“Do you think this outfit makes me look fat?” This is the timeless question to which a husband or boyfriend, if he knows what’s good for him, is supposed to answer with a lie. Even if he thinks that yes, in fact his partner does look fat in that outfit, he is supposed to say, “No, honey, of course you don’t look fat.” This is the classic white lie that we tend to think of as not only okay, but virtuous. In fact, we say, it would be wrong not to lie in this situation.

We live in a culture in which lying is accepted and forgiven and even at times encouraged. Our politicians lie to us and we have come to accept it as par for the course. Even liberal politicians. Think of President Clinton’s famous: “I did not have sexual relations with that woman.” This lie did get him into trouble, but then you see bumper stickers that say, “When Clinton lied, no one died.” This bumper sticker forgives Clinton’s lie by contrasting it to the much more egregious lies of the Bush administration – the lies about weapons of mass destruction in Iraq that led us into a war and caused the deaths of at least tens of thousands. But even these lies that had such dire consequences seem to have been quickly forgotten. New reasons were posited for why we should be in Iraq and the American people re-elected President Bush.

Advertisers try to lie to us all the time. A study came out recently in which a consumer watchdog group invented a fake health product, created a TV infomercial for it with actors perfectly willing to claim that they had used this imaginary product, got medical experts to testify to the product’s legitimacy, and the networks were perfectly willing to air this complete fabrication. And so the interesting thing to me is that while advertising is regulated by the government, we are not particularly outraged about the fact that it needs to be regulated – that it seems that businesses would misrepresent their products if they could, and do when they can. We accept lying as just part of life that you can’t really do much about. It’s this kind of shrugging of the shoulders about lying that I find troubling.

Children, at least in theory, are taught not to lie; that lying is wrong and bad and our founding father, George Washington, because he was such an honest boy, admitted to chopping down the cherry tree even though he feared the repercussions. We’re taught that we should emulate George Washington and bravely tell the truth even when we might get in trouble for it. We’re taught that George Washington’s father
valued his truthfulness more than a thousand trees though they were blossomed with silver and had leaves of the purest gold.

But this childhood morality doesn’t seem to stick. It doesn’t translate into adult morality in our culture. The ethic in this society seems to be that you tell the truth as long as it works for you and doesn’t hurt anyone’s feelings. Lying is okay. Or at least it’s excusable, understandable, and inevitable.

And it may well be that lying is sometimes excusable, understandable, and inevitable. But religions historically have had very little patience for lying. And in many religious traditions, truth telling is a central spiritual practice. Telling the truth, even when it’s an inconvenient truth or a painful truth, seems to be an essential part of being in sync with the universe. Satya, truthfulness, is one of the eight pillars of Hindu practice. Satya is considered foundational to all other spiritual practices. In one of the Upanishads, the sacred texts, it is written, “No virtue is greater than truthfulness, no sin greater than promoting untruth.” It suggests that all other spiritual practices are useless unless you are also practicing truthfulness. It also calls the practice of truthfulness a kind of asceticism.

In the Christian tradition, the monk St. Augustine also taught absolute honesty and he developed a whole taxonomy of kinds of lies, organized from bad to worst. The worst kind of lie was spreading a false religious teaching. The least bad kind of lie was lying to save someone’s life, but in his view this kind of lie was still a sin.

There are prohibitions against lying in both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament. In the Book of John, Jesus describes lying as the Devil’s “native tongue.” In the Book of Numbers, Balaam speaks as an oracle and says, “God is not a human being that he should lie…” God is envisioned as a being who does not lie. Truthfulness is considered an ascetic spiritual practice in these traditions and lying a sinful indulgence.

To me, this is a fascinating concept that truth telling is an ascetic practice. Asceticism usually means extreme austerity -- denial of the body, forgoing of mental and physical comforts, and even going without basic needs in order to focus better on spirit. Think self-flagellation, fasting, refusing all possessions, denying oneself Starbucks chai lattes.
But if you think about it, refusing to lie is a subtler form of austerity. If you have to tell the truth all the
time, you first have to be brutally honest with yourself. You don’t get to wallow in pleasant fantasies
about who you are. You have to own up to your failings and shortcomings first to yourself and then to
others. You don’t get to manage your image. You don’t have recourse to the little fibs that protect you
from responsibility, from judgment, or from consequences when you make mistakes. You also don’t get
to indulge in social niceties but you have to instead get real with the people in your life. This can be
awkward. It can be embarrassing. It can set you apart from others in society just like refusing possessions
would. It’s another way of refusing to play the games and speak in the codes in which everyone else
speaks.

In place of these games and codes, by refusing to lie you are constantly reminding yourself and others that
life is serious and life is short and we don’t have time to be saying things that are not what we mean. It’s
hard enough to say what you mean when you mean to say what you mean. It’s hard enough to really know
somebody and to be really known when you are being truthful. It’s hard enough to not feel alone in this
world when you try to be open with the people in your life. Much less when you’re spinning lies.

By refusing to lie, you state that we have a sacred connection to one another. Misrepresenting yourself
 tears the fabric of that sacred connection; it conceals and isolates you. Lying does soul damage to the liar,
the lie-ee and the relationship between them. By refusing to lie, you refuse to participate in that kind of
soul damage.

But, one might protest, what if telling the truth will hurt somebody and cause animosity? Like in the “do I
look fat in this dress” scenario. Isn’t it sometimes far more destructive to a relationship to tell the truth?
Well, let’s take that case. A woman asks her husband, “Do you think I look fat in this dress?” and let’s
say the truth is that he thinks she does. There are two possibilities for why she’s asking: either A-- it’s an
honest question, she honestly wants to know his opinion because she wants help deciding whether to wear
the dress or not; or B-- the question is code for a different question like, do you love me? Or are you
attracted to me?

If it’s option A, she truly wants his opinion, then surely he owes it to her to give it to her. She’s explicitly
asked for help in making a decision, she values his input, and if he cares about her, he shouldn’t mislead
her.
If it’s option B, and what she’s really asking is do you love me or are you attracted to me, the issue is more complicated. Because in fact she is being dishonest with her question. She is not asking what she means to ask. So what to do? He could play along with the game. She’s asking do I look fat when she means do you love me and he could answer no you don’t look fat meaning yes I love you. So he’d be answering in code the question that was asked in code.

But what a mess! And what a sad state of affairs if we can’t ask what we really want to know and say what we really think. I think a much healthier and bolder approach would be for the husband to say, Yes, I think you look fat in that dress and I love you very much. I know many of you may cringe at the bluntness of that statement. I’m not suggesting that you be cruel or tactless – tact is fine as long as tact doesn’t create an untruth.

We have a right to know the truth, even if we don’t always want to hear it. If, sticking with option B, she’s speaking in code and wants to know if her husband is in love with her or is attracted to her, and in fact he is not, then it’s even more essential that he say so. That would be the hardest truth to speak and to hear, but the most important. She would have a right to know that truth. There is no worse kind of lie than a lie that deprives someone of information that they need in order to be able to make good decisions in their lives.

This is what made the lies of the Bush administration about Iraq’s weapons of mass destruction so appalling. These lies deprived Congress of information that, if they had had it, might have changed their decision to go to war. Congress and the American people had a right to the truth. This became an institutionalized falsehood that changed the course of history.

“Don’t ask, don’t tell” is another case of institutionalized falsehood. Gay and lesbian servicemen and women have to conceal their identities or lose their careers. This systematic suppression of the truth, where one is punished not for being gay but for speaking the truth about being gay, means that the armed forces and to some extent the whole country, get to blithely continue believing in a mythological military in which everyone is straight. Gay people remain invisible and discrimination against gay people remains unquestioned and intact. Truth-telling here would force the country to deal with this issue head on.

In the story about George Washington and the cherry tree, truth is a desirable goal just for its own sake. Not because someone would be hurt by a lie – no one would have been hurt if George had said, “I don’t
know who cut the cherry tree down – it wasn’t me.” Not because it would have destroyed a relationship. But the moral of the story is that you should tell the truth simply because it is the truth, not because of any consequences if you don’t. I think there’s something to this. There is a beauty to truth, something divine about it, not as a means to any other end, but as an end in itself. There is a beauty to truth that is worth a thousand trees, though they were blossomed with silver and had leaves of the purest gold!

I challenge all of us to give it a try. Try it just for a week. Absolute truthfulness. No lies, no misrepresentations. It doesn’t mean that you have to say everything that crosses your mind – we should heed the old warning, “Always tell the truth but don’t always be telling it.” In other words, don’t go out of your way to say hurtful things. But, if you want to do this experiment, you cannot mislead people either by silence or words or actions. I think we’ll all find it really difficult to do, even for a week. But if all these great spiritual leaders are right, it will truly be a spiritual practice. And I bet it will teach us a lot about ourselves. And if we are absolutely truthful with our closest friends and family, I bet it will have a real impact on those relationships too. If you decide to conduct this experiment, I’d love to hear any stories you have of how it went. Maybe we’ll find a way to share the stories anonymously at a later date. In the meantime, be bold, be brave, tell the truth.