



MOOD: 🧐 thoughtful



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 **tacit**

<https://tacit.livejournal.com/>

2004-04-20 17:31:00

## Some thoughts on truth and virtue

*"When in doubt, tell the truth."*

-- Mark Twain

Some time ago, I was embroiled in a bit of a sticky situation between some friends of mine and some other friends of mine. The first friends had asked me, unbidden, if I knew something about the situation of the second friend; the second friend and I had talked about this very thing just days earlier; so I told the first friends what the second friend had said. As it turns out, the second friend had, for whatever reason, lied to the first friends about that very thing, and the lie was thus revealed.

Now, second friend probably had personal reasons for the deception; it was a messy situation, and second friend was having a lot of problems at the time. Nevertheless, the landmine blew up on me, even though second friend's problems were NMB--Not My Baggage.

But I didn't come here to talk about that. I came here to talk about courage.

I've generally held a zero-tolerance policy toward people who aren't honest with me or with those around me. I've walked away from a few friendships because the friend in question is dishonest, or shows a pattern of dishonest or untrustworthy behavior.

Yet, at the same time, I don't always believe that honesty *of and by itself* is a moral virtue. I believe there are times when it is acceptable to lie, and even times when it is unethical *not* to lie. (Trivial example: It's 1930, Berlin, you're hiding a family of Jewish refugees in your basement, the Gestapo knocks on the door and asks if you know the whereabouts of any Jews.)

So it's not the lie itself that has the moral value; it's the context. Given that, then when, exactly, is it acceptable to lie? What ruler can you use to measure the ethical value of a lie?

I've been spending a great deal of time thinking about that, and I've had something of an epiphany.

It's not actually a lie, *per se*, that ticks me off. It's what the lie *represents*. And specifically, it's what the lie reveals about the liar's courage.

Courage *is* a virtue. In the hypothetical case of a person hiding a family of Jews from the Gestapo, it requires greater courage to lie than it does to tell the truth. The lie is an act by which the person hiding those refugees stands by his principles--that wholesale genocide is wrong.

In thousands of ways great and small, everyone's courage and dedication to the things they claim to believe in are tested, all the time. In the case of the situation involving my friends, telling the truth would have required the greater courage; the situation was messy, and standing up to that mess unflinchingly might have jeopardized the beginning of a romantic relationship. Few things are more fragile than a brand-

new relationship in its earliest stages; I can appreciate why someone might lie in an attempt, however misguided, to protect such a thing, though it's a short-term and flawed strategy at best.

Regardless, the lie betrayed a certain lack of courage, and it's that which destroyed all chance of a continuing friendship between that person and I. A person who lacks courage can't be counted on when things are difficult. Anyone can be honest and act with integrity when it's easy; it's the way people behave when things are hard that really matters, and it's whether you can count on someone when things are hard that is the true measure of a person. Courage is a cardinal virtue; a person who has courage can be trusted, can be relied on.

Courage is rare precisely because it is difficult. When it comes right down to it, it's altogether easy to act without courage; and whichever way one chooses--courage or cowardice--tends, over time, to become a *habit*.

All this was brogught back to mind recently, when I perused my journal and discovered [this post](#)

 What, I wonder, does it reveal about the poster's character?

TAGS: [philosophy](#), [relationships](#)

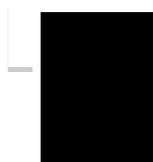


22 comments

   
[April 20 2004, 15:03:33 UTC](#)  CHECK [COLLAPSE](#)

It reveals that the poster is likely afraid, and is dealing with zir fear through name-calling of others to gain the supposedly higher ground.

Either that, or they're an asshole. ;^)

   
[April 20 2004, 15:04:41 UTC](#)  CHECK [COLLAPSE](#)

Oh, and I forgot to say that the whole post in general really rocks. Great stuff, and probably worth including in some form on your website. Mind if I link to it?

  [tacit](#)  
[April 24 2004, 08:55:15 UTC](#)  CHECK [COLLAPSE](#)

Not at all! :)

 [Hey, Asshole!](#)  
  
[April 20 2004, 15:32:50 UTC](#)  CHECK [COLLAPSE](#)

I think all of us who would rather be called an asshole and speak our minds ought to just recalim that word the way serious women took back "bitch" and the way some of us have decided that "slut" is a compliment.

Of course that means only your friends who get it are allowed to call you that. As in:

██████: "Hi, Asshole! :-)"

Franklin: "Hi, Bitch! I hear you're quite the slut!"

██████: "Why, thank you! You too!"

& Franklin: {Hugs}

Love you!

██████, your bitch

 **Re: Hey, Asshole!**  
 ████████  
April 20 2004, 16:01:54 UTC  CHECK [COLLAPSE](#)

That is, I believe, the entire premise behind Heartless-Bitches.com. :)

Strangely,  ████████ has mostly heard "dork" as an insult, whereas I think of it as a term of affection and endearment. I'm helping her see the word from my point of view, hurrah!

 **Re: Hey, Asshole!**  
 tacit  
April 24 2004, 08:58:12 UTC  CHECK [COLLAPSE](#)

Well, yanno, "dork" *is* Yiddish for "penis..."

 **Re: Hey, Asshole!**  
 tacit  
April 24 2004, 08:57:03 UTC  CHECK [COLLAPSE](#)

My word, I just love when you talk all sexy like that...I generally prefer "whore" to "slut," though, as I like the connotations of hard work and industriousness. :)

*Deleted comment*

  tacit  
April 24 2004, 09:00:15 UTC  CHECK [COLLAPSE](#)

When courage becomes a habit, it's still courage. In fact, I believe that courage *and* cowardice can both become habits, and that if you keep any habit for long enough, it becomes so natural and reflexive that responding the other way becomes something you never even think about.

Most people, I suspect, make a habit of cowardice, so as adults the notion that they can confront their fears and behave with courage never even occurs to them. At that point, I don't think it's possible to change the habit without a LOT of work.

 ████████  
April 20 2004, 16:28:50 UTC  CHECK [COLLAPSE](#)

Well, I wonder what you'd make of this situation, Franklin. On LJ animal rights, high school student had a dilemma. The class was asked to make a presentation on organizations that had an impact on society. She chose PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals.) Now, I don't want to get into a whole thang about PETA, pro and con. It's not about them. :-)

The student did her presentation, talking about her values as a vegan. The teacher, wearing leather shoes and a fur coat (not really), kept making personal asides like, "well, I guess *I'm* the enemy in this little scenario, eh?" (wink wink nudge nudge). The teacher's attitude that anyone who's personal ethics were contrary to hers were assholes. The student, worried that she'd get a failing grade, completely backed down in the face of the teacher's derogatory remarks. The student had literature (with upsetting pictures of factory farming and slaughterhouses) to hand out, but didn't. She lacked the courage of her convictions. But the question is:

Was it worth failing, knowing that she would not convince the adult power authority who has the upper hand while she's in high school? Or is it better to retreat in order to fight another day, when the scales may be more evenly balanced? Was the student unethical, a liar, and a coward?

I don't have an answer in mind. I ask because I can't decide myself.

  [REDACTED]  
[April 20 2004, 17:37:01 UTC](#)  CHECK [COLLAPSE](#)

Having been an uppity little feminist/animal rights/youth rights teenager, I must say that it is important to choose ones battles. You can't fight every moral war, you will bury yourself and never accomplish anything. When it comes to activism, effectiveness is more important than absolute consistency. Because, after all, isn't activism about getting things done?

To me, this example is not about courage, it is about saving ones energy for the bigger fights.

  [REDACTED]  
[April 20 2004, 17:48:19 UTC](#)  CHECK [COLLAPSE](#)

Thanks. That's the way I was leaning, but didn't have the right words.

We had another example, which I think goes the other way about courage. Young girl noticing animals not being properly cared for in a pet shop. Didn't know what to do. Didn't think the manager would take her seriously. We counseled her to report to someone who DID have authority. She didn't. But she said "NEXT time I encounter this situation, I know what to do." Heh. Right.

I'm out of the right words a LOT these days, reduced to gibberish. :-)

Moving to Boston, en masse, eh? :-) Well, it's about friggin' time. You, um, do all know it's not just cold, but DAMN COLD, up here? My heating bills doubled this past Dec/Jan. I just put on a few more cats on the bed.

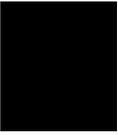
Can't wait to meet you all end of the month!

 **Silence does not constitute agreement**  
Anonymous  
[April 20 2004, 20:23:32 UTC](#)  CHECK [COLLAPSE](#)

What I might have done in the student's case (of course, this would presume my having had the self-possession as a HS student as I do now, at 25 -- NOT a likely scenario) is not to agree with the teacher, but perhaps refuse to discuss further, while stating that my silence does not constitute my acquiescence.

Arguing with people who can't be argued with is a waste of time, and in this student's case, possibly hurtful to her grade. In such a situation, I think it is morally permissible to state "I do not agree" and leave it at that.

Incidentally, this is [REDACTED] from the [REDACTED], and not the "you're an asshole" anonymous poster. Although I may disagree with Franklin at times, I attempt to do so without name-calling, and always with my list-name attached.

 **Re: Silence does not constitute agreement**  
 [REDACTED]  
April 21 2004, 07:51:54 UTC  CHECK [COLLAPSE](#)

[REDACTED] Hey babe. You got an LJ? Do tell. :-)

Yes, they don't teach us how to debate adult authority in high school. I'm just amazed -- or maybe not so -- that the teacher didn't debate HER disagreement in a more scholarly way, as an example of how to disagree. WE need the courage not to suffer fools gladly.

For me, courage is doing what I know is right but find hard to do. Like. . . I don't get out there in the field and actually DO any hands on animal rights work. Like volunteering at shelters, who desperately need help. Because I'd be depressed and crying all the time -- I know from personal experience in the past -- AND I'd bring every single animal home in order to save them. You think the Ark was crowded? It would change my daily life as I know it, and I don't have the courage to face the dismal facts day after day. I give money instead. But it's guilt money.

But I think the courage Franklin is talking about has to do with being unpopular, and perhaps losing friends, because you have as they call it "the courage of your convictions."

 **Re: Silence does not constitute agreement**  
Anonymous  
April 21 2004, 13:04:54 UTC  CHECK [COLLAPSE](#)

Nope, no LJ for me. I do have a blog though (email me if you want the location, I prefer not to post it willy-nilly).

Agreed that the teacher hardly displayed maturity in handling the situation thus. The student may not have known what to do, but the teacher damn well should have.

 **Re: Silence does not constitute agreement**  
 tacit  
April 24 2004, 09:15:57 UTC  CHECK [COLLAPSE](#)

*"Arguing with people who can't be argued with is a waste of time, and in this student's case, possibly hurtful to her grade. In such a situation, I think it is morally permissible to state "I do not agree" and leave it at that."*

This assumes that one cannot successfully argue with a teacher; my experience says that you can, in fact, do this, and succeed.

Students have a number of avenues of approach which can give them a significant amount of power, if they but use it. In a case like this, I would suspect it's quite possible to get the teacher

to back down, either by challenging him directly or (if that does not succeed) by formally complaining about his lack of professionalism to school faculty. I've known high-school students who have succeeded in having teachers reprimanded or even *fired* for unprofessional behavior--but it takes the courage to act.



[tacit](#)

April 24 2004, 09:11:53 UTC

CHECK [COLLAPSE](#)

*"The student, worried that she'd get a failing grade, completely backed down in the face of the teacher's derogatory remarks. The student had literature (with upsetting pictures of factory farming and slaughterhouses) to hand out, but didn't. She lacked the courage of her convictions. But the question is: Was it worth failing, knowing that she would not convince the adult power authority who has the upper hand while she's in high school?"*

Inteesting question, on a number of levels.

First of all, I believe that it is often necessary to choose one's battles, and fight only those battles which can be won. Having said that, though, I do ot believe this is a battle that could not be won.

True story:

A long time ago, back in my school days, I was taking a speech class, and had to give a rhetorical speech--a speech on some topic whose purpose was to persuade others to adopt some view on that topic. The teacher said the speeches would be graded solely on their value as rhetoric, and not on their content or topic. I did mone on morality, arguing that conventional views of morality were inherently unjust and unworkable.

The teacher--a politically conservative man--was quite personally offended, and announced to the class "That's the stupidest thing I ever heard" before failing me.

I called him on it. Right there in fornt of a class full of students, I hauled him across the carpet. I told him he had violated his own grading standards, and I also told him it was not his place to judge whether or not my ethical or philosophical standards were "stupid."

You know what happened? He backed down, apologized in front of the class, and gave me a very high grade.

Power lies in the hands of the person who weilds it, not necessarily in the hands of the authority figure. It is not a given that the student was faced with an unwinnable battle here.

And here's the crux--it's possible that fighting this battle might have had value far greater than winngin a good grade or expressing her views. A battle won at an early age, particularly in this kind of situation, can set a powerful precedent; once you've won a battle like this, you begin to see that you do have

power, and that sense of empowerment can help you win future battles. It really takes only one victory at the right time to completely rewrite one's sense of what is possible.

**anonymous posting....**



April 20 2004, 17:37:33 UTC

CHECK [COLLAPSE](#)

I got personally attacked in my lj by someone who refused to tell me who they were... This prompted me to change my settings to disallow anonymous replies....

Honesty is important to me... but tact is also important....

I think pretending you like or are friends with someone is such a stupid thing to do...

but saying things to deliberately hurt that person's feelings is obnoxious...

So I guess I wonder where that line should be drawn...

How do you tell someone you don't really want to hang out with them anymore or at all without being overly cruel or harsh?



**Re: anonymous posting....**



April 24 2004, 09:20:20 UTC

CHECK [COLLAPSE](#)

I don't want to disallow anonymous posting; people can post whatever they like here, though I may delete the post (something I've done on a few occasions), ridicule the poster, or both. :)

Tact is something that is entirely unrelated to honesty. From a very young age, we're taught that "tact" means "telling lies to avoid offending someone," but the fact is, it's possible to be honest without also being insulting. And the reverse is true as well; lying to someone is not the same as protecting that person's feelings...

If you really don't want to hang out with someone, there is probably no way to say it without hurting that person. But pretending you like someone you don't is also hurtful; it merely postpones the hurt, that's all. And you are not ethically obligated to spend time with every single person who wants to spend time with you! You have, first and foremost, an ethical right to choose how you spend your time, and with whom.

**Re: anonymous posting....**



April 25 2004, 04:30:37 UTC

CHECK [COLLAPSE](#)

Some excellent points...

It's hard to know, except from experience, what a gentle way to say no thank you might be....

I think we are told (at least young women are) that we need to be polite and friendly all the time to everyone we meet- otherwise we aren't being \*nice\*

I think I need to learn how not to be so nice if I feel someone is stepping on me... but it's so well entrenched in me that I simply don't know how.... I keep worrying about hurting someone's feelings...

Anonymous

April 20 2004, 19:51:28 UTC

CHECK [COLLAPSE](#)



I know you've been looking into this matter rather closely, so let me just go ahead and make this one completely clear.

It's not me. It's not my style. I have no problem going on the record calling you an asshole (and much worse) personally, so, naturally, I wouldn't do that anonymously.

Besides, I wouldn't just call you an asshole. I'd cite accurate and verified examples.

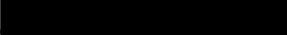


Anonymous

April 20 2004, 19:55:53 UTC

CHECK [COLLAPSE](#)

Okay...so, your journal (or the LJ system) curiously has decided to make a post of mine, which is very clearly a function of my being signed in, anonymous.

Regardless, \*I\* am the originator of the post to which I am responding. This is  , if you prefer, and I have no association with the one-liner you got. It's not my modus operandi, nor did I do it. I don't like you and you might not like me, but that's still not my way.



### The Invention Of Lying

 [pingback\\_bot](#)

November 1 2011, 23:26:44 UTC

CHECK [COLLAPSE](#)

User   referenced to your post from [The Invention Of Lying](#) saying: [...], this doesn't mean that I never lie, but I mostly stick to 's Path of Greatest Courage [...]