

Some People Have to Lie to Survive.
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From the beginning of time, human beings have learned that telling the truth is not always the best policy. Courtiers learned not to tell truth to a king; workers had to lie to their bosses; women feared speaking the truth to a husband, as did children to their parents. Telling the truth, a value of modern Western life, is a luxury born of a society that punishes lies, not truth. And yes, our politicians are still learning this.

A recent movie, Easy A, tells the story of a bright high school girl with no status among her popular peers who, in a moment of folly, lies to her best friend that she had a date and lost her virginity to a collage boy over the weekend. Within nanoseconds, the lie was believed and passed around to everyone. She was no longer ignored, but was approached by other \223losers\224 who wanted her to lie about having had sex with them (a gay youngster and a fat boy). The rumors grew in scope, and inspired by the book her class was reading, The Scarlet Letter, the girl sewed large letter \223A\224 on all her clothes. The point of the whole movie was that everybody in that school had to lie about something in order to \223fit in.\224

Homosexuals have been in that situation for centuries now. Even today, they must if not exactly lie, at least pretend, to remain in the military. \223Don\222t Ask, Don\222t Tell,\224 is the military code and telling the truth is a one-way ticket to dismissal. In many benighted places in the world today, homosexuals may be sentenced to death. It used to be a criminal behavior even in the West.

A few years ago, someone made a film about Afghanistan during the Taliban dictatorship where a family without a father or sons (a grandmother, mother, and little daughter) were forbidden to go out of the house or find work. They would have starved. Instead, they disguised the girl as a boy and she apprenticed to a shopkeeper, providing them all with food. She came to a terrible end.

What I thought was fiction turns out to be a common practice in Afghanistan. (See \223Afghan Boys are Prized, So Girls Live the Part\224 by Jenny Nordberg, New York Times, 9/21/10.) Families with no boy children select one of their girls to pretend to be a boy, until her first menstruation reveals her gender, at which point a younger sister becomes the designated boy. A pseudo-boy can go to school, can work, can accompany the other girls and adult women in the streets. Why would anyone in that society want to be female? Except under one circumstance: Afghan adult males have a keen sexual appetite for young boys, not girls. A pseudo-boy could be in real trouble if so targeted.

For some girls playing at being boys, changing back is too great a price to pay. An athletic girl, who as a boy can play sports, cannot bear to give it up. A clever girl who is getting a boy\222s education finds reverting to the female world with its claustrophobic ignorance impossible. They run into problems with their families, society, and the endemic misogyny that rules Afghanistan.

Interestingly enough, even in Western history, there have been stories about women who passed themselves off as males\227for adventure, to go to war, and even to become pirates. There is also the story of Pope Joan\227a woman who hid her gender to become a pope in the Middle Ages. And then there is the story Yentle, made into a movie, about a Jewish girl who disguised herself as a boy so that she could go to school.

Being human is being both male and female\227and even includes those who have the body of one but the emotions of the other gender. Sometimes it even includes being both\227a hermaphrodite. For all of us, it should not be necessary to lie to fit in\227or survive.

655 words

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