

Women and honor: some notes on lying (1975) essay sample

[Life](#), [Relationships](#)



These notes were first read at the Hartwick Women Writers' Workshop, founded and directed by Beverly Tanenhaus, at Hartwick College, Oneonta, New York in June 1975. They were published as a pamphlet by Motherroot Press in Pittsburgh, 1977; in *Heresies: A Feminist Magazine of Art and Politics*, vol. 1, no. 1; and in a French translation by the Québécois feminist press, Les Editions du Remue-Ménage, 1979.

It is clear that among women we need a new ethics; as women, a new morality. The problem of speech, of language, continues to be primary. For if in our speaking we are breaking silences long established, "liberating ourselves from our secrets" in the words of Beverly Tanenhaus, this is in itself a first kind of action. I wrote *Women and Honor* in an effort to make myself more honest, and to understand the terrible negative power of the lie in relationships between women. Since it was published, other women have spoken and written of things I did not include: Michelle Cliff's "Notes on Speechlessness" in *Sinister Wisdom* no. 5 led Catherine Nicolson (in the same issue) to write of the power of "deafness", the frustration of our speech by those who do not want to hear what we have to say. Nelle Morton has written of the act of "hearing each other into speech" [Nelle Morton, "Beloved Image!", paper delivered at the National Conference of the American Academy of Religion, San Francisco, California, December 28, 1977]. How do we listen? How do we make it possible for another to break her silence? These are some of the questions which follow on the ones I've raised here.

(These notes are concerned with relationships between and among women. When “personal relationship” is referred to, I mean a relationship between two women. It will be clear in what follows when I am talking about women’s relationships with men.) The old, male idea of honour. A man’s “word” sufficed – to other men – without guarantee. “Our Land Free, Our Men Honest, Our Women Fruitful” – a popular colonial toast in America. Male honour also having something to do with killing: I could not love thee, Dear, so much/Lov’d I not Honour more, (“To Lucasta, on Going to the Wars”). Male honour as something needing to be avenged: hence the duel.

Women’s honour, something altogether else: virginity, chastity, fidelity to a husband. Honesty in women has not been considered important. We have been depicted as generically whimsical, deceitful, subtle, vacillating. And we have been rewarded for lying. Men have been expected to tell the truth about facts, not about feelings. They have not been expected to talk about feelings at all.

Yet even about facts they have continually lied.

We assume that politicians are without honour. We read their statements trying to crack the code. The scandals of their politics: not that men in high places lie, only that they do so with such indifference, so endlessly, still expecting to be believed. We are accustomed to the contempt inherent in the political lie.

To discover that one has been lied to in a personal relationships, however,

leads one to feel a little crazy.

Lying is done with words, and also with silence.

The woman who tells lies in her personal relationships may or may not plan or invent her lying. She may not even think of what she is doing in a calculated way.

A subject is raised which the liar wishes buried. She has to go downstairs, her parking meter will have run out. Or, there is a telephone call she ought to have made an hour ago. She is asked, point-blank, a question which may lead into painful talk: “ How do you feel about what is happening between us?” Instead of trying to describe her feelings in their ambiguity and confusion, she asks, “ How do you feel?” The other, because she is trying to establish a ground of openness and trust, begins describing her own feelings. Thus the liar learns more than she tells. And she may also tell herself a lie: that she is concerned with the other’s feelings, not with her own. But the liar is concerned with her own feelings.

The liar lives in fear of losing control. She cannot even desire a relationship without manipulation, since to be vulnerable to another person means for her the loss of control. The liar has many friends, and leads an existence of great loneliness. ***

The liar often suffers from amnesia. Amnesia is the silence of the unconscious. To lie habitually, as a way of life, is to lost contact with the unconscious. It is like taking sleeping pills, which confer sleep but blot out

dreaming. The unconscious wants truth. It ceases to speak to those who want something else more than truth.

In speaking of lies, we come inevitably to the subject of truth. There is nothing simple or easy about this idea. There is no “the truth”, “a truth” – truth is not one thing, or even a system. It is an increasing complexity. The pattern of the carpet is a surface. When we look closely, or when we become weavers, we learn of the tiny multiple threads unseen in the overall pattern, the knots on the underside of the carpet.

This is why the effort to speak honestly is so important. Lies are usually attempts to make everything simpler – for the liar – than it really is, or ought to be. In lying to others we end up lying to ourselves. We deny the importance of an event, or a person, and thus deprive ourselves of a part of our lives. Or we use one piece of the past or present to screen out another. Thus we lose faith even with our own lives.

The unconscious wants truth, as the body does. The complexity and fecundity of dreams come from the complexity and fecundity of the unconscious struggling to fulfil that desire. The complexity and fecundity of poetry come from the same struggle.

An honourable human relationship – that is, one in which two people have the right to use the word “love” – is a process, delicate, violent, often terrifying to both persons involved, a process of refining the truths they can tell each other.

It is important to do this because it breaks down human self-delusion and isolation. It is important to do this because in so doing we do justice to our own complexity. It is important to do this because we can count on so few people to go that hard way with us. ***

I come back to the questions of women's honour. Truthfulness has not been considered important for women, as long as we have remained physically faithful to a man, or chaste.

We have been expected to lie with our bodies: to bleach, redden, unkink or curl our hair, pluck eyebrows, shave armpits, wear padding in various places or lace ourselves, take little steps, glaze finger and toe nails, wear clothes that emphasised our helplessness. We have been required to tell different lies at different times, depending on what the men of the time needed to hear. The Victorian wife or the white southern lady, who were expected to have no sensuality, to "lie still"; the twentieth-century "free" woman who is expected to fake orgasms. We have had the truth of our bodies withheld from us or distorted; we have been kept in ignorance of our most intimate places. Our instincts have been punished: clitoridectomies for "lustful" nuns or for "difficult" wives. It has been difficult, too, to know the lies of our complicity from the lies we believed.

The lie of the "happy marriage", of domesticity - we have been complicit, have acted out the fiction of a well-lived life, until the day we testify in court of rapes, beatings, psychic cruelties, public and private humiliations.

Patriarchal lying has manipulated women both through falsehood and through silence. Facts we needed have been withheld from us. False witness has been borne against us. And so we must take seriously the question of truthfulness between women, truthfulness among women. As we cease to lie with our bodies, as we cease to take on faith what men have said about us, is a truly womanly idea of honour in the making?

Women have been forced to lie, for survival, to men. How to unlearn this among other women? “ Women have always lied to each other.”

“ Women have always whispered the truth to each other.” Both of these axioms are true.

“ Women have always been divided against each other.”

“ Women have always been in secret collusion.”

Both of these axioms are true.

In the struggle for survival we tell lies. To bosses, to prison guards, the police, men who have power over us, who legally own us and our children, lovers who need us as proof of their manhood. There is a danger run by all powerless people: that we forget we are lying, or that lying becomes a weapon we carry over into relationships with people who do not have power over us. ***

I want to reiterate that when we talk about women and honour, or women and lying, we speak within the context of male lying, the lies of the powerful, the lie as false source of power. Women have to think whether we want, in

our relationships with each other, the kind of power that can be obtained through lying.

Women have been driven mad, “ gaslighted”, for centuries by the refutation of our experience and our instincts in a culture which validates only male experience. The truth of our bodies and our minds has been mystified to us. We therefore have a primary obligation to each other: not to undermine each others’ sense of reality for the sake of expediency; not to gaslight each other. Women have often felt insane when cleaving to the truth of our experience. Our future depends on the sanity of each of us, and we have a profound stake, beyond the personal, in the project of describing our reality as candidly and fully as we can to each other.

There are phrases which help us not to admit we are lying: “ my privacy”, “ nobody’s business but my own”. The choices that underlie these phrases may indeed be justified; but we ought to think about the full meaning and consequences of such language.

Women’s love for women has been represented almost entirely through silence and lies. The institution of heterosexuality has forced the lesbian to dissemble, or be labeled a pervert, a criminal, a sick or dangerous woman, etc etc. The lesbian, then, has often been forced to lie, like the prostitute or the married women.

Does a life “ in the closet” – lying, perhaps of necessity, about ourselves to bosses, landlords, clients, colleagues, family, because the law and public

opinion are founded on a lie – does this, can it, spread into private life, so that lying (described as discretion) becomes an easy way to avoid conflict or complication? Can it become a strategy so ingrained that it is used even with close friends and lovers?

Heterosexuality as an institution has also drowned in silence the erotic feelings between women. I myself lived half a lifetime in the lie of that denial. That silence makes us all, to some degree, into liars.

When a woman tells the truth she is creating the possibility for more truth around her. ***

The liar leads an existence of unutterable loneliness.

The liar is afraid.

But we are all afraid: without fear we become manic, hubristic, self-destructive. What is this particular fear that possesses the liar?

She is afraid that her own truths are not good enough.

She is afraid, not so much of prison guards or bosses, but of something unnamed within her. The liar fears the void.

The void is not something created by patriarchy, or racism, or capitalism. It will not fade away with any of them. It is part of every woman.

“The dark core”, Virginia Woolf named it, writing of her mother. The dark core. It is beyond personality; beyond who loves us or hates us.

We begin out of the void, out of darkness and emptiness. It is part of the cycle understood by the old pagan religions, that materialism denies. Out of death, rebirth; out of nothing, something. The void is the creatrix, the matrix.

It is not mere hollowness and anarchy. But in women it has been identified with lovelessness, barrenness, sterility. We have been urged to fill our “emptiness” with children. We are not supposed to go down into the darkness of the core. Yet, if we can risk it, the something born of that nothing is the beginning of our truth. The liar in her terror wants to fill up the void, with anything. Her lies are a denial of her fear; a way of maintaining control.

Why do we feel slightly crazy when we realise we have been lied to in a relationship? We take so much of the universe on trust. You tell me: “ In 1950 I lived on the north side of Beacon Street in Somerville”. You tell me: “ She and I were lovers, but for months now we have only been good friends”. You tell me: “ It is seventy degrees outside and the sun is shining”. Because I love you, because there is not even a question of lying between us, I take these accounts of the universe on trust: your address twenty-five years ago, your relationship with someone I know only on sight, this morning’s weather. I fling unconscious tendrils of belief, like slender green threads, across statements such as these, statements made so unequivocally, which have no tone or shadow of tentativeness. I build them into the mosaic of my world. I allow my universe to change in minute, significant ways, on the basis of things you have said to me, of my trust in you. I also have faith that you are telling me things it is important I should know; that you do not conceal facts from me in an effort to spare me, or yourself, pain.

Or, at the very least, that you will say, “ There are things I am not telling you”. When we discover that someone we trusted can be trusted no longer, it forces us to reexamine the universe, to question the whole instinct and concept of trust. For awhile, we are thrust back onto some bleak, jutting edge, in a dark pierced by sheets of fire, swept by sheets of rain, in a world before kinship, or naming, or tenderness exist; we are brought close to formlessness. ***

The liar may resist confrontation, denying that she lied. Or she may use other language: forgetfulness, privacy, the protection of someone else. Or, she may bravely declare herself a coward. This allows her to go on lying, since that is what cowards do. She does not say, I was afraid, since this would open the question of other ways of handling her fear. It would open the question of what is actually feared.

She may say, I didn’t want to cause pain. What she really did not want is to have to deal with the other’s pain. The lie is a short-cut through another’s personality.

Truthfulness, honour, is not something which springs ablaze of itself. It has to be created between people.

This is true in political situations. The quality and depth of the politics evolving from a group depends in very large part on their understanding of honour. Much of what is narrowly termed “ politics” seems to rest on a longing for certainty even at the cost of honesty, for an analysis which, once given, need not be reexamined. Such is the deadendedness for women – of

Marxism in our time. Truthfulness anywhere means a heightened complexity. But it is a movement into evolution. Women are only beginning to uncover our own truths; many of us would be grateful for some rest in that struggle, would be glad just to lie down with the sherds we have painfully unearthed, and be satisfied with those. Often I feel this like an exhaustion in my own body. The politics worth having, the relationships worth having, demand that we delve still deeper. ***

The possibilities that exist between two people, or among a group of people, are a kind of alchemy. They are the most interesting thing in life. The liar is someone who keeps losing sight of these possibilities.

When relationships are determined by manipulation, by the need for control, they may possess a dreary, bickering kind of drama, but they cease to be interesting. They are repetitious; the shock of human possibilities has ceased to reverberate through them.

When someone tells me a piece of truth which has been withheld from me, and which I needed in order to see my life more clearly, it may bring acute pain, but it can also flood me with a cold, seasharp wash of relief. Often such truths come by accident, or from strangers. It isn't that to have an honourable relationship with you, I have to understand everything, or tell you everything at once, or that i can know, beforehand, everything I need to tell you. It means that most of the time I am eager, longing for the possibility of telling you. That these possibilities may seem frightening, but not destructive, to me. That I feel strong enough to hear your tentative and

groping words. That we both know we are trying, all the time, to extend the possibilities of truth between us.