Some people believe that one should always be honest and truthful, while others believe that under certain circumstances it is acceptable to be dishonest or not tell the truth. Is lying ever permissible? Make sure you support your position with reasons, explanations and examples.

People have differing opinions about truthfulness and honesty. Some say one should always be honest and truthful, but others believe that it can be okay to not tell the whole truth or to be a bit dishonest in certain situations. The question arises, is lying ever permissible? The proviso “under certain circumstances” underlies the conundrum that one faces while addressing this question. We often face this predicament, and are often called upon to make this judgement in our own life. Some people with weak conviction are likely to succumb to this proviso, and declare that under certain circumstances it is acceptable to lie and be dishonest. My personal conviction on this issue is that of an unambiguous NO! I believe that lying is not permissible under any circumstances.

My father presented a book to me when I was 10 years old. The book was an autobiography of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, “My Experiment with Truth.” I was an avid reader, and completed the book at once. The book has had a long lasting impact on my life. It transformed my life, and helped shape much of my thoughts in my adult life. The experiences that Gandhi describes in this book reinforced my belief in truth. Insistence for truth was one of the strongest attributes of Gandhi, and it played an instrumental role in his various struggles that he waged in South Africa as well as in India. It was Gandhi who is credited widely with a momentous victory of India in her struggle for independence from the colonial British rule. No wonder Richard Attenborough paid rich tributes to Gandhi in his widely acclaimed movie “Gandhi” not only by depicting Gandhi’s brave, courageous and uncompromising stand on Quit India movement, but also by quoting a memorable quotation from Albert Einstein in the beginning of the movie.

Another source of my conviction on truth is my father. As a principal of an elementary school, my father inculcated the value of truth in all his students and also in his children. He also taught the importance of this attribute from Indian civilization perspective. He used to remind us of the famous dictum from the Vedas, “Satyam-ava-Jayate,” meaning truth alone prevails.

Now let us examine the importance of truth and honesty. Not telling the truth or lying almost always hurts somebody, directly or indirectly, physically or emotionally, tangibly or intangibly. Our interactions in a civilized society with another individual or entity are largely based on mutual trust. That trust is a sacred foundation of the relationship. Lying is a breach of that sacred trust, and it compromises the integrity of that relationship. Any relationship that is devoid of trust cannot be sustained for long period of time. This includes relationship between lovers, friends, colleagues, neighbors or between children and parents. When one lies, it amounts to betrayal of the trust. It is morally and ethically wrong to lie. Truth is one of the foundational principles of the civilized society.

The requirement of truth is not restricted to the moral and ethical standards. Telling the truth is a legal requirement also. For example, lying under oath is a serious issue and is considered perjury which is a punishable crime. When we take oath, we are required to tell the truth, only the truth, and nothing but the truth.
Adherence to truth is required for all members of the society. Every member of the society has a societal obligation to be honest and truthful. Parents are required to be honest and truthful so as to teach this important value to their children. They also need to practice honesty in order to set an example for their children. Similarly, teachers have the obligation to reinforce this value to their students not only by teaching the value of truth but also by being honest and truthful.

The honesty and truthfulness acquires an even more importance when it comes to the public figures. Those in the field of politics, government and public corporations have an added obligation to the society. For example, elected representatives in the federal government or the state government have a tremendous burden to maintain a very high standard of character. When millions of citizens have placed their trust in them for running the government, it is very important for them not to lie or mislead people. They are custodians who have been entrusted with the task of managing the affairs of the state or the nation with utmost integrity. For instance, people were extremely upset with former president Bill Clinton when the scandal involving his sexual affair with the white house intern Monica Lewinsky came out. It is interesting to note that most of the people were upset not so much because of his affair but because of him lying under oath during the investigation.

Recent scandals involving some of the major public corporations such as Enron, Worldcom, Anderson, ImClone etc have shaken the public trust in these corporations and their senior executives. It turns out that the senior executives were lying to the shareholders! Being employees of the public corporations, these executives were supposed to take care of the interest of their shareholders. However, they failed in their duties as they lied! As a result, the public is becoming increasingly skeptical of senior executives of various corporations.

The importance of truth and honesty is equally important in the field of scientific research. As a scientist, I can vouch for the importance of truth in science. Most of the research is supported by the public agencies (many of them run by the federal and state governments), and therefore is taxpayer’s money. Once again the basic issue is that of public trust. Even if the funding is from private source, scientists are expected to tell the truth. Scientific research is after all a quest for knowledge or truth. There can be no place for dishonesty in this endeavor. Fortunately, there have not been too many scandals involving scientists lately.

Dishonesty and lying is a hallmark of unethical unscrupulous and criminal elements. I strongly believe that lying and resorting to dishonest means is not acceptable under any circumstances.
The question of whether one should always be honest and truthful or whether it is permissible to lie in certain circumstances is a question that people have pondered for centuries. However, in order to ascertain whether lying is ever permissible, one must first look at both the underlying reasons why people lie, and the effects of such behavior.

Probably, there is no clearer statement of the first question than in the popular thriller movie of the 1960’s *Charade*, in which Audrey Hepburn, a newly-minted widow who has just learned that her husband had lied to her about his identity and his past, asks Cary Grant, whom she has also just caught in a misrepresentation, “Why do people lie?” Without a moment’s hesitation, Grant responds, “Because they don’t think the truth will get them what they want.” Mr. Grant’s response is clear, succinct and to the point. The fact is, whether large or small, lies are told because the teller does not believe that he or she will achieve a desired result if the simple, unvarnished truth is employed.

But, merely recognizing the basics for lying brings no one nearer to deciding whether, under appropriate or particular conditions, a lie is not only justified, it is preferred. Certainly, there are those who would argue that there is nothing wrong with the small or “white lie,” those benign little falsehoods intended to spare someone from hurt feelings. Most of us tell these little fibs all the time. For example, a friend has just prepared a meal for you, which tastes disgusting. He asks if you like it. Although you do not like the taste at all, you grit your teeth, swallow, and say, “Mmm, delicious!” It is a lie. The food tastes like dead worms, but you don’t want to hurt your friend’s feelings because you know how much effort was put into the meal’s preparation. You justify the lie as a kindness, a way to spare someone you care about from disappointment.

Likewise, you compliment a friend on a new hairdo or dress, even though the former makes her look like she just stuck her finger into an electrical outlet, and the latter causes her to resemble the Goodyear blimp. Or, you tell the co-worker who has just shown you a series of photographs of her infant grandson that he is a beautiful baby, even though the child resembles a hairless monkey and looks like a throwback in evolutionary development. In all these cases, a lie was told, but such lie is justified because, as Mr. Grant would note, it was a means to an end: saving a friend the pain of the truth.

But, even with such altruistic motives as kindness to someone you care bout, can even these seemingly harmless lies be justified? Indeed, are such “white lies” really told out of kindness to another or merely out of expediency for the teller? Is it really a kindness to allow a friend to walk around in a hairstyle that is unflattering or clothing that makes her appear fat? Is it kind to tell your friend that his food is delicious when it is near poisonous? The answer to all these questions is, probably not. A true friend would find a way to suggest that the hairdo is not as flattering as another one the wearer once had, or the dress makes her look “hippy” when she is really so slim. If you don't tell your friend the meal was not as tasty as it looked, he will never strive to improve his cooking. In short, even these small lies are really not kindnesses to the inquirer, but a means to avoid argument, to avoid honest expression, and probably do little harm but fail to achieve the goal of the asker: the genuine opinion of a friend.

So, while these benign, small lies are probably not warranted, their effects are small and personal, and thus, in the end, may be somewhat benign. However, the culture of lies is so pervasive in our society these days that it is difficult to justify even the smallest untruth lest it lead to bigger and bigger lies that impact millions of people.

Of course, we all start small: the child standing next to a broken glass, no one else about, declaring, “I didn’t do it.” But, can this lead to the criminal who, in the face of incontrovertible evidence, fingerprints and video tape footage of him in the act, declares his innocence. It probably does since we live in a society where the means always
seems to justify the ends, where dishonesty is acceptable if it frees one from punishment, whether for a broken glass or a broken window.

Probably there are no better examples of the evils of dishonesty than those from recent history. There is the lie of Adolf Hitler and Nazi Germany in the late 1930's saying that if the rest of the world allows them to "reclaim" the Sudentenland, there will be peace in the world. This, of course, as history soon showed, was a lie.

Closer to home, in 1983, President Richard Nixon appeared on national television to declare that he wasn't a crook and had no involvement in the Watergate scandal. This too was a lie, and within a year Mr. Nixon became the first president in history to resign his office in disgrace.

Then there is President Bill Clinton, who stared directly into the television cameras and told the American people that he didn't have sexual relations with Monica Lewinsky. He did, and he became the first president impeached in office and the first to become a disbarred attorney while still holding the presidency.

And now, there is our current president, Mr. Bush, who plunged the nation into unilateral war in Iraq with the lie that weapons of mass destruction were present there, poised to strike the U.S. at any moment. None has been found despite months of US occupation of that country and no such weapons are likely to be found. Yet, this lie has cost thousands of lives, destroyed the tenuous infrastructure of another country and has cost the American people billions of dollars that could have been put to better use elsewhere.

If history teaches us anything, it is that in the end, the truth invariably comes out. In the end, liars are ultimately shown for who they are: people who don't think the truth will get them what they want, regardless of the cost to themselves and those who believed in them.

In the end, whether it is the small, benign "white lie" or the big lie that plunges others into war or political turmoil, the conclusion that must be reached is that lying is never acceptable. The end does not justify the means, with one absolute exception: the ugly baby. When confronted with a doting grandparent or parent and a photograph of a red-faced, bawling evolutionary throwback, lie. There is nothing else one can do in such a situation but to comment on how beautiful that baby is and walk away knowing that you have performed a true act of kindness.