

A Habitat of Lies

Creating a personal environment of truth

by Marjorie Kelly

Like a Greek chorus in the collective unconscious, the Iran-Contra hearings were omnipresent this summer. The drone of the radio voices might dip in anywhere in my day: in the office of my designer, in the deli where I went for a sandwich, in my car. I confess I didn't listen much to the text, for it was the subtext that fascinated me. Who was lying? Was a lie being told at this very moment? That catch in the throat—what did it mean?

When Secretary of State George Shultz took the stand in late July, "he lanced the poison," James Reston wrote in the *New York Times*. "He told an alarming story of corruption at the top of the Government, and by letting it all out he somehow managed to restore a sense of truth and purpose to the proceedings."

It's curious that the truth—or a piece of the truth, if that's what it was—left the nation dumbstruck and grateful, as though we'd gotten a piece of fruit with our crust of bread that day. In her book *Lying* (excerpted on page 18), Sissela Bok observes how differently the nation viewed governmental deception in Eisenhower's time. Many Americans were astonished then to learn the president had lied about a U-2 spy plane being forced down in Russia. Today we are astonished when a government official tells the truth.

In our time, the classic philosopher's question—Is lying ever justified?—seems irrelevant, just as it would be irrelevant for police officers to debate if theft is ever justified, or for parents to argue whether tantrums are justified. The more pertinent question is: How does a wise and intelligent person deal with a habitat of lies?

A useful first step might be to school ourselves in lying, to learn how lies behave. As our culture has minutely studied the characteristics of birds—cataloguing

subtle color variations, songs, and flight patterns—so we might study the characteristics of lies. Readers of *Business Ethics* lend a hand to this task with their answers to the questions: How can you tell when someone's lying? And what can you do about it? (Share their provocative thoughts on page 8.)

I have often noted a mirrorlike quality to deception, in which the truth is the reverse of what is presented. For example, when I was late with an assignment once and the editor was applying what I thought was excessive pressure, he commented revealingly, "I hope you don't think I'm trying to punish you." The thought actually hadn't occurred to me, but his saying it made me suspect punishment was indeed his motive. Projection works in a similar way, when people accuse others of the very thing they themselves are guilty of—as when a nosy office manager suspects others of going through her desk. It is often the disguise itself that reveals a deception.

This goes for self-deception as well. If I'm constantly suspecting others of going through *my* things, perhaps I'm actually the one who's too nosy; projecting it onto others is the way I hide it from myself. If a company president suspects his managers of hiding the truth from him, perhaps he's the one who's not being fully honest; he suspects others of withholding information because he himself does it.

Understanding how deception works is one thing—learning to deal with it quite another. It is simplistic to think we can, like white knights, unmask deceit and demand truth. That only drives the lie deeper, for the human mind is capable of infinite intelligence when it comes to deception. We would do well to remember that most lies spring not from evil

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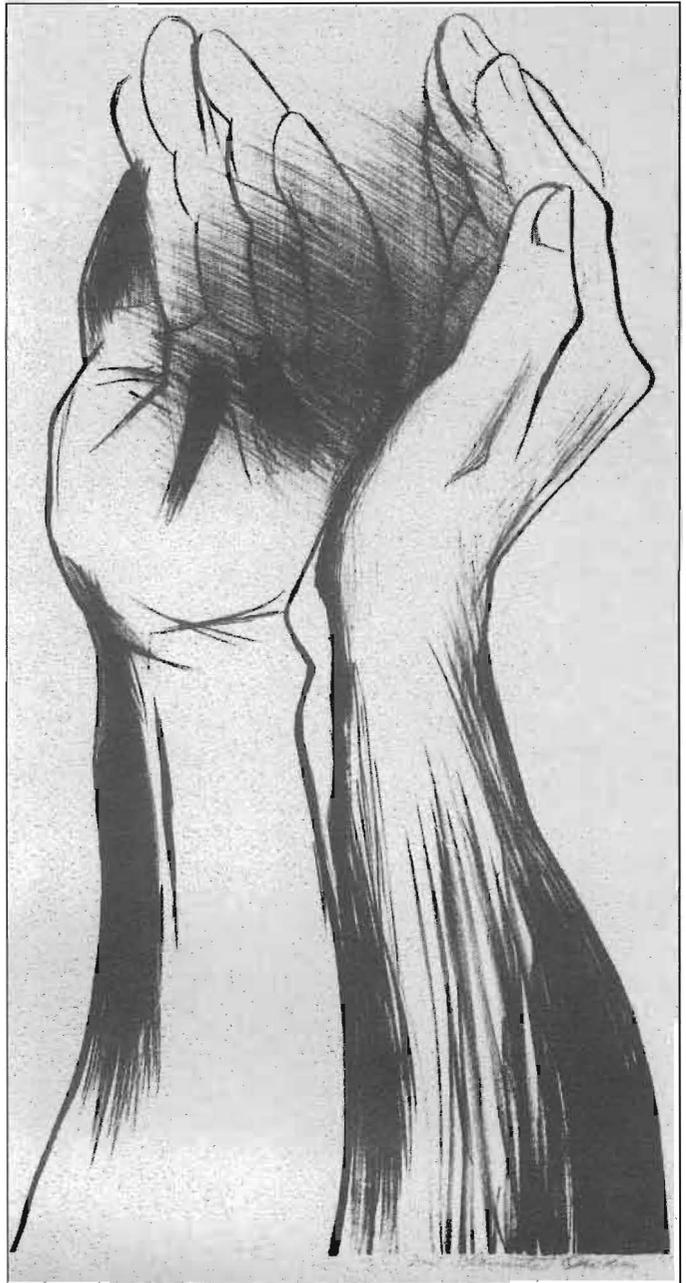
intent, but from fear. When people are afraid, when they expect to be treated harshly, when they lack courage, they will lie.

The point is not to punish lies but to create an environment where honesty is welcome. For as the poet Adrienne Rich reminds us (page 13), the truth “is not one thing, or even a system. It is an *increasing complexity*.” Truth is a kind of commitment—to share with one another our contradictory and difficult feelings, to explore together the areas where we fear to go, to look at the things we would rather hide. It is only in a context of healthy communication that truth can grow. For like a relationship or an organization that is alive, a truth that is alive is always changing, taking unexpected forms, and leading us down paths we never dreamed existed.

As deception can be like a mirror, so can honesty. If I can find the courage to speak my difficult truths, others find the courage to speak theirs. When I can allow another to stumble through false starts and partial truths, I learn to allow myself the same tentativeness, the same reaching for buried feelings, until at last we emerge together into clarity.

Truth is a kind of shared space we inhabit, and it can be a comfortable and well-furnished space—as it is when communication is ample and flows freely—or it can be a messy space full of obstacles that trip us up—as it is when communication is guarded and suspicion abounds.

Most fundamentally, truth is a space we inhabit within ourselves, a closeness to the center, a communication with all that we are. It is one of the ongoing struggles of being human, to become more and more honest with ourselves—to admit what we really want and move toward it, to admit what is distasteful and move away from it, to admit who we really are and accept it. Anything less is a kind



Jose Clemente Orozco, *Manos (Hands)*, 1926, lithograph, 13/100, 19×13½". Courtesy San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Albert M. Bender Collection, gift of Albert M. Bender.

of deception and hiding from our true selves.

If our larger culture is awash in lies and deception, perhaps the solution is to create a counterweight of truth, within ourselves, within our personal relationships, and within our organizations. For in the end, compared to the utterances of any politician, our personal truths are more resonant, more fundamental, and more enduring. ✕