Lying-Moral Choice in Public and Private Life
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Sissela Bok is one of my favorite thinkers. As a philosopher and ethicist she has a tendency to make even the most jaded of us pause and ask ourselves many different things. Philosophy, generally by design, can cloud the black and white easily and frequently turns the grays into just another blended color. Bok does that.

I first read this book a long time ago, so reading it again brings a new perspective after so many years of listening to confessions during interviews. With this work, Bok explores the concept, ability, reasons and variations of lies created and told by people. Whether it is a lie to the child about ‘if you don’t eat your spinach, you won’t be strong like Popeye’, or the parent who denies youthful discretions, this work discusses it all.

Bok asks “Is the ‘Whole Truth’ attainable?” And to that point, is it worth it? Do you really want to know what happened in the kitchen the last time you went to the fast food place for lunch? Sometimes ignorance is bliss.

Truthfulness, Deceit and Trust are brought up in such a way to question whether or not we should believe fairy tales any more than the news at 6:00 PM. Let’s take trust for example. Trust, I believe, is conditional and has a lot to do with faith. Not religious faith, but the faith (and belief/expectation) that most people who are guilty of a crime are going to lie during the first few minutes (at least) of an interview. As CFI’s, we are taught to expect that.

Is it okay to lie to protect others or for some other benevolent purpose? That depends on who and what is being protected and who is being deceived. Suppose an acute crisis erupts and threatens the lives of innocents. If a lie, whether big or small, will prevent tragedy, who will fault the person who made the lie and saved people?

I may be preaching to the choir here, but as professional interviewers, we are all aware of the line walked when it comes to interviewing. Simply asking the question, ‘Why would I keep a video of you handling money?’ may make the subject believe you have them on video taking money, but did we really ask that question? To the subject who is guilty, they believe we did.

Bok writes about several components of moral choice and ethics, including, weighing consequences, white lies, lies to the sick and dying, paternalistic lies, lies to liars and enemies, and my favorite lies for the public good. In addition to these, she also discusses Questions of Professional Responsibility. The next book I read by her will be on Happiness. My copy of Lying, will now reside next to Ayn Rand’s ‘Atlas Shrugged’.