

# Why Bother (to Be Good)?

**An address presented to the  
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## OPENING READING:

*(the text of a statement adopted in principle at the  
1993 Parliament of the World's Religions, signed by  
"spiritual and religious" leaders of a variety of faiths)*

## **Towards an Initial Declaration of a Global Ethic**

### PREAMBLE

Our world is in travail ... peace eludes us ... the planet is being destroyed ... neighbors live in fear ... women and men are estranged from each other ... children die!

This is despicable, loathsome, and abhorrent!

We condemn the abuses of Earth's ecosystems.

We condemn the poverty that stifles life's potential; the hunger that weakens the human body; the unemployment that continues unabated; the economic disparities that threaten so many families with ruin.

We condemn the social disarray of the nations; the disregard for justice which pushes citizens to the margin; the anarchy overtaking our communities; and the insane death of children from violence. In particular we condemn aggression and hatred in the name of religion.

We condemn ... and declare that it need not be:

It need not be because an ethic already exists even in the face of this travail. This ethic offers the possibility of a better individual and global order, and leads individuals away from despair and societies away from chaos.

We are women and men who have embraced the precepts and practices of the world's religions:

We affirm that a consensus already exists among the religions which forms the basis of a global ethic.

We affirm that this truth is already known, but yet to be lived in heart and action.

We affirm that there is an irrevocable, unconditional norm for all areas of life, for family and communities, for races, nations, and religions. There already exist ancient guidelines for human behavior which are found in the teaching of the religions of the world and which are the condition for a sustainable world order.

### WE DECLARE:

We are interdependent. Each of us depends on the well-being of the whole, and so we have respect for the community of living beings, for people, animals, and plants, and for the preservation of Earth, the air, water and soil.

We take individual responsibility for all we do. ALL our decisions, actions, and failures to act have

We must treat others as we wish others to treat us. We make a commitment to respect life and dignity, individuality and diversity, so that every person is treated humanely, without exception. We must have patience and acceptance. We must be able to forgive, learning from the past but never allowing ourselves to be enslaved by memories of hate. Opening our hearts to one another, we must sink our narrow differences for the cause of the world community, practicing a culture of solidarity and relatedness.

We consider humankind our family. We must strive to be kind and generous. We must not live for ourselves alone, but should also serve others, never forgetting the children, the aged, the poor, the suffering, the disabled, the refugees, and the lonely. No person should ever be considered or treated as a second-class citizen, or be exploited in any way whatsoever. There should be equal partnership between women and men. We must not commit any kind of sexual immorality. We must put behind us all forms of domination or abuse.

We commit ourselves to a culture of non-violence, respect, justice, and peace. We shall not oppress, injure, torture, or kill another human being, forsaking violence as a means of settling differences.

We strive for a just social and economic order, in which everyone has an equal chance to reach full potential as a human being. We must speak and act truthfully and with compassion, dealing fairly with all, and avoiding prejudice and hatred. We must not steal. We must move beyond the dominance of greed for power, prestige, money, and consumption to make a just and peaceful world.

Earth cannot be changed for the better unless the consciousness of individuals is changed first. We pledge to increase our awareness, by disciplining our minds, meditation, prayer, or positive thinking. We commit ourselves to this global ethic, to understanding one another, and to socially-beneficial, peace-fostering, and nature-friendly ways of life.

We invite all people, whether religious or not, to do the same.

*[signed by 123 representatives of the world's religions. A representative of the American Ethical Union was invited to sign; however, the mailing with that invitation arrived after the Parliament.]*



consequences.

In late summer of 1993, I was among a delegation of American Ethical Union members who attended the Parliament of the World's Religions. I spent time, as did many of those people, at the "humanist" booth in the exhibit hall — the "spiritual bazaar" as someone named that place — and I also presented a talk on "Ethics as Religion."

I do want to make clear that not all Ethical Culturists are humanists, and not all humanists are Ethical Culturists. I am one who happens to be both. I was one of those who helped to organize both the humanist presence, and the AEU presence, at the Parliament. One basis for the presence of the AEU was that in 1893, at the first Parliament of the World's Religions, Ethical Culture was a part of the Parliament, and a fair number of speakers at that 1893 Parliament came from Ethical Culture. In fact, in 1893, the American Ethical Union's assembly was scheduled to be held just after the Parliament, so that many of our members could attend.

An estimated 8,000 total people attended the Parliament, representing a wide range of the world's faiths as well as interfaith groups. We were there to communicate, to open dialog, to consider the state of the world and what religion might have to contribute, both to the problems that exist now, and to the solutions that must be found.

In conversations at the Parliament with people of other faiths, I found that many were curious why someone who was a humanist would be there. Their questions on humanism tended to fall, I found, into to main categories:

1. Why Bother to Be Good? Without an authoritative scripture or supernatural being, what is the foundation of ethics?
2. How is there security without confidence in an afterlife? This question wasn't phrased, as it often is in classical philosophy, as a question about ultimate justice and rewards, but rather as a question about meaning and comfort. In fact, most people phrased it quite personally: "How dare you take away my security! I could not survive life if I didn't think I would survive death!" or "Who are you to take away my hope that I will see my father/mother/spouse/etc. again after death?" This latter question, while profoundly important to those who asked it, is not, however, the topic I'll be discussing today.

The question of ethics, in the center of a Parliament of people of many faiths who were there primarily because of their ethical concern, was quite important. I found that many of the Moslems who were there, and the very few fundamentalist Christians who attended, were especially convinced

that all the world's ethical and moral problems are

The reasoning goes like this: to a Moslem, humanism puts humans to the front, allowing us to put ourselves above all else (God, Nature, etc.). In this situation, they reason, values and ethics would be purely relative and therefore nonexistent. I realize that not all Moslems believe this, but it is clearly a common "line" in the Moslem community to blame "scientism" and "humanism" for the mess humanity has created.

In answering the question of "Why bother to be good?" we attempted *not* to argue – for the basic agreement of the Parliament was that we were all there to share our beliefs and faiths but not to convert anyone – but to explain. The answers we gave to the question tended to be, in some form, one of these three:

1. Look at us: we do live moral lives, we put ethics at the center of our "religious" faith and practice. This statement was a big surprise to many, who have believed humanism's enemies that we are completely without ethics. Many had simply believed that we were anti-ethics.

2. Humanists – whether we consider ourselves religious or not – and those 20% in the world who don't consider themselves part of any traditional religion – are as likely to be living ethically as are adherents to or members of any religion. From observing the behavior of religious believers worldwide, it's fair to say that no scripture or dogma is completely effective in enforcing ethical codes! It is the Christian founder, Paul, who stated one of the most important ethical dilemmas: What I would do, I find I do not do. What I would avoid doing, I find that I do anyway.

3. Belief in God (and many that week affirmed that their gods were really all the same) doesn't guarantee a consistent ethics. Examples include the personal ethics of divorce, birth control, treatment of women and children, as well as the larger issues around interreligious conflict, tearing the world apart.

These conversations proved great learning experiences, for those of us answering and for those questioning. They were truly conversations; usually we ended up listening more than we talked. And we found common ground in the fact that all these people thought it so important that a religion must ground its ethics, implying that they, too, recognize that ethics is central. (It is only fair to note that the Parliament drew primarily from the liberal end of the various faiths.)

Ethical humanism cuts out the middleman, if you will. We don't need to argue about whether or not the ethics have been sent from on high, or whether or not there is a deity with a consciousness behind them. We understand the measure of a religion to be the ethics it produces.

caused by: HUMANISM.

David Muzzey in *Ethics as Religion* describes traditional religions like Christianity as beginning with a creed, moving to a form of worship and liturgy, and then to an ethics. Ethical Culture, Ethical Humanism, turns this around. What is the common ground among ethical humanists is our ethics. Our form of meeting – not only on Sunday morning, but in our more social gatherings, our educational work, our committee meetings – ought, if we are at our best, to enhance our ethical goals. These ought to be ways we live out our ethics. And our belief systems, the individual credos by which each of us live, ought to be regularly reexamined and rethought in light of the ethics to which these lead. We begin with, not end with, the ethical quest.

I believe that religions are human inventions, created for human purposes in response to particular human needs of a particular human group in a particular place. Thus, humans have developed religions quite differently – and the history of religious development that is recorded shows that religions do grow and evolve, to meet changing human needs.

Even if you believe that religion was revealed from a divine source – the reality is that it is real human beings, with all our limitations and creativity, that understand those religions, interpret those religions, and selectively communicate those religions. It comes down to the same thing.

One major purpose of religion as an aspect of human living is to regulate human conduct, to bring some security and order to social life.

(Another major purpose is to help individuals find meaning in an often-unjust, often-chaotic universe. But that's beyond the topic of this morning..)

It is well documented that other living creatures have some kind of ethics – by which I mean rules that govern individual behavior in a social setting. For ethics, at the core, is about individuals acting in society with other individuals.

Ethics is action – action in situations in which there are alternate possibilities for action. Ethics is about choices, but not just choices in an intellectual sense. Ethics is not just a habit of thought, but how we actually live out our choices.

We are choice-makers, and cannot avoid making choices. If we do not act, that in itself is an act. We may not ever have infinite choices – but there is in every moment some range of choice.

Further, ethics assumes that our choices matter. We do have an effect on the world around us. The acts of others – and their failure to act, too – will affect our lives, our ability to make good choices and take actions for the good. Our actions and failures to act will affect others, and ourselves. What we do matters in the world and in the larger

human community. Every choice opens up some further choices; every choice closes off some other further choices.

Stephen Jay Gould, scientist and author, has powerful essays on the natural world showing that living creatures act in their lives as if they have these purposes in mind:

- preserve the individual who is acting
- preserve the descendants of the individual who is acting
- preserve close relatives (those to whom the individual has a close genetic link)
- preserve others in the species (no close genetic link)
- preserve the environment that sustains the species (and other species that are in that environment)

Gould does not claim that such acts — on the part of viruses, bees and ants, starfish, apes, and others — are always purposeful in the sense that there is intent. In fact, the greatest lesson may be that there is NOT usually intent in making the choices that even non-sentient beings constantly make. And Gould acknowledges that the most selfish of those ethical levels may be the most common — but life could not have existed thus far unless a basic cooperation existed, over and above the individual struggles for survival of self and close relatives.

Carl Sagan and Ann Druyan, in their new book *In Search of Forgotten Ancestors*, also show the many ways in which animals besides humans use what we would call ethical behavior. Close relatives of ours, like the chimps, will sacrifice their own welfare to keep from causing pain and suffering to others, even others who are unrelated.

Human babies, immediately after birth, can be shown to have empathy. When a newborn human baby hears the cry of another baby, she will respond with a similar cry, one that is motivated not by her own needs, but by her identification with the other's needs.

So one answer to "Why bother to be good?" is that we are born with the tendency to do so. Ethics is a natural phenomenon, even though it often doesn't look like it's a common one.

In fact, religion and the ethics that have usually been linked to religion probably evolved in humans to the extent that they have because these helped our ancestors to live more successfully. Ethics may be a gift of the evolutionary process.

Philosophers — David Hume is one — have talked of an "inborn ethical sense" or "moral sensitivity." Others have stressed the logical and rational base, or among those who follow authoritarian religions, the revealed nature or divine instigation of ethics and morality. My own

To go another step: we have some consciousness about making choices, and out of that consciousness also comes responsibility for making the best choice possible.

conclusion, based on our parallels with our cousins in the rest of the animal world, is that we *do* have some kind of inborn capacity for ethics, for sensing something we call "right" from something we name "wrong." We seem to have a sense of "good" — and of its counterpart, "evil."

One distinction in humanist ethics is this: that we don't claim divine authority or authorship. We don't have a scripture that we can agree on as the only and inerrant source of rules of behavior. I once heard a fundamentalist Christian define a humanist as someone who doesn't believe in something, just because it says so in a book or because someone says so. The speaker thought this was pretty strange. Most of us here wouldn't be comfortable any other way!

But now we approach the source of the critique of humanist ethics. Our ethics, our enemies tell us, are "relativistic." I don't use the term "enemies" lightly, by the way; there are those who consider our ideas quite dangerous and worth fighting to destroy. As one gentleman at the Parliament told me, "No one has the right to be wrong." (I found this statement frightening.)

Relativism, or subjectivism, is an important charge against humanism. "Anything goes" if you don't have an authoritative foundation. It just doesn't happen to be accurate.

Humanists disagree among ourselves on how subjective and how objective ethics can be. I happen to think there is an objective reality outside the human mind, and that certain kinds of actions will work better than others in preserving the social order and fostering the ability to function as a human individual of worth and dignity. But we can only know that objective reality through our subjective experience. And so, to say that ethics is subjective is to acknowledge a practical reality — that each person's perception will differ, each person's needs are different, the interests of different individuals will often collide.

But to say that humanist ethics acknowledges the subjectivity of human knowing and human wanting, is not the same as saying "Anything goes." We are interdependent beings, not independent, and that means that complete subjectivity is also an illusion.

I prefer the term "contextual" ethics and not "relativistic" ethics. What we must do, how we must act, depends on the context. There is no rule-based ethic — even those in revealed, authoritative religions — that can be enforced completely and consistently! This is especially true when we

acknowledge that we live in a world of ethical imperfection.

A classic case of contextual ethics is this one: A Nazi stormtrooper comes to your front door and asks if you are hiding any Jews. You are. Do you

An ethical person is always asking, "What is there in the context of this decision that helps me choose between conflicting goods, or conflicting bads?" There is no truly pure case in real life where we have perfect knowledge of the consequences of our acts, or where, if we did have such perfect knowledge, we could avoid all bad and do all possible good!

Yet, there are underlying principles and helpful guides to making ethical decisions. It really doesn't matter how you ground them – revealed religion, or evolutionary contextual ethics. We do tend to come to many of the same conclusions. Even when we don't, there is an underlying human principle at work. Take attitudes towards divorce, for instance.

The fact that most religious and legal systems have attempted to address the issue of divorce tells us something quite profound – two things, at least. One is that human beings tend to pair off, making long-term commitments to share lives and, often, raise children. The other is that sometimes these commitments fail to meet the real human needs of one or both members of the pair, or of the rest of the family. Different cultures have attempted to address this issue in different ways – and early in our own Ethical Humanist movement, attitudes towards divorce were fiercely debated.

Even if there are many different "solutions" to this single issue, a culture needs some basic agreement on what the rules are for making and breaking long-term adult intimate family relationships. Not having rules – forcing constant conflict and negotiation when real human behavior surfaces – would inflict far more harm in the long run than having imperfect rules. Which isn't to say we can't work to change rules which fail to preserve human dignity.

A challenge to the modern world is that, as communication and travel become easier, ethical rules – rules developed in different cultures and contexts – will come into conflict more and more. This is why the agreement out of the Parliament of the World's Religions is so important – an acknowledgement that, even though we may disagree on issues like divorce, birth control, and even where ethical codes come from, we can agree on the overarching rules of ethical conduct.

We may still disagree on whether violence, in a particular case, is warranted. But we can agree that violence is not a good thing.

We may still disagree on how urgent the earth's crisis is, and how exactly to solve it – but we can agree that there is an urgency, that we can change

commit the ethical sin of lying, or do you commit the ethical sin of contributing to the doing of harm to a human being? Do you tell the truth, or protect human life?<sup>1</sup>

our behavior as individuals and as groups now, and that this will be a better world for all its life if we do behave better towards it.

And here is the core of humanist ethics: the preservation, or even more strongly the nurturance, of human dignity and worth.

Even the very important issues around environmental ethics can be seen in terms of human dignity and worth. It's not as simple as spotted owls versus human jobs. First, those jobs have been going away for other reasons, in far greater numbers – reasons of greed and corrupt power. Second, preserving the environment is essential to human life, and spotted owls are like the canaries in the mines – their extinction is not bad because it's aesthetically bad, but because whatever is bad for owls is bad for owls, humans, and other life.

This earth has survived far worse than we humans can inflict on it, and the earth and some life will survive our worst abuses. But the kinds of abuses that are all too common now, including the abuse of overpopulation, may very well make this world intolerant of human life. And as a humanist, I value human life enough to want to preserve earth's environment as a safe place for human beings – in the long run, which may conflict with human interests in the short run.

The core of humanist ethics is to nurture human dignity and worth. Every human being must be treated as a human being of intrinsic worth and dignity. The way that we, as ethical humanists, often phrase this is as follows:

Act so as to elicit the best in others, and thereby in yourself.

This is Felix Adler's version of an ethical principle found in some form in every human society, often called the Golden Rule. Act so as to elicit the best in others, and thereby in yourself. Every human being is unique, and deserves to have their unique best brought out. When we act in society so as to help this to happen, then we are also most likely to be our own unique best.

We can't expect every other human being to be just like us, although the basic principle of empathy is important to ethics. We can't just do what we'd like others to do for or to us, because each of us is different. Yet we are all human, and there are some commonalities that are as important as our differences.

Instead of a long list of legal rules, humanist ethics has this primary principle.

(Another religious group we encountered a lot at the Parliament were the Jains. While they have a

metaphysics quite different than our humanist understandings, they too have an ethical-based religion with a core principle from which rules can

This kind of humanist ethics does not require a God – nor does it require rejection of a God. Neither theism nor atheism is particularly relevant to ethical humanism – not even agnosticism is required! Note how humanistic is that Global Ethic statement I read earlier! There were a number of people from different traditions who stopped by the Humanist display to say that, to them, humanism is the common ground among the religions, adding also the modern scientific world view.

It is, by the way, not an accident that at this meeting of the world's religions, a statement sounding much like ethical humanism might develop. For part of our history is that we began in the period where the world's religions were encountering each other more as equals, less as enemies. Our founder, Felix Adler, was motivated to his vision of a universalist religious alternative in part by his study, in Switzerland when he was training to be a rabbi, of the world's religions. His vision of the "common ground" was central to the founding of Ethical Culture as something not in opposition to the world's religions, but as growing out of the best in all these human attempts to understand the world and live better in it.



What are some of these humanist ethics that we talk about? Do we have only a basic principle, one that is often difficult to apply in particular situations? Or can we say more?

One humanist, F.C.S. Wicks, attempted to recast the Ten Commandments (which really aren't Ten in the Hebrew Scriptures, appear twice in somewhat different form, and aren't quite as they are usually recited). He tried to give them a humanist form. Listen, and see what you think:

- I. Thou shalt worship all truth, goodness, beauty, as manifest in human life and accept no person in lieu thereof.
- II. Remember each day and keep it holy.
- III. Honor all worthy of honor.
- IV. Thou shalt preserve life.
- V. Thou shalt be pure in heart.
- VI. Thou shalt speak the truth with all.
- VII. Thou shalt desire only that which is for the good of all.
- VIII. Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.
- IX. Thou shalt resist evil, but not hate the evildoer.

be derived contextually. For Jains, the basic principle is "Cause no suffering.")

- X. Deal justly with thine enemy and deal fairly with those that hate thee.

Perhaps a bit more complicated, here is a summary of "humanist virtues," adapted from secular humanist Paul Kurtz's list in his 1988 book, "Forbidden Fruit." (The forbidden fruit in the Jewish and Christian scriptures is, of course, knowledge of good and evil.)

Truthfulness

Promise-keeping

Sincerity (being both candid and free of hypocrisy)

Honesty (no deceit for personal gain)

Faithfulness, loyalty

Dependability – reliability, responsibility

Good will (as opposed to hatred, or malice)

Refrain from harming persons

Refrain from harming common and private property

Sexual consent

Compassion (& kindness, empathy or sympathy, altruism): aid those in distress, not only don't cause harm (most ethical humanists would place this higher up the ladder than Kurtz does!)

Gratitude

Accountability

Justice - fairness

Tolerance: understanding, broadmindedness

Cooperation, including the negotiation of inevitable conflict. War should be considered only when necessary to protect and defend, but it won't be easy to agree on exactly when that condition is met.

These are all "virtues" or patterns of behavior based on attitudes of thought – and they are all learnable behaviors, all behaviors and patterns and habits that we can cultivate. *How* can we be good? These are some helpful ways to think about that question, some guidance for setting our own goals on improving our own contribution to a more ethical world.



But back to the question for the day: *Why bother* to be good?

This is a lot of effort, there are no guarantees any of it will work, and it's often not much fun. When so many other people appear to be acting contrary to these ethical principles, what motivation do we have?

I've answered that we don't need to be motivated by belief or unbelief in deity or an afterlife. Any combination of those might come up with a workable or an unworkable ethics.

I've also answered that it may be human instinct. We appear to have an inborn sense that tells us that right is better than wrong, a sense that

It is interesting to compare the development of children's moral behavior, and show the parallels to adult behavior. A small child goes through stages putting self over others, then others over self, and finally develops an inner compass that does not require that dad or mom is watching. We *learn* that we ought to bother to be good. We learn to do without the "why." But this doesn't necessarily help when we're confronted with a situation where learned behavior doesn't exactly apply.

Some would also say that being good is simply self-interest. I find this a difficult position, because the self-interests of different persons will often conflict, and our own inner and outer interests also often conflict. We still must decide which self-interest.

Similarly, simply looking at social goods — like the greatest good for the greatest number — doesn't totally answer the question. It is too easy to for the more powerful to define their individual, short-term good as identical to the good of the many. "If it's good for General Motors, it's good for the country." And if you're one of those whose good is sacrificed for the many, especially when you have little choice, "good" doesn't look so "good."

The concept of the common good helps here — the affirmation that, even in this world alone, without positing an afterlife to achieve justice, that the good which is best for individuals is also the best for society, and vice versa. That social good which doesn't bring out the best in individuals isn't really a "common good." And that individual good which sacrifices others to it, is also not a "common good."

We need faith for that kind of "Why bother." We need to learn, and remind ourselves constantly, that we can put off short-term good for the long-term. We have to learn to derive satisfaction even from the uncertain faith that what we do in this lifetime will have a positive effect many lifetimes later. We may never have certain evidence of that — but the evidence of the reverse may help us ground our faith in confidence.

We can certainly see that the dangerous things we do, and see others do, that will have negative consequences. The lesson of people like Hitler or Stalin or Pol Pot or Idi Amin isn't just that some people are capable of great evil, but one lesson is this: that one person can have a tremendous effect on the present and future generations. Our impact is not totally under our

often helps us move beyond our narrow, immediate self-interest.

As choice-conscious beings, we have no choice but to make ethical choices. The fact that we are conscious gives us knowledge, but also gives us responsibility.

control — but we can make it more positive or more negative, as we choose to act or fail to act.

The American Indian custom of looking seven generations back and seven generations forward is a way of thinking long-term, of seeing ourselves not merely as individuals but as individuals in an interconnected chain of equally worthy individuals. We have been among the seven cared for by our ancestors, and we will be among the seven generations remembered by our descendants.

We never know for certain that our "bothering" to be good will be worthwhile. We do know that it *is* often a bother, that often the easy way, the pleasant way, is not the way of good. The *cultivation* of ethics is something not only for children, but for adults — and cultivation of ethics is what Ethical Culture means. We can get better at ethical living — and we can get worse.

It may be that all our "bothering" to be good has little effect. What we do know is that choosing not to bother will also have an effect. If we live as if our lives do not matter, then the world will not be any better for our having lived. If we live as if our lives do matter, then the world very well may be better. No guarantees, just a good chance.

And that's worth it, given the alternatives. Why bother to be good? Because only by trying will we know if it's worth it.

I suggest that you consider answering the question for yourself. Why do you bother? What is it that motivates you to do good, to cultivate an ethical life, to bless the world?



Notes:

I close with a reading from Rebecca Parker, who as head of Starr King Theological School (Unitarian Universalist) is one of the few women in such a position. She has this to say, quite relevant to today's subject:

Your gifts – whatever you discover them to be –  
    can be used to bless the world.  
The mind's power, the strength of the hands,  
    the reaches of the heart,  
the gift of speaking, listening, imagining, seeing, *waiting*.  
Any of these can serve to feed the hungry,  
    bind up wounds, welcome the stranger,  
    praise what is sacred,  
    do the work of justice, or offer love.  
Any of these can draw down the prison door,  
    hoard bread, abandon the poor,  
    obscure what is holy,  
    comply with injustice, or withhold love.  
You must answer this question:  
    what will you do with your gifts?  
*Choose to bless the world.*  
The choice to bless the world can take you into solitude  
    to search for the sources  
    of power and grace;  
    native wisdom, healing and liberation.

More, the choice will draw you into community,  
    the endeavor shared, the heritage passed on,  
    the companionship of struggle,  
    the importance of keeping faith,  
    the life of ritual and praise,  
    the comfort of human friendship,  
    the company of earth, its chorus of life  
        welcoming you.  
None of us alone can save the world.  
*Together* – that is another possibility,  
    waiting.

- Rebecca Parker

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1. Sissela Bok (daughter of Gunnar and Alva Myrdal) in her book, *Lying*, suggests that we must *always* find a solution that does not require lying.

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Author: Jone E. Johnson  
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