

The Lie I'm Telling Myself Today: Living a Lie in Pursuit of Happiness and Success

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I am a liar. I have lied consistently. I am talking about every day, looking a person in the face, unrepentantly, with all the sincerity that I can fake. Not to strangers either. A full confession here must include the truth that I have lied to my colleagues and to my family. However, the person whom I have told the most persistent and mendacious, pants-on-fire, dirty dog things to ... is me.

Did you ever have an experience like this? I remember one evening late in my sophomore year of college studying in the common area of my dorm so my roommate could sleep. It was one of those dark nights of the soul when I thought I was standing on a cliff gazing into the maw of failure. I remember telling myself then, "You just have to finish college." That's it. After that, you need never take another class, forever. I pulled myself together, pulled an all-nighter (with some help from the \$0.99 bottomless cup of coffee at the Waffle House), and passed that class and term.

Have you said that to yourself at some point in the past four years? During the past week? Last night?

Finishing college wasn't it at all. Although formative and indelible, my life and career were not assured merely because at twenty-two I had a bachelor's degree. However, that lie helped in the short term. It helped me get through that night and more. I told shorter-term lies to myself than that (get through this test, that paper, calculus, a difficult roommate), but mainly the lie I told myself came down to this: just finish college, and it will be all good from there.

A goodly number of you excelled and have won athletic awards. Some will graduate with Latin Honors. You probably do not need advice on how to succeed, but for the rest of us, here is my suggestion: lie your way to your goals. I am not suggesting lying to other people. Rather, I am recommending that you lie to yourself. I know that Juniata's motto is *Veritas Liberat*, Truth Sets Free, so this may seem heretical or a betrayal to Juniata's spirit. I don't think that it breaks that spirit if you consider my full recommendation.

During college I developed the habit of the goal-driven lie. Although I didn't really recognize what I was doing for another twenty years, I created a habit of telling myself and sometimes others: if I can only accomplish this task (fill in the blank: Ph.D. exams, the dissertation, landing a job, getting tenure, earning promotion, knocking out this pile of grading, working through that round of paper conferences, publishing this article, getting through some speech I need to give...), everything would be OK.

The lies invaded my personal life, too. I remember thinking that if I could just live in the same city as Belle, it would all be good from there on out. Then having children led to a whole series of lies: I just need to get this kid potty-trained. I just need to work out a stable childcare situation, and I have it made.

The lie I tell myself on any given day is a tool for motivating action. It is a form of goal setting that has helped me to persevere through a problem, a stage, or a challenge to reach goals that seemed like mountains and others that proved to be molehills. It has worked pretty well for me. In most cases, I got through. These hurdles are always going to be difficult, but I became disappointed to discover that there are always more hurdles.

I told myself that lie about finishing high school. I told myself that lie about finishing the spring of my sophomore year of college. I told myself that lie about earning my B.A., my M.A. and my Ph.D. I told myself that lie about getting my dream job at Juniata College. I told it about earning tenure, and I told it about publishing my book. By this point, I really knew: whatever lie I am living with today will be replaced by another lovely lie just over the horizon.

When I recognized this habit, due largely to the facial expression of a certain senior member of the history department, I began printing out my lies and taping them to my office door with the headline "The lie I'm telling myself today" (see Figure 1). Self-mockery, which I enjoy, is an upside of making these lies public. I can taunt myself.

Lying your way to success comes with genuine risks, though. You may have already recognized the moral hazard it presents. If you begin lying to yourself in one part of your life, can you contain it there? There are many other hazards, but here let me describe three kinds of lies that I hope you will avoid telling: lies about yourself and your abilities, lies about other people, and lies about everyone.¹



Figure 1. Jim Tuten’s office door boasts any number of lies he is telling himself. Photo credit: James Tuten.

THE FIRST LIE NOT TO TELL—ABOUT YOURSELF: I AM AN IMPOSTER

My collection of mendacities has helped me to succeed, at least to some degree, but people often undermine themselves with lies. One of the most common types of lies that make life more difficult is imposter syndrome. Telling some version of the lie that “I am not worthy” is a particular danger. Many, maybe all, of us have thought this during the past academic year. If so, you may be a victim of imposter syndrome. I am sure that you know what imposter syndrome is: the sense that you individually, because of how smart, how creative, how talented, how good looking you rate yourself, don’t get to succeed at law school, medical school, in finance, as an entrepreneur, in politics, in relationships, or in life. Frequently, imposter syndrome tempts us to talk ourselves into failure because we are part of a specific group. That

can sound in your head like this: people like me — first generation college students, women, gay people, trans people, people of color, immigrants — people that our society has, at least previously, labeled as less than — are not meant either to succeed in this school, job, or campaign or to achieve our goals.

If I could pick a super power, it would be the ability to instill the confidence of being adept in all the members of our Juniata community. That is, I wish I had the power to drive imposter thoughts from all of our minds.²

THE SECOND LIE NOT TO TELL—ABOUT YOURSELF: I CANNOT DO IT

Another category of lie I worry you will be tempted to tell yourself is closely related to the imposter syndrome lie. It is the fallacy of extrapolating one error as total proof of the conclusion that you cannot do it, that you cannot reach your goal. That lie sounds like this: that poor grade, that job rejection, or that snub proves that I am not capable. Unlike with imposter syndrome, with this lie you are not leaning on the categorical—it does not depend on your group identity. It is purely personal.

When I was in Barbados in January 2020, one evening early in the trip, I was hanging out on a porch with a botanist of international renown and several great Juniatians looking at the stars above the Atlantic Ocean. (It turns out that January was the peak of 2020 for nearly everyone.) At that time, I shared a personal story that I had told very few people over the years. I am not sure why I told this story then, but, since it was mentioned in one person’s nomination of me to win the Beachley award, I am telling it again now, in part to own it and in part because maybe you will remember it someday when you have a reversal of fortune. I hope that it will remind you not to allow one setback to destroy your confidence.

When I applied to Ph.D. programs, I received a rejection from the school I most wanted to attend. Instead of continuing my graduate education, I finished my M.A. thesis and worked a pair of part-time jobs. I chose to re-apply, won acceptance, and enrolled. One day in my first year in that program, my advisor asked me, “Jim, I never understood why you re-applied instead of coming the first time we accepted you.” Naturally, I explained: “Because I didn’t get in.” He retorted that I must be mistaken and I should check with the graduate office. So, I did just that. The person who ran graduate school matters for the department checked the files for me. Then, barely looking at me, she said, “I sent you the wrong letter the first time. You should have gotten an admitted letter.” She offered a flippant “Sorry.”

That made me about as mad as I have ever been. I left her office and went back as little as possible during my years in graduate school. I had ended up with a gap year due to a clerical error. Importantly, even though I was tempted to tell myself the lie that I was a failure, I did not allow the first rejection to be a permanent measure of my worth. At least that once, I avoided telling myself the lie that I could not do it, based on one (big) piece of (faulty) evidence.³

THE THIRD LIE NOT TO TELL—ABOUT OTHER PEOPLE: THE SELFISH LIE

The columnist David Brooks, who spoke at Juniata many years ago, writes about the distinction between résumé virtues versus eulogy virtues. Brooks put it this way, “résumé virtues are the skills you bring to the marketplace... eulogy virtues are the ones that are talked about at your funeral.”⁴

Last August, my father died rather suddenly from a tick-borne disease. I returned to my hometown in South Carolina and reconnected with hundreds of people, both distant kin and community members whom I had not seen in years or decades. I learned that my father had gotten the eulogy virtues right. Little about his years as a volunteer fireman, his decades elected to the town council, nor much about the six decades he spent farming Lowcountry loam or the offices he held in community organizations and his church got discussed. Instead, we heard hilarious tales involving enough wildlife and livestock to fill a medium-sized ark. Folks recounted the fun things, the amusing tales they loved recalling. They celebrated sharing life together. My father assumed that every person is interesting, deserves your time and attention, and knows things that you do not know and that humans are an end in themselves. There is the rub, class of 2020. The people you meet are not the means to anything. They are the ends.

That is a crucial lie to avoid: it is the lie that other people are unworthy and that they are the means to some end of yours or some end of your company, your party, your movement, or your nation. Lying out of selfishness is a large and terrible category of lies. To recognize these lies, ask yourself: Am I tempted to dissemble because I want to do something fun, illicit, illegal, or immoral? Would knowing the truth of what I did hurt a loved one, a friend, or a colleague?

The selfish lie has behind it the desire to get what you want at the expense of others. There is no need to dissemble with your family, a friend, or a co-worker. I am suggesting that if you, like me, must lie, guide it with generosity toward others . . . always.⁵

THE FOURTH LIE NOT TO TELL—ABOUT ALL OF US: I DON'T HAVE TIME TO RELAX

Back in February one night, I took a survey that Juniata had asked us to complete. Our family sat in the living room together, our son doing homework on the floor, Belle watching a movie, and me with my laptop on the sofa. I reached a question asking about work-life balance, and I knew that Belle sees this as an area in which I do not excel. I read the question aloud to hear her response. Our son piped up: “What is work-life balance?” Without missing a beat, Belle snapped, “Don’t ask your father; he has no idea what it means.”

Ouch.

Me warning you against the perils of this lie—that there isn't time to relax—is akin to being scared straight by someone who is already a victim of the problem.

Critics of our culture in the United States point out with increasing frequency that we work too much. The research shows that it is true that salaried workers put in more hours now than they did in previous decades. This is a lie we all tell ourselves. I must work constantly, and working defines me.

Among the many things I have learned from being fortunate enough to travel to other cultures is that not all of them obsess with work. I cannot get the image of the Netherlands in the summer out of my mind. When 4:00 or 5:00 in the afternoon comes, everyone not working in a café goes to one and has a glass of wine or an espresso with friends. They bike, walk, boat, talk, laugh. Work stops so they can enjoy being alive in the summer sun. That is the Dutch approach to life, and they are onto something. In Barbados, too, fun is important. Gathering with friends for a rum, relaxing on the beach, or taking karaoke up to an art form the way Bajans do looks like a life-affirming approach.

As you get into your work, go hard, but don't lie to yourself that work is all there is, that it alone can bring you happiness. Make space for those eulogy virtues. I remember this advice through a wonderful phrase from our Barbadian friends: “pace yourself.”⁶

Go forward, class of 2020. Do big things, but do not let yourselves believe that you are imposters, that you cannot reach your goals, or that it is ever okay to use someone, but also remember to pace yourselves. If, after that, you need to get through the workweek by telling a little lie that relief is around the corner, then do it, but give yourself a knowing little wink in the mirror when you do.

NOTES

Including expert comments by J. Mark McKellop, Professor of Psychology at Juniata College (indicated by JMM).

1. JMM: Dr. Tuten's lying breaks up large goals into smaller, more achievable ones, which is a very good problem-solving and operant conditioning technique. Telling oneself little lies establishes realistic goals (e.g., “read this book” or “study for two hours”) that one can complete relatively easily, thus providing positive reinforcement. To speak like the founder of operant conditioning, B. F. Skinner, “set the organism up for success by increasing the probability of successful outcomes” (Burrhus F. Skinner, *The Behavior of Organisms: An Experimental Analysis* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1938)). Telling oneself little lies also helps to protect one's self-esteem and promotes a positive outlook (see Martin E. P. Seligman, *Learned Optimism: How to Change Your Mind and Your Life* (New York: Vintage, 2006)). Seligman worked closely with Aaron Beck, who I mention below in note 3).
2. JMM: Imposter syndrome is “real” but maybe not as prevalent as people think. Dr. Tuten is correct that one should not believe that he/she is incapable of success. Although “isms,” being poor, and other social and environmental factors can present challenges, there is no evidence that

any person in a specific social or cultural group is inherently less likely to succeed than other types of people.

3. JMM: The fallacy of denigrating one's self-worth based on one setback is an example of what clinical psychologists call "cognitive distortions." These distortions are strongly associated with anxiety and depression. A healthy alternative is to accept failures as "life lessons" and not over-magnify their significance for our lives in general. Aaron Beck is a famous (by psychology standards) modern psychologist who developed the model of cognitive therapy. *Wikipedia* presents a good summary of his model and some examples of cognitive distortions ("Beck's Cognitive Triad," last modified May 25, 2020, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Beck%27s_cognitive_triad). His work dovetails nicely with that of his colleague Martin Seligman on "learned optimism": hoping for positive outcomes but not ruminating on small setbacks (see note 1).
4. David Brooks, *The Road to Character* (New York, Random House, 2015).
5. JMM: Lie #3 is right on! I often tell my psychology students that "we are primates, and, if you watch other primates, they are always taking care of each other...grooming...touching...it's in our biology." I always finish my course on Health Psychology by showing a video of snow monkeys sitting near or in a natural Japanese hot spring during winter grooming each other. They look SO HAPPY AND PEACEFUL sitting outside, despite the surrounding ice and snow (see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=az_c2JKxv3A).
6. JMM: Lie #4 is definitely on target. Americans work more than do people in other developed countries. I often share with students how many European countries have annual "bank holidays." Europeans established these days for no other reason than to prevent people from working themselves to death. Students who have not traveled to Europe are always surprised when they learn about these holidays.