

Reasons for Honour in a Godless Society

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THE GREATER THE DISTANCE between the public and private person, the bigger the fall. We always wonder: why? Why mislead when it would cost you so little to tell the truth? Why did the James Hardie board act as it did? Why did Marcus Einfeld lie rather than pay a \$75 speeding fine? Why, when he was caught in that small lie, did he proceed to tell a much larger one? Interviewed about it, he had no insight: "I have no idea why I did what I did."

People may lie with good reason: to save their lives, their livelihood or their safety. But what do we say about the self-defeating lies, the lies without any point, the lies with no upside and—as Einfeld discovered—such abysmal downside?

A common denominator for all liars is the calculation that we won't be caught out. It becomes a habit, and soon the logic is inverted, so that if there's little likelihood of being caught, the lie turns into a reflex, a default position.

In the compulsive liar there is a kind of joyous masochism at work. It's not that this kind of liar has no conscience, no knowledge of right and wrong, no sense of honour. It's not that this kind of liar doesn't feel pain. It's not even that the pain isn't strong enough to stop the lies. It's that this person somehow enjoys the self-harm every bit as much as a masochist may enjoy the scald of the burning cigarette on their skin. It is the mortification they seek, the private paradoxical buzz of wounding oneself, taking control of the causes of pain, and then relishing the dreadful wait for the phone call, the knock at the door.

Christopher Hitchens wrote about this in a 2008 *Slate* column called "So many men's rooms, so little time". His pretext was Larry Craig, the US Republican Party senator caught "foot-tapping" in a public toilet, but his information came from Tom Driberg, a former British politician who led a double life. Driberg told Hitchens that the double-lifer is not only exhilarated by the permanent risk of exposure, but empowered by "a sense of superiority that a double life could give. What bliss it was to enter the House of Commons, bow to the speaker, and take your seat amid the trappings of lawmaking, having five minutes earlier felled a guardsman (and on one unforgettable occasion, a policeman) in the crapper in St James' Park."

Such people, Hitchens theorises, "have a need, which they only imperfectly understand, to get caught. And this may be truest of all of those who are armoured with 'the breastplate of righteousness'. Next time you hear some particularly moralising speech, set your watch. You won't have to wait long before the man who made it is found, crouched awkwardly yet ecstatically while the cistern drips and the roar of the flush maddens him like wine."

For such a person—and indeed for those of us who sleep soundly and straight in the bed of mendacity—what is there to stop us? If there's no all-seeing eye, no God, no conscience, and when it's in our interest to take the dishonest choice, when we can get away with it, when we can think of any number of rationalisations, when we actually

enjoy the masochistic pleasure—what is standing between us and the lie?

I don't think urban Western pragmatists have fully worked this out. We are distressed and discomfited by an Einfeld, or the actions of the James Hardie directors, but not because we share the shame. Honour-driven cultures do share the shame; acts of dishonour tar everyone with the same brush.

In the post-Enlightenment West we quarantine the liar but are shaken nonetheless, because these acts remind us that the creed of personal integrity is not yet strong enough to carry us to a world beyond the carrot and stick of honour and shame.

In the Enlightenment, the West substituted law and justice, underpinned by personal integrity, for the old codes of honour and shame, but we remain anxious about whether we have quite built that bridge to the other side.

We live in a pluralistic Australia and a pluralistic globe, in which honour-and-shame communities co-exist with the pragmatic children of the Enlightenment. We see them as barbaric, for the weight they place on honour. They see us as corrupt, with our misplaced faith in a secular, individual, relativistic idea of personal integrity.

The Western world may believe it has shed the ancient codes of honour. But the Western world is not the Western world anymore. Cultures of honour and shame are marching through our doors every day, with all that they bring, and are our partners on the international stage. We dismiss or mock them at our peril. We have only one way forward—and that is backwards, into our own collective and individual histories, when we, too, were governed by codes of honour rather than the rule of law.