

## Chapter One: An Inconsequential Untruth

*They call it a “white” lie because you feel pure after telling it.*

For old times’ sake, you’ve been meaning to get together with Jane, a friend from your previous job, who helped you through the tough times before you switched jobs. But every time Jane suggests a date, you say you’re busy. You never tell her the real reason you’re always so busy. You keep it kind of quiet. You’ve been working on a book, nourishing the hope that someday writing can become your full-time occupation.

A few days ago Jane suggested lunch at one of the old hangouts, and you finally accepted. You felt you needed to do it this time. You’re actually looking forward to it—sort of. Then, the day before your date, you get a call from a close friend who knows your passion for writing and has contacts in the publishing industry. She managed to get a meeting with a respected publisher, a lunch meeting, tomorrow!

You accept, but a sinking feeling sets in instantly. You’ve made two promises and you can’t fulfill both. You can’t pass up this opportunity to meet an important publisher but how are you going to tell Jane you’re canceling on her. Your mind races through the catalog of possible excuses and lands on this: “Something’s come up at work.” After all, no one argues when it comes to work. Work comes first. Everyone understands that. Of course it doesn’t feel quite right to lie, but it’s only a white lie, right?

Before you call Jane with your white lie, let’s look at the opportunity you have to drop a bad habit and create a good one: to substitute truth-telling for lying. This is a moment to reimagine integrity as a practice of keeping promises rather than avoiding

embarrassment. You made a promise to Jane. She has a reasonable expectation that you will keep your promise. You now have a duty to fulfill her reasonable expectation.

Of course, there are exceptions that excuse a promise. First, emergencies can arise. Everyone understands that a car accident, a child's sudden illness, or a crisis at work are unforeseen events that excuse the fulfillment of a promise. Even if a friend is sitting impatiently at a restaurant tapping at her smart phone, irritated or worried, she will release you from your promise after learning the facts.

Also, new circumstances may arise that require you to break a promise even when the person to whom you made it is not so understanding. For instance, you may promise a friend to take him drinking after he helped paint your garage, but then you learn he's an alcoholic. You don't want to enable conduct that could be damaging to his health, so you break that promise. Avoiding harm to another is an implied promise that we must keep even if we have to break an explicit promise to do it.

But here you are breaking a promise, not because of an emergency or to avoid harm, but because you got a better offer and an exciting one at that—a lot more exciting than picking over old times with a former coworker. Let's face it, you're throwing Jane over for a better deal, and you're embarrassed to admit it. So, to avoid unpleasantness, you tell a white lie. "It's just a white lie," you tell yourself, but what you're telling yourself is an illusion: the illusion of inconsequence.

White lying is a perfect storm of illusion. We lie to get what we want, we tell ourselves it protects the feelings of the other person, and we remain certain of the purity of our motives. They call this kind of lie, "white" because you feel pure after telling it.

This illusion manages to pass under the radar screen of self-awareness, leaving intact our self-image as persons of integrity. It's perfect: the perfect illusion of inconsequence.

But here's the catch. In the moment you deploy the white lie, you've deepened the habit of deceiving others and habituated yourself to finding excuses rather than telling the truth. The irony is that it would be so simple to tell the truth and ask Jane to release you from your promise. For instance:

Jane, about our date for lunch tomorrow! I realize it took a lot of time to set up, and I apologize for calling you this late. But something just came up: an opportunity to meet a publisher that may be interested in the book I'm working on. I never told you about this but it's something I've been working on for a long time. Would it be all right if we postpone our lunch?

How about we get our calendars out right now and set another date?

If you don't want to tell Jane about your book, then just say a rare opportunity came up that simply may not happen again. If you're unsure how the truth will sound when you say it, write it out first, then practice saying it out loud. I bet as you practice saying the truth, you'll get more and more confident speaking it.

Jane may not like being thrown over no matter what the reason. Practicing integrity is not just about the impact on Jane. It is about deepening your habit for truth-telling, getting better at the practice of integrity. If meeting this publisher is so important that you want to cancel your date with Jane, then it's important enough to tell the truth to Jane about it.

Of course, if Jane says no, then you must go through with lunch. You made a

promise. Creating a habit of truth-telling also means that when you ask to be released, you mean to be bound by the answer. You must always ask to be released from a promise.

And, that goes for your alcoholic friend too, although in his case, it is irrelevant whether he releases you. Avoiding harm to another human being is an implicit promise that supersedes any explicit one. Whatever he thinks of you for breaking your promise, as with Jane, you've trained yourself to tell the truth and trained him to expect it from you.

### **Remember the law of small things**

A promise must always be fulfilled unless you are released from it.

## **Chapter Two: The Law of Reasonable Expectation**

*Which calls and emails do you return?*

In Chapter One, counting promises was relatively easy because the promise to have lunch with Jane was explicit. In this chapter and the ones that follow in this Part, we will look at implied promises. Implied promises create reasonable expectations just as explicit promises do. But, because implied promises are unstated, they are easy to miss and easy to break. The ability to see, or “discern” implied promises is central to the practice of integrity, so we need to strengthen the habit of discerning implied promises.

Let's look at a really simple example of an implied promise: answering emails. Most of us at one point or another fall behind on emails. We feel bad because we know many of them should be answered, but we simply don't have the time. So we plow through our inbox, responding to the ones that seem most “important.”

But how often do we stop and simply ask: what makes an email important? Which ones do we have a duty to answer because of an explicit or implied promise we make. We don't ask ourselves these questions because most of the time the decision on what emails to answer is made automatically. Chances are what we might define as "important" is a swampy mix of responding to those who can do us a favor, to avoid the embarrassment of not responding or simply to get someone off our back. To prove the point, stop reading right now. Now take a minute and just jot down the criteria you use for judging the importance of emails.

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Ok. Got it? Now, what happened when you did this little exercise? Do you actually have a rule you use? Or did you just come up with a rationale for what you have been doing automatically?

When we do things automatically, without intention or out of habit, we often wind up stressed because we don't really know why we're doing something. So the question is: can we take control of our emotions and our emails by counting promises. Literally count them.

Here's how to do it. With each email, ask: have I made a promise that I must keep by responding to this sender? I don't just mean confirming a proposed time and date for a meeting, agreeing to pick up your spouse at a certain time, or acknowledging an

understanding previously reached. I mean keeping an implied promise: like when a friend emails that he's having trouble with a boss and you have an insight that can help, or when a former colleague, like Jane, says she's having trouble finding another job and you think you could help, or a friend asks for a recommendation on a place to stay in a city you frequent, or a neighbor sends a group email looking for help at the block party he's organizing. Okay, you get the idea.

Many of us instinctively resist new obligations and automatically think up plausible ways of getting out of them. Practicing integrity means substituting this habit of evasion with the habit of truth-telling. For most of us, this requires a massive shift in the way we view our participation in the world: from a beleaguered accomplice in countless cultural rituals and personal obligations, to a fully engaged participant in the life of others, contributing to them by fulfilling their reasonable expectations.

That is what integrity is: enriching our interactions at home, at work, in our communities, and in our nation by keeping implied promises arising from the reasonable expectations of others. To many of us, though, the word expectation sounds like a trap. How many times have we been told to avoid the expectations of others, or the tyranny of our own excessive expectations? Actually, the trap is seeing expectations as a trap. There is a way to avoid that trap: by learning to distinguish between reasonable and unreasonable expectations.

Let's say your mother, whom you love dearly, calls every day expecting you to listen for an hour while she saunters through a lengthy account of her day. She may sincerely feel that as her son you have made an implied promise to do so. But the sincerity of her

feeling does not make her expectation that you listen to such verbose daily accounts reasonable. And because her expectation is not reasonable, you have no duty to fulfill it.

True, you may feel bad about dreading her calls, not really listening to her or itching to get off as soon as you can. There are names we use to describe those feelings, like guilt, shame or embarrassment, but the important thing is that those feelings have nothing to do with integrity. Why? Because you made no explicit promise, nor could one be implied, to extend that level of attention to her. Her expectation that you do so is unreasonable and you have no duty to fulfill her unreasonable expectation.

Now, you may choose to comply with your mom's unreasonable expectation out of compassion, love, or pity, and feel proud about doing a good thing, but that does not mean you "have integrity" for doing so. The fulfillment of an unreasonable expectation, no matter how widely regarded as commendable, or how deeply regarded by you as noble, is not an act of integrity, because integrity does not require the fulfillment of unreasonable expectations.

I realize this may strike you as odd, or, well, just plain nonsense. After all, aren't we talking about virtuous actions here, and isn't virtue the same thing as integrity? In a word, "No." Here's why. If we are to make any sense of the complex demands on us, it is crucial to make distinctions between actions that keep promises—that is, meeting the reasonable expectations of other persons—and the things we may choose to do purely as a matter of personal choice. To practice integrity we need to keep this boundary clear in our mind. You do not have to count the unreasonable expectations of others as promises.

Of course, there are many actions people do beyond anything reasonably expected of

them that provide them with immense personal satisfaction, attract the admiration of others, and ennoble our society. The kindness of listening to a loquacious mom is an extraordinary act, so is valor on the battlefield (“courage over and beyond the call of duty”), and so is generosity in giving all your money to charity. But integrity does not require extraordinary acts; it requires us to keep promises, the ones we undertake explicitly and the ones implied by the reasonable expectations of others. That is extraordinary enough. That alone is enough to transform our lives and the life of our nation.

Unless we get this distinction straight, we will remain caught in the swirling currents of unreasonable expectations. Our minds throw up endless thoughts in the course of a day—some 80,000<sup>1</sup>—many of them negative, a perpetual inventory of the guilt we haul around throughout our lives. Guilt is no substitute for integrity. The practice of integrity is a means to displace guilt with the duty to fulfill the reasonable expectations of others. A new habit.

So, next time you feel overwhelmed by emails, just ask yourself: which of these emails are you reasonably expected to answer because of an explicit promise made to the sender or a promise implied in your relationship with her. I predict that counting these promises will yield meaning from an otherwise tiresome ritual.

### **Remember the law of small things**

A reasonable expectation of another person arises when we make an explicit promise or when one is implied by our conduct. Someone simply wanting something from us is not necessarily reasonable.

### **Chapter Three: The Benign Benevolence of Friends**

*Free dinner on an expense account or freeloading on community trust?*

In Chapter One, we saw that reasonable expectations arise from an explicit promise, like the lunch date with Jane. In Chapter Two, we saw that a reasonable expectation can arise also from an implied promise. But in both chapters, the question was whether a promise was made to another person. In this chapter we ask whether there is such a thing as an implied promise to an institution, or group of persons.

Let's say you have a close friend from high school, Bill, a partner in a prominent financial services company who often comes to town and you usually go out to dinner. Every time it comes time to pay, he grabs the bill. You protest but he says, "I'll just put it on the company expense account." He explains that the cost of dinner is a fraction of his "expenses" and his company "couldn't care less" if he takes out a friend while in town on business.

So let's start counting promises. Do you have any to keep here? For instance, do you have an implied promise to a company that doesn't know who you are and "couldn't care less" that Bill is buying your dinner? No. As for Bill, if he had a reasonable expectation that you should not be accepting a free meal, he wouldn't be offering or insisting that you accept. So, there's no implied promise to Bill.

Still, if you think you have no promises to keep in this situation, then you are indulging the illusion of inconsequence. To illustrate the point, let's take a look at this on a personal level. Let's say your friend Bill was going through a crisis at work, a child's

illness, or a marital difficulty, and you missed it because you were too absorbed in your own worries. We are all occasional victims of self-absorption and we sometimes let people down.

When it happens, and if we recognize it, we apologize, right? We apologize in order to acknowledge that we breached a friend's reasonable expectation of support. Our thoughtlessness breached an implied promise of loyalty and jeopardized his trust in us. We try to learn from those mistakes and do better next time and if we do, trust is rebuilt and friendships get stronger.

So now let's ask: is a breach of trust any less damaging when it affects an entire nation, not just a single individual? The acts of individuals breaching trust are certainly harder to see and easier to dismiss because it seems, well ... inconsequential to the fate of a nation. But how small is it really? Doesn't trust in the institutions of our society require the same attention, occupy the same importance and require the same effort to repair?

Let's take a look at what happens to trust in a nation when we breach implied promises to others. Each participant in the mortgage crisis culminating in 2008 believed that his part was inconsequential: the millions of homeowners who sought mortgages they couldn't afford, the banks that granted them without adequate collateral, the brokerage houses that invented a security out of these substandard mortgages, the insurance companies that guaranteed the security without adequate reserves, and the rating agencies that glossed over these weaknesses, until the combined weight of these individual acts plunged the nation into a decade-long economic crisis. No one was counting promises; they were simply pursuing self-interest.

So, let's get back to counting promises. Isn't there an implied promise we make to everyone else as part of an interdependent society to refrain from seeking personal advantage at the expense of mutual trust? Doesn't each of us have a reasonable expectation of everyone else to act in a way that strengthens trust in the institutions we all depend upon?

Remember, the term reasonable expectation means that which we value in the actions of others, not what we no longer predict will occur, or what we've stopped hoping will happen after repeated disappointment.

We have a reasonable expectation that our vote is important even though it's just one of millions and we wonder if either candidate will really change anything,

We have a reasonable expectation that our kids will recognize their responsibility to assist in household chores, even if we accurately predict they will find some excuse not to.

We reasonably expect that if we offer ourselves to listen to another person, including our parents and friends prone to verbosity, that they will not abuse our patience even if they can't seem to help themselves.

And, in this case, we have a reasonable expectation that businesses and other institutions in our society will be truthful in their conduct, even though much of the time they don't.

Wouldn't you agree that padding expense accounts undermines our reasonable expectation of trust in business, even though we know that padding happens every day? By insisting on paying for your own meal, rather than letting your friend Bill pay, you are

keeping your implied promise to contribute to the trust that sustains our communities, including the business community, and fulfilling our shared expectation of duty to the community. It may seem like a small thing but the ties that bind a community, like a friendship, wither when trust is eroded.

Here's another way to kick the habit of dismissing things as "too small to matter." Ask yourself: Is there a role I can play, however small, to stem the tide of corruption that erodes trust in business? Only by viewing ourselves as personally involved in contributing to the maintenance of trust in our institutions, like we do our friendships, are we capable of fulfilling the duty of community.

**Remember the law of small things**

The duty of community promotes trust in the common institutions upon which we all depend.