children called “great” in the kingdom of heaven. I heard Christ say, “Do not be afraid,” and I heard God referred to as a tenderhearted parent.

I began to see that the relationship between God and human beings was something other than that of a tyrant and his cowering subjects. God was nothing like Miss Grote.

I was released from the lie. Now I can read all the stories of the Bible, the harsh ones as well as the comforting ones, in this greater context. And of course I still see Lot’s wife turning her head for one last glimpse of home, then dissolving into sharp, salt tears.

Lisa Kenkeremath
Falls Church, Virginia

I’ve always been a rule follower, so when my new baby’s doctors and nurses told me to write down the time of every feeding and every wet or smelly diaper, I did. For the next 30 days I carried my spiral notebook and pen with me throughout the house.

I began to worry. Had I nursed my baby long enough? She was hungry again—I probably hadn’t given her enough to eat! I shouldn’t have had a cup of coffee—now I couldn’t nurse. I was holding her too much; I wasn’t holding her enough. I couldn’t leave the house with her—what if she got sick? I should leave the house with her and expose her to the outside world so she wouldn’t become allergic to it for the rest of her life . . . or should I?

The lies of perfectionism crept into my professional life when I returned to work as a minister. You can’t do both of these jobs, a voice said. You have to do both, another voice responded. Your child is getting too much attention from you, one voice said. Another responded: the church is getting the attention that your daughter needs.

Much of what was going on was postpartum depression—I was in a life-changing experience that I needed to wade through carefully. But meanwhile the lies of perfectionism, delivered through postpartum hormones, kept me from going through a single day without crying.

When a friend called to check on me, I broke down. My friend told me to sit down. Then she said slowly and deliberately, “You. Are. Not. Perfect.” In that moment, I felt the lies cry out in defeat, just as Voldemort cried out in pain when Harry Potter destroyed a Horcrux. Then she said: “The gospel is not dependent upon you, but you are dependent upon the gospel.”

I won’t say I never feel shame, despair, or the pangs of perfectionism these days. But the air is a little lighter. By learning how to stop giving the lies of perfectionism a voice, I keep the lies at bay. These days I’m dependent instead on the gospel. The rules that I follow are written with grace.

Anne Ross Bruce
Glasgow, Kentucky

In my teenage years my mother was drunk more nights than she was sober. When my dad, my brother, or I confronted her about her drinking, she’d deny having had a

drink, even though her slurred speech and stumbling gave her away. We'd perpetuate the family lie by saying, "Oh, it's really not that bad" or "Maybe she'll be better tomorrow." I guess we were protecting Mom or hiding our painful embarrassment—probably both.

But there was a more sinister and demonic lie. My mother suffered from low self-esteem and criticized others relentlessly. She spared no one her wrath. One of her favorite targets was my dad's sister, who, according to my mother, was either a witch or a bitch. As a result our relationships with my aunt and uncle and our cousins were strained. We didn't socialize with them. We didn't share holidays. And for many years I believed that my aunt was the problem.

I became a Presbyterian pastor, so when my aunt died of cancer, her children invited me to participate in her funeral service. To help me prepare, they sent me an envelope overflowing with sympathy letters. What I read amazed me! My aunt had been the wife of a U.S. Navy captain and had taken a loving, motherly interest in the younger officers and their wives. She'd also been a devoted spouse, a caring mother, an elder in her church, and a volunteer in many charitable organizations. She was a remarkable and gracious woman.

As I stood with her husband and four daughters at the cemetery, a single thought kept running through my mind: "Ignoring God's commandments, we violate the image of God in others and ourselves, and accept lies as truth."

Those words are part of the Presbyterians' "A Brief Statement of Faith," and I'd spoken them so often that they'd become part of the fabric of my faith. Now these words came back to me with the force of Nathan's words when he confronted King David about his adultery.

"We accept lies as truth." That's what I'd done, due at least in part to the dysfunctional alcoholic family in which I grew up. For far too long I had a distorted view of the truth about my aunt, who lived a beautiful, grace-filled life.

By telling the truth now, perhaps I can find healing for the family disease of alcoholism.

Albert G. Butzer III
Norfolk, Virginia

At one time in my life I believed that making a lot of money was the key to a good life. I fully committed myself to the deception. I worked day and night, seven days a week, in the insurance business, and yes, I won sales awards and made a lot of money. But in the process I neglected my family, my health, and my soul.

Late one night I came home from another long day of work. As was often the case, my wife and young son were already asleep. I rarely saw them in those days. I was too wired up to sleep, so I turned on the TV and watched a late-night classic movie—*Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, based on the play by Tennessee Williams.

It's the story of "Big Daddy," a rich and powerful man who had all the things money could buy: a big southern mansion, 28,000 acres of fertile farmland, and millions of dollars in stocks and bonds. He also had an alcoholic son, colon cancer, and the certainty of death in the near future.

At the end of the movie Big Daddy and his son are in the basement of his mansion. For one brief moment I saw Big Daddy's masks of power and wealth stripped away, and I realized that he wasn't wealthy at all. He had a shallow relationship with his wife. He was estranged from his son, and his daughter's only concern was getting a share of his estate. He had no significant relationships; he didn't even know the names of his servants. He knew no love, no purpose in life, no faith, and no meaning.

It was a powerful moment for me. I realized that if I continued on my present course, I would end up just like Big Daddy, rich in material things but bankrupt in things that really matter. God used that movie, along with several other experiences, to say, "You are chasing after the wrong dream. Money is not what matters most." Soon afterward I quit my job, went to seminary, and began my vocation as a minister. I've never regretted the decision.

Martin Thielen
Cookeville, Tennessee