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# The Post-Truth Era—Welcome to the Age of Dishonesty

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Have we now reached a stage of social evolution that is “beyond honesty?” That fascinating question is raised by author Ralph Keyes in his new book, *The Post-Truth Era: Dishonesty and Deception in Contemporary Life*. “I think it’s fair to say that honesty is on the ropes,” Keyes observes. “Deception has become commonplace at all levels of contemporary life.”

By the time you finish reading *The Post-Truth Era*, Keyes is likely to have convinced you that dishonesty is now the order of the day, and that deception has now been institutionalized at virtually every level of American culture.

Keyes is an author of keen perception and wide-ranging observation. He has pulled together an enormous body of evidence, all pointing to the pervasive rise of dishonesty in American life. As Jeremy Campbell remarked in *The Liars’ Tale*, “It is a creeping assumption at the start of a new millennium that there are things more important than truth.”

Keyes acknowledges that human beings have lied in the past, but he suggests that the current generation of liars has developed a skillfulness and nuance in lying that is virtually unprecedented in the human experience. “Even though there have always been liars, lies have usually been told with hesitation, a dash of anxiety, a bit of guilt, a little shame, at least some sheepishness,” Keyes notes. “Now, clever people that we are, we have come up with rationales for tampering with truth so we can dissemble guilt-free.”

Keyes has a label for this new age of dishonesty. “I call it post-truth. We live in a post-truth era.” Keyes credits the late Steve Tesich with coining this phrase, but Keyes now applies it with vigor to our contemporary culture. “Post-truthfulness exists in an ethical twilight zone,” he explains. “It allows us to dissemble without considering ourselves dishonest. When our behavior conflicts with our values, what we’re most likely to do is reconceive our values.” Since we do not want to think of ourselves as unethical, we simply “devise alternative approaches to morality.”

As evidence of this cultural acceptance of lying, Keyes notes the rise of euphemisms for deception. “We no longer tell lies. Instead we ‘misspeak.’ We ‘exaggerate.’ We ‘exercise poor judgment.’ ‘Mistakes were made,’ we say. The term ‘deceive’ gives way to the more playful ‘spin.’ At worst, saying ‘I wasn’t truthful’ sounds better than ‘I lied.’” Keyes suggests that the use of such euphemisms is a new cultural syndrome he identifies as “euphemasia.” This would include everything from terms such as “credibility gap,” to Winston Churchill’s “terminological inexactitudes.”

What are we to do with terms such as “poetic truth,” “nuanced truth,” “alternative reality,” or “strategic misrepresentations?” In our technological age, driven by a digitalized dimension of lying, we are now accustomed to talking about “virtual truth.”

In a fascinating section, Keyes traces the history of lying. He suggests that early civilizations depended on honesty, at least within the kinship group, for the establishment of stable order and trust. Once society becomes more complicated and diverse, lying becomes more routine. In some cultures, lying to an enemy or a stranger is not considered immoral at all.

In more modern eras, lying was raised to a higher art form. In the history of Protestant confessionality, creeds were to be accepted “without hesitation or mental reservation.” This language continues among confessional Christians, who may wonder how the term “mental reservation” emerged in the first place.

Keyes supplies this explanation, tracing the use of “mental reservation” back to the Reformation era, when Catholics developed “mental reservation” as a defense for telling an untruth under threat of persecution. “In time, however, it became an easy way to rationalize all manner of prevarication,” Keyes explains. The device of “mental reservation” allowed an individual to hold or “reserve” the truth to himself even as he misled an interrogator. Before long, others used this excuse in order to give apparent assent to creedal statements while privately rejecting the very truths articulated in the statement of faith.

Just how important is honesty, after all? “Honesty’s market value is too little appreciated in the history of ethics,” Keyes argues. “Truth telling underlies not just individual reputations but the health of society as a whole.” Without honesty, there can be no confidence in legal contracts, no shared confidence in social arrangements, and no authority for the rule of law. As argued by Enlightenment philosopher Immanuel Kant, a healthy society can’t remain healthy so long as it accepts lies. “For a lie always harms another,” Kant asserted, “if not some other particular man, still it harms mankind generally, for it vitiates the source of law itself.”

Is lying a symptom of social pathology? Keyes considers the argument that social dislocation and disconnectedness breed dishonesty. Surveying modern sociological literature, Keyes acknowledges a link between post-truthfulness and the loss of community. “When it comes to post-truthfulness, the fraying of human connections is both cause and effect. Not feeling connected to others makes it easier to lie, which in turn makes it harder to reconnect. Eroded communities foster dishonesty. Dishonesty contributes to the further erosion of communities. As communal bonds wither, unfettered self-interest is unleashed.”

Most of us are largely unaware of the pervasive dishonesty around us—even the dishonesty and deception included in our understanding of the past. Keyes goes after several of America’s most cherished historical legends, demonstrating that many are “apocryphal in whole or in part.” The famous story of George Washington and the cherry tree was invented by a moralistic clergyman, ironically as an argument for honesty.

“Puffery is an art form in the United States,” Keyes asserts. Self-invention becomes a way of climbing the social ladder. Ralph Lifshitz transforms himself into Ralph Lauren, and spawns one of America’s most famous and profitable lifestyle brands. The classical and Anglophile style of Ralph Lauren’s designs would be more awkwardly marketed under the name, Ralph Lifshitz.

Martha Stewart, now serving time in federal prison for lying to federal authorities, is identified by Keyes as one of “the quintessential reinvented Americans.” Unlike Ralph Lauren, who openly acknowledges his origins, Keyes accuses Martha Stewart of going to incredible and extreme effort to hide her humble roots.

In an article written for an early issue of *Martha Stewart Living*, Stewart wrote an editorial tribute to honesty. “We must remember,” she chided, “—and teach our children (and perhaps our political figures)—one essential; the truth shall make you free.” Nevertheless, Keyes presents a very different picture of America’s domestic adviser. “Martha Stewart routinely misrepresented the type of family she grew up in, her father’s occupation, whom she dated in college, where her roommate was from, what she earned as a model, the size of party she threw, her husband’s ability to father children, how much of her own writing she did, where her home was located (to avoid paying taxes), and why she sold her ImClone stocks.”

In the professional world, resumes are now assumed to be inflated. San Francisco mayor Willie Brown once observed, “I don’t know anyone who doesn’t lie on their resume.” The most pervasive form of “credential inflation” is the listing of unearned degrees. “An estimated half million Americans hold jobs for which their purported qualifications are spurious,” Keyes reports, adding that an investigation conducted by the General Accounting Office once revealed twenty-eight senior federal officials who did not actually hold the college degrees they claimed. Hauntingly, Keyes relates that one personnel official with a hospital told him that job applicants, once informed that their credentials would be checked by a professional firm, sometimes withdrew their applications. Reportedly, nearly a third of those applying for positions took back their applications and never returned.

Making his way through the terrain of deception in American life, Keyes notes that some individuals have become “recreational liars.” They spin tales which are willingly received by some as truths. While this may appear harmless, the practice lowers the credibility of the entire society.

What about the law? According to Black’s Law Dictionary, a “legal fiction” is “an assumption that something is true even though it may be untrue.” In other words, lawyers are obligated, according to the professional standards of the bar, to use whatever argument will work in defending a client, whether or not it is true. In one perverse case, Keyes documents the work of one Florida prosecutor who argued in one courtroom that a pair of teenage boys had killed their father and then entered another courtroom to argue that a family friend—not the teenagers—was the real murderer. “From a strictly legal perspective this was not inconsistent,” Keyes observes, “but it certainly put a spotlight on the contrast between concepts of truthfulness within courts of law and those without.”

Lies are now routinely accepted in political argument and in literature. The line between fiction and nonfiction is now blurry at best. Some recent best-selling titles in the “non-fiction” category have been highly fictional. Does anyone even care?

Keyes identifies the academic world as the source of much confusion when it comes to honesty. Postmodern philosophers routinely dismiss objective truth, and assert that all truth is simply social construction and invention. Authorities in power simply invent truth in order to buttress their authority, the postmodernists allege. Following this logic, lying becomes a means of liberation. As Keyes observes, “Jeremy Campbell exaggerated only slightly when he observed that to a postmodernist, being overly concerned with telling the truth ‘is a sign of depleted resources, a psychological disorder, a character defect, a kind of linguistic anorexia’.”

Debunking the postmodernist worldview, Keyes simply clarifies the obvious: “Asking what constitutes truth is an appropriate topic for intellectual inquiry, but it doesn’t follow that the difficulty of identifying what is objectively true gives us license to tell each other lies.”

The Post-Truth Era offers perceptive analysis of American culture in the new millennium. Without the recovery of truth, this civilization is doomed to a descent into even deeper levels of deception and dishonesty. As a culture, it’s about time we faced the truth about our acceptance of untruthfulness.

