

KILROY CAFÉ

Philosophy for the Modern Age

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THE SETUP

Every life is based on lies. What are yours?

By GLENN CAMPBELL

No matter how rational you think you are, the structure of your life is based on flawed assumptions that, if you live long enough, are going to proven false.

Here's an example: "Real estate always appreciates in value, never depreciates." How many homeowners have been suckered by that assumption and are now paying the price? For decades, if not generations, this was the mantra of new home buyers, luring them into commitments they couldn't afford and didn't really need. In reality, there was no economic science behind the belief, only blind faith.

But that's just the tip of the iceberg. Virtually everything you are doing right now is based on one or more lies. I can't tell you exactly what your lies are, but they are essentially religious beliefs taken without proof and reinforced by your past investments. Probably, you already know what they are deep inside but can't afford to speak of them openly. You can't bear to see these lies for what they are because you have already devoted so much of yourself to them and would face great pain to let them go.

Is your career based on lies? Your marriage? Your whole current lifestyle? Unfortunately, the answer is probably yes. But don't think you are alone. Just about everyone else is in the same boat. The whole world is a big lie factory.

You were born into a set of lies: those of your parents and the world they lived in. Because you had no means to

question them, their lies became part of your nervous system. There was Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny but also a thousand more subtle lies that your whole family took as truth.

A simple case: Don't go swimming within a half-hour of eating, I was told, or you will get cramps and drown. Turns out, there was no medical or statistical basis for that one whatsoever, but the kids in my family took it as truth, because that's what we were told by the people we trusted.

It seemed like every week since I first became conscious, I was discovering new falsehoods. Even today, I am learning that things I had been taught or had assumed from the examples around me were in fact pure fiction. That's the fundamental trauma of growing up. No matter how benign your upbringing was, it dished out fairytales to you that reality is eventually going to trash.

It's unavoidable. To introduce you to a complicated world, your parents had to simplify things for you. These simplified theories (or invented fictions) allowed you to learn, but eventually you had to let them go and move on to more complex theories. The letting go is usually painful, but it's part of growing up. Every theory is temporary and will eventually be replaced by another.

The danger comes when you get heavily invested in one theory, like the one about real estate always appreciating. If you have a mortgage and are struggling to make the payments, you can't afford to believe anything else. Your theories are no longer permitted to

change, so your growth in this area comes to a halt.

In the normal course of a human life, your invested fictions are going to accumulate and eventually box you in. You may continue to "learn," or gain new facts, but you will no longer "grow," or change your fundamental schema, unless the change is forced upon you.

And reality will provide that service! If you invest too much in a false theory, reality will eventually hand you an appropriate catastrophe, like a crash in the housing market. Then you'll have to change, but it won't be so graceful as when you change on your own.

If you are pummeled by reality enough, you might eventually get wise by realizing how naïve you really are. No matter how old you are or how important you seem to be in the world, you haven't worked things out, are nowhere near working things out, and are a fool if you think you have.

It's okay to pursue a fiction for a while—That's better than having no direction at all.—but don't ever treat the fiction as permanent. If it ever comes down to signing on the dotted line to set your theories in a stone, you better have a gag reflex to protect you.

Maybe it's all fiction. Maybe everything you believe is based on a lie. At least you should leave yourself the freedom to change your lies as conditions warrant.

—G.C.

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