

~ Life in LAMORINDA ~

SMC course on the truth behind lying



SMC Jan Term instructor Rob Weiner

Photo Lou Fancher

By Lou Fancher

When people say we're all destined to experience two life events – birth and death – they're forgetting one other common denominator: lying. "I don't think we'll ever meet someone who's never told a lie," or been at the receiving end of a lie, says Saint Mary's College Jan Term instructor Rob Weiner.

Weiner ought to know. Not simply due to the fact that the long-term liberal arts professor, writer and expert on creativity is human and has therefore lied and been lied to, but because he's a scholar and has studied the topic for decades. Officially retiring eight years ago after 25 years as a liberal arts professor at Saint Mary's and Sonoma State University, Weiner relies for his Lying 101 course on multiple degrees in philosophy, literature and religious studies from Johns Hopkins, Georgetown, Yale, and the University of Cologne.

"Long ago my specialization became creativity and invention," he says. "People would always say, 'I'm not creative.' I'd ask them if they'd ever told a lie, made up something that wasn't so, which meant they did have creative ability." Evolving to broader questions concerning gullibility and critical thinking, Weiner found access routes to facial recognition and lie detection analysis pioneered by psychologist and UCSF professor emeritus Paul Ekman and books including Sissela Bok's groundbreaking "Lying," published in 1978.

"It's a classic," says Weiner. "What has changed in 20 years is that now, you can go to any bookstore or go online and find books on the subject. When I started, it was a novel topic. Now it's widespread, in part because of fake news and social media."

On the first day of the Jan Term course Weiner has led for a half dozen years on the Moraga campus, 23 students watch Stephen Colbert's 2005 late night broadcast parody explaining fake news and "truthiness." In it, the comedian speaks of truth felt "in his gut," a physical location in which it seems emotion and reason swirl, simultaneously nauseating and comic. "How we combine truth and lies is one of the things we talk about," says Weiner.

The four-week course covers multiple aspects of lying: relational; philosophical; the psychology of lies in the business world, public rela-

tions and marketing; the ethics of lying to protect innocent victims; neurological biomarkers of compulsive, pathological lying; and a book that could be memoir or total fiction in which readers don't know if the narrative is a lie or the author's real life, and four excerpts that cover lies in the Bible. "I also give students a few articles that I know are false, mixed in with truthful articles. Part of the game is for them to see how skeptical they are."

Expectedly, students say there's more than gaming going on. "I've been hurt by lying," says Kohlten Clark, 21, a junior majoring in business marketing. "Beliefs I had growing up that I found out weren't actually truthful put my world upside down."

Madison Pomeroy, a 20-year-old junior in the Integral Studies department who also manages staff at a coffee shop, recalls the burn of a recent lie told by an employee. "She closed early and left a mess. She lied about being sick." Two days later, guilt led the employee to confess. Pomeroy says that despite only issuing a warning and a writeup, "I learned she wasn't reliable. She descended the ladder of my trust."

But what about when the coin is flipped? Clark admits to a common lie: hiding things from parents. In a way, it was learned behavior. "They asked me if I was drinking in high school and told me I wouldn't be punished if I told the truth. I did and I got punished. I understood then that telling the truth could be harmful to me." As a young adult growing up during the internet era, fear of getting burned on social media completed the lesson. "I expect to become a better liar by taking this class. It's a good skill to have. Lying has a negative connotation but there are situations where you need to protect yourself. It's easy to get scammed online so I give an alias."

Pomeroy's experience is slightly different. She opened a Christmas present early, lied, and "because I was a rookie," was found out one week later. "I hid the original paper in my closet," she says, "my parents found it." Gone forever was the much-coveted spy watch. Her motivation for enrolling in Weiner's class is to better understand truth, love, justice, and why admitting to a lie – even in the face of bald, undeniable evidence – is extremely difficult.

While the course presents negative aspects of lying,

Weiner notes it's important to explore deception's positive applications, because lying is a full spectrum activity. "Hiding someone from the Nazis is totally reasonable," he says. "But trying to win an election? It's not so reasonable. The consequences of lying in general and applied lies in different worlds of science, business or relationships varies." Distrust of government leaders in countries controlled by dictatorships he says is high. In America, social media that pushes people to feel they must look or behave according to specific presets drives what Steiner says is an upswing in distrust of government and the media. "A number of students are children whose parents are divorced, in which deceptions come out. For them, it's personal. They come to study truth."

The impact on Weiner of teaching the course is complicated. "I've become more skeptical of the lies we tell, but more tolerant of them also. I catch myself lying and most often, I stop it. Or if my goal is amusement or education, I might continue on."

Lying 101 includes one session in which students take a personal lie inventory, then share it. Without forcing anyone to "spill the beans," Weiner says 80 percent of the students participate. While hoping the course leaves students more honest than not, he encourages everyone to search for truth by considering probability, applying the scientific method of inquiry and always collecting multiple sources before drawing conclusions. Even then, an open-ended mindset, tough skin and a robust "truthiness" gut are handy tools to preserve.

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