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Chapter 3: Why Lies Fail

Lies fail for many reasons. The victim of deceit may accidentally uncover the evidence, finding hidden documents or a telltale lipstick stain on a handkerchief. Someone else may betray the deceiver. An envious colleague, an abandoned spouse, a paid informer, all are major sources for the detection of deception. What concerns us, however, are those mistakes made during the act of lying, mistakes the deceiver makes despite himself, lies that fail because of the liar's behavior. Deception clues or leakage may be shown in a change in the expression on the face, a movement of the body, an inflection to the voice, a swallowing in the throat, a very deep or shallow breath, long pauses between words, a slip of the tongue, a micro facial expression, a gestural slip. The question is: Why can't liars prevent these behavioral betrayals? Sometimes they do. Some lies are performed beautifully; nothing in what the liar says or does betrays the lie. Why not always? There are two reasons, one that involves thinking and one that involves feeling.

Bad Lines

Liars do not always anticipate when they will need to lie. There is not always time to prepare the line to be taken, to rehearse and memorize it. Ruth, in the incident I quoted from Updike's novel *Marry Me*, did not anticipate that her husband, Jerry would overhear her speaking on the telephone to her lover. The cover story she invents on the spot -that it is the Sunday school calling about their children-betrays her because it does not fit with what her husband overheard her say.

Even when there has been ample advance notice, and a false line has been carefully devised, the liar may not be clever enough to anticipate all the questions that may be asked and to have thought through what his answers must be. Even cleverness may not be enough, for unseen changes in circumstances can betray an otherwise effective line. During the Watergate grand jury investigation federal judge John J. Sirica described such a problem in explaining his reactions to the testimony of Fred Buzhardt, special counsel to President Nixon: "The first problem Fred Buzhardt faced in trying to explain why the tapes were missing was to get his story straight. On the opening day of the hearing, Buzhardt said there was no tape of the president's April 15 meeting with Dean because a timer...had failed. ...But before long revised his first explanation. (Buzhardt had learned that other evidence might become known that would show that the timers were in fact working.) He now said that the April 15 meeting with Dean...hadn't been recorded because both tapes had been filled up during a busy day of meetings." Even when a liar is not forced by circumstances to change lines, some liars have trouble recalling the line they have previously committed themselves to, so that new questions cannot be consistently answered quickly.

Any of these failures-in anticipating when it will be necessary to lie, in inventing a line adequate to changing circumstances, in remembering the line one has adopted-- produce easily spotted clues to deceit. What the person says is either internally inconsistent or discrepant with other incontrovertible facts, known at the time or later revealed.

Such obvious clues to deceit are not always as reliable and straightforward as they seem. Too smooth a line may be the sign of a well-rehearsed con man. To make matters worse, some con men, knowing this, purposely make slight mistakes in order not to seem too smooth. James Phelan, an investigative reporter, described a fascinating instance of this trick in his account of the Howard Hughes biography hoax.

No one had seen Hughes for years, which only added to the public's fascination with this billionaire, who also made movies and who owned an airline and the largest gambling house in Las Vegas. Hughes had not been seen for so long that some doubted he was alive. It was astonishing that a person who was so reclusive would authorize anyone to write his biography. Yet that is what Clifford Irving claimed to have produced. McGraw-Hill paid Irving \$750,000 to publish it; Life magazine paid \$250,000 to publish three excerpts; and it turned out to be a fake! Clifford Irving was ". . . a great con man, one of the best. Here's an example. When we cross examined him, trying to break down his story, he never made the mistake of telling his story the same way each time. There would be little discrepancies in it, and when we'd catch him up, he'd freely admit them. The average con man will have his story down letter-perfect, so he can tell it over and over without deviation. An honest man usually makes little mistakes, particularly in relating a long, complex story like Cliffs. Cliff was smart enough to know this, and gave a superb impersonation of an honest man. When we'd catch him up on something that looked incriminating, he'd freely say, 'Gee, that makes it look bad for me, doesn't it? But that's the way it happened.' He conveyed the picture of being candid, even to his own detriment--while he was turning lie after lie after lie. There is no protection against such cleverness; the most skillful con men do succeed. Most liars are not so devious.

Lack of preparation or a failure to remember the line one has adopted may produce clues to deceit in how a line is spoken, even when there are no inconsistencies in what is said. The need to think about each word before it is spoken--weighing possibilities, searching for a word or idea--may be obvious in pauses during speech or, more subtly, in a tightening of the lower eyelid or eyebrow and certain changes in gesture (explained in more detail in chapters 4 and 5). Not that carefully considering each word before it is spoken is always a sign of deceit, but in some circumstances it is. When Jerry asks Ruth who she has been talking with on the phone, any signs that she was carefully selecting her words would suggest she was lying.

Lying about Feelings

A failure to think ahead, plan fully, and rehearse the false line is only one of the reasons why mistakes that furnish clues to deceit are made when lying. Mistakes are also made because of difficulty in concealing or falsely portraying emotion. Not every lie involves emotions, but those that do cause special problems for the liar. An attempt to conceal an emotion at the moment it is felt could be betrayed in words, but except for a slip of the tongue, it usually isn't. Unless there is a wish to confess what is felt, the liar doesn't have to put into words the feelings being concealed. One has less choice in concealing a facial expression or rapid breathing or a tightening in the voice.

When emotions are aroused, changes occur automatically without choice or deliberation. These changes begin in a split second. In *Marry Me*, when Jerry accuses Ruth of lying, Ruth has no trouble stopping the words "Yes, it's true!" from popping out of her mouth. But panic about her affair being discovered seizes her, producing visible and audible signs. She does not choose to feel panic; nor can she choose to stop feeling it. It is beyond her control. That, I believe, is fundamental to the nature of emotional experience.

People do not actively select when they will feel an emotion. Instead, they usually experience emotions more passively as happening to them, and, in the case of negative emotions such as fear or anger, it may happen to them despite themselves. Not only is there little choice about when an emotion is felt, but people often don't feel they have much choice about whether or not the expressive signs of the emotion are manifest to others. Ruth could not simply decide to eliminate any signs of her panic. There is no relax button she could press that would interrupt her emotional reactions. It may not even be possible to control one's actions if the emotion felt is very strong. A strong emotion explains, even if it does not always excuse, improper actions--"I didn't mean to yell (pound the table, insult you, hit you), but I lost my temper. I was out of control."

When an emotion begins gradually rather than suddenly, if it starts at a very low level--annoyance rather than fury--the changes in behavior are small and are relatively easy to conceal if one is aware of what one is feeling. Most people are not. When an emotion begins gradually and remains slight, it may be more noticeable to others than to the self, not registering in awareness unless it becomes more intense. Once an emotion is strong, however, it is much harder to control. Concealing the changes in face, body, and voice requires a struggle. Even when the concealment is successful and there is no leakage of the feelings, sometimes the struggle itself will be noticeable as a deception clue.

While concealing an emotion is not easy, neither is falsifying the appearance of an unfeared emotion, even when there is no other emotion that must be concealed. It requires more than just saying "I am angry" or "I am afraid." The deceiver must look and sound as if he is angry or afraid if his claim is to be believed. It is not easy to assemble the right movements, the particular changes in voice, that are required for falsifying emotions. There are certain movements of the face, for example, that very few people can perform voluntarily. (These are described in chapter 5). These difficult-to-perform movements are vital to successful falsification of distress, fear, and anger.

Falsifying becomes much harder just when it is needed most, to help conceal another emotion. Trying to look angry is not easy, but if fear is felt when the person tries to look angry the person will be torn. One set of impulses arising out of the fear pulls one way, while the deliberate attempt to seem angry pulls the other way. The brows, for example, are involuntarily pulled upward in fear. But to falsify anger the person must pull them down. Often the signs of this internal struggle between the felt and the false emotion themselves betray the deceit.

What about lies that don't involve emotions, lies about actions, plans, thoughts, intentions, facts, or fantasies? Are these lies betrayed by the liar's behavior?

--- Much more to be found in the book itself---