

# Keep It Fake

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**James:** I found this excellent article in *The New York Times* recently and I thought that it would be helpful for people who are stuck with a predominantly negative narrative about themselves and people whose desire to “tell the truth” blinds them to the obviously spiritual benefits of the white lie. It reinforces Vedanta’s idea that our experience derives from our thoughts. If I think there is something wrong with me because, for example, I have been a real or imagined victim of someone or something in the past, my present life will be nothing more than an unpleasant reliving of that trauma. As Vedanta asserts and this article agrees, we need not keep the uncomfortable narrative alive. We can invent one that generates a more salubrious experience. I have emboldened sentences which I think encapsulate the idea.

**The New York Times:** Toward the end of his terrific new philosophical investigation, *Keep It Fake: Inventing an Authentic Life*, Eric G. Wilson admits that, as with many of us, learning how to be a good dad was something he had a tough time figuring out. On the cusp of fatherhood he was working too much, and drinking too much – sound familiar? – and battling depression. But he had the good sense and good luck to find an excellent psychiatrist.

“Dr. S. maintained – no, bellowed, for he was a crazy man, not afraid to go to the floor and scream to make a point – that I would never be able to be a good father or husband, or indeed person in general, and never be able to find a jot of joy until I stopped treating my depression as a tyrant determining all my moves. **I needed a new narrative.**”

“‘Go home, Eric,’ Dr. S. urged. ‘You’re an English major guy and so should enjoy this; **construct a new book of life, a novel in which you as protagonist have power and grace.**’”

Many of us nod and agree with our shrinks until we get back to the house or the office and then proceed to act in just the same way we always have. But Wilson took his psychiatrist’s advice. He decided that rather than trying to be Super Dad – the kind of responsible, serious, conscientious father he had always planned on being – he would become Crazy Dad. “Calling myself Crazy Dad, instead of Depressed Parent, and acting as though this identity were real and so enjoying a more zany, capricious, playful, capacious, love-charged, creative existence: these behaviors illustrated to me repeatedly the power of my imagination.” **Wilson adopted a more self-consciously performative role in all of his relationships, and he found that rather than feeling what we might fear for him – a kind of disjunctive distance from himself and others – his social life, his love life and his depression all improved.** It wasn’t just “fake it till you make it.” He had to be more intelligent than that; he had to recognize his strengths and weaknesses, and **be willing to actively cultivate those habits that contributed to his particular flourishing in the many different roles he had to perform.** Like any good actor, he had to play to his strengths.

## Limited Identities

Because of the enormous influence of the sociologist Erving Goffman's *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959), it has become relatively uncontroversial that **we all act our way through the day**: I am one man as a father, another as a husband, still another as a teacher, yet another as a mentor or a friend. But there is an undeniable tension between that observation and **the nagging feeling we all share that behind those masks there is a "real me," a "genuine self," some kind of master narrator who stands behind, informs, controls and even unifies these other selves**. After all, if I am not one self but many selves, can I ever tell the truth about myself? It solves the problem of self-deception: **when I successfully lie to myself** – an act of self-refuting psycho-logic that, on the face of it, looks paradoxical, impossible, absurd – **it is simply one of my selves hiding the truth from another of my selves**. But what about those selves that make up the self that is me? Do they have component selves too? Are we "turtles all the way down," selves upon selves upon selves? That sounds like a threat to all kinds of things we hold dear. Self-knowledge, telling the truth about how we feel, sharing frightening aspects of ourselves with loved ones, developing intimacy, cultivating a coherent, reliable personhood: these virtues seem to be threatened by the idea that we are merely playing the game of being a person. Sincerity, integrity, authenticity – it's not too much to say that these ideals of selfhood are sacred to us. They are moral ideals yoked to another sacred cow of the good life (especially the American version): being honest.

In an epigraph to his book, Wilson quotes Oscar Wilde: "The crude commercialism of America, its materializing spirit, its indifference to the poetical side of things and its lack of imagination... are entirely due to that country having adopted for its national hero a man who, according to his own confession, was incapable of telling a lie, and it is not too much to say that the story of George Washington and the cherry tree has done more harm, and in a shorter space of time, than any other moral tale in the whole of literature."

By putting Wilde right up front, Wilson lays his cards on the table: the romantic view of life and selfhood is argued against a more traditional, and still more popular, enlightenment view. The artist is championed over the scientist; creating truth matters more than discovering it. That said, and like many of us who work on deception and self-deception, Wilson wants to have his cake and eat it too. On the one hand he insists that all of life is a kind of fictionalizing; on the other he wants to reassure us that we can believe what he says, that he can be trusted, that these games are played in the service of the truth.

A recent episode of the radio show *This American Life* tells the story of a man named Michael Leviton, who was raised to always tell the truth. Leviton finds over time that his life has become less and less livable – he can't keep friends, let alone lovers – until, miraculously, he finally realizes the secret: **let himself lie. Not all the time and not every time it's convenient, but strategically, in order to please others, in order to put his best foot forward**. Suddenly, his life turns around. He has friends. Romance blossoms. Work improves. All because Leviton is teaching himself to be... dishonest. In Wilson's terms, he's learning how to fake it.

Maybe the lesson is that truth and falsehood are like many other good things: healthy for us in the right amount, unhealthy when we don't get enough or indulge in too much. Wilson can't be Crazy Dad all the time, and indeed as his daughter grows up, the kind of crazy dad she will benefit from – speaking as a fellow crazy dad

of three daughters, ages twenty, ten and eight – will change over time. But that’s the great appeal to me of Wilson’s view and this book: he is brave enough to admit that **the work of trying to be a good person requires you to think very hard – yes, very honestly – about how you actually interact with others.** Merely “telling the truth” or “being true to yourself” is too easy and, ultimately, too selfish. Like any good artist, you can never forget your audience. What you don’t want to do is believe your own press.

*Keep It Fake: Inventing an Authentic Life* by Eric G. Wilson. 226 pages, Sarah Crichton Books/Farrar, Straus & Giroux. \$25.