When a routine background check for his appointment as Poet Laureate of California revealed that Quincy Troupe had lied in his curriculum vitae, Troupe joined a long list of notable figures who had rewritten their own history: Sandra Baldwin, the first woman President of the United States Olympic Committee, who resigned when it was revealed that she had falsified her educational background; George O'Leary, who resigned as Notre Dame's head coach when it was learned that he had lied on his resume; Larry Lawrence was disinterred from Arlington National Cemetery and reburied in California after it was discovered that he was not a combat veteran of World War II.

Seeing cases such as these, we are often torn in two directions. On the one hand, we want to acknowledge that what these individuals did was wrong. Even though we may find their actions understandable, we still do not believe they are right. On the other hand, we want to acknowledge the essential goodness of the person. These are not evil persons. They are good, decent, and highly talented persons who did something wrong, although it was not something malevolent. They did not try to hurt anyone else, although they may inadvertently have hurt many other people, including themselves.

Our tendency is to want to deny one of these truths at the expense of the other—either to say that the action was not wrong (or not importantly so), or to dismiss considerations about the person's goodness as irrelevant. The cost of acknowledging one as true is to deny the other as false. It's as though we are at the top of a triangle, perpetually on the edge of sliding down definitively onto one side or the other.

We should resist this temptation to make our lives easier, to create the illusion that we live in a morally simple and easy world. We don't. The morally simple world is the one that we see on television at night: the good characters are genuinely good, and the bad characters are bad enough to get everything they deserve—and in the end, they do get what they deserve. This is a morally simple world, and there is no genuine tragedy in it.

The world of everyday life is not like this. In the cases of Troupe, Baldwin, O'Leary, and Lawrence, we have good, decent people who told a lie, sometimes long ago, and continued to tell it until they were found out. Does this mean that they are not good, decent people? No. does this mean that what they did wasn't wrong? No. We must hold fast to both of these truths and not deny one to preserve the other. This is not television.

This becomes crucially important when we turn to the question of what to do in such cases. There are no easy solutions, and we should not expect our moral world to be easy or simple. However, we can see the standards that a good solution must meet. Take the Troupe case as an example.

First, a good resolution of this situation must acknowledge that what was done was wrong. The glue that holds our fragile social world together is trust, and lying damages that trust. Whatever solution is reached, it must clearly proclaim that this is not behavior we condone.

Second, a good resolution must also acknowledge that we are dealing with good, decent, highly talented individuals. The resolution is easy when we are dealing with people who have consistently lied and cheated and whose dishonesty and greed has been a substitute for talent and hard work. (One might call these "the Enron cases.") The tough cases are the ones like Troupe's, where you have a good person, a gifted poet, and a superb teacher.

Third, a good resolution must acknowledge that people have been hurt by this. In cases such as these, trust has been put in an individual by supporters who believed they knew the essential facts about the person they were supporting, and then that trust has been betrayed. When someone lies to get a job, presumably there is some specific individual who is denied that job as a result. Moreover, many admire and learn from someone like Quincy Troupe. How are they to handle this? Are they being taught to think that lying is not that important? Are they being taught to discard all the wonderful things they have learned from Troupe? This is what makes it a difficult situation.
Finally, we must recognize that the answer does not lie just with those, such as the administrators at UCSD, who must make a judgment in the case. The challenge is also to Troupe and to others in similar situations. How can they respond in such a way as to preserve all that is good and true in their lives—and this is considerable in the case of someone like Troupe—and yet also affirm that what they did was genuinely wrong? That, in the final analysis, may be the most difficult test of greatness.

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