

Bill Adair:

[Reading] I've never liked liars. I was a newspaper reporter for 20 years, and got so frustrated with lying politicians that I started PolitiFact, the fact-checking website. But I found myself intrigued by liars, the way a detective is fascinated with master criminals. When I became a journalism professor at Duke in 2013, I got assigned to teach an ethics course, and decided to include a section on writers who had fabricated or plagiarized stories.

Judith Kelley:

That's Bill Adair. He's my colleague here at the Sanford School of Public Policy at Duke University, where I am the Dean; and I am Judi Kelley. And Bill was reading from an article that he wrote, called Loving Lies. It's a story, I would say, that is not just captivating in the turn of events, but also, it's revealing about human nature. And that, I think, is what we want to zero in on a little bit in this conversation today.

So Bill, you've been doing this research into lying journalist. And as you describe in this story, you reached out to a man named Stephen Glass. What did you know about him at the time?

Bill Adair:

Well, I knew a lot, because most journalists are pretty familiar with Stephen because he is one of the most famous liars in journalism. In 1998, as a young writer for the New Republic and other magazines, Stephen fabricated more than 40 articles. And we're not just talking about adding a character here or there; we're talking about fabricating entire articles that he passed off as true articles, like people attending the Conservative Political Action Conference, and making them seem really over the top, obnoxious, drug-taking young conservatives, and a story that seemed too good to be true and was.

And so, articles like that caught the attention of a magazine writer at Forbes Digital Tools. Stephen was uncovered and fired from the New Republic. And that's legend in journalism circles, and he has been a villain in journalism ever since. And is, to the extent that he's discussed in college journalism, ethics courses, is essentially "don't be like this guy." And so he is roundly held up as an example of an epic liar.

Judith Kelley:

How did he get away with it for so long? Because 40 is a lot. Why did it take that long for them to discover?

Bill Adair:

I think a few things were going on. One, he started slowly. He would embellish facts, he would add things here and there; but he was not fabricating entire articles. But as questions were raised, his editors supported him initially, because they, and I think that's the inclination of a lot of editors, they support the writers who work for them. And unless there's an egregious thing that jumps out, I think the editors tend to support the people that work for them. But when this reporter Adam Penenberg, called from Forbes Digital Tool, it was clear to Chuck Lane, then the editor of the New Republic, that Stephen was fabricating; and they confronted Stephen.

Judith Kelley:

But it also was the case, wasn't it, that Stephen sort of went above and beyond the lying piece, in that he fabricated certain pieces of evidence, fabricated circumstances that would back up his lies. So it wasn't just lying and then lying about lies. He was actually creating false evidence at times.

Bill Adair:

Yes. And that's a really good point. And Stephen had worked as a fact-checker for the New Republic, a different kind of fact-checking than what I do. This is at magazines where there are newer, younger journalists who check the accuracy of articles; and Stephen had done that. And so, he had also as you said, fabricated evidence to make it seem like the characters that he had invented really existed. He had made false business cards, a fake website. He even had his brother pose as the CEO of a fake company. And so, that helped create the illusion that these articles were real.

Judith Kelley:

Were any of these things ever criminally prosecuted in any way, or were they not prosecutable in that sense? But you would think that once you start creating fake personalities or business cards or things like that, you're getting into more than lying.

Bill Adair:

No, he was not prosecuted criminally, nor was he ever sued by anyone, because there was no one who really suffered harm.

Judith Kelley:

I see.

Bill Adair:

Other than the magazines. He did though, and this was interesting; so of course, many years went by after he did this, before I met him. So I brought him to Duke in 2016. So that was 18 years after he had been fired from the New Republic. And that was one of the few times that he had ever spoken about what he had done to college students. And he came here, and one of the things that he told my students, was that he had repaid the magazines that he had worked for more than \$200,000, which he said was the money that he had been paid plus interest; to the extent that there was harm, the harm was that he had been paid for work that was not real; and so, he reimbursed them.

And in the meantime, he had applied to get his law license in California. And one of the reasons that the California Supreme Court denied it, they groused that he had not repaid the magazines. So when he was here, he made some news, and announced that he was repaying the magazines. But he was never criminally prosecuted.

Judith Kelley:

Got it. So, you mentioned earlier that he came to be seen as a villain in journalism, and you yourself sort of drew him in as convenient 'Exhibit X.' So, do you think that it's convenient for journalism to have a villain like this, when you are trying to teach? Was that part of why he was seen like that?

Bill Adair:

Well, I think that it, and particularly in the case of fabrication, there aren't really any shades of gray. He made up an epic number of things, and so it's not like you can excuse anything he did as being

acceptable in journalism. Everything he did was wrong; he would be the first one to tell you that. And so, what interested me though in teaching the course... So the course I teach is called News as a Moral Battleground, and it is our journalism ethics course. And as I taught it, what I realized about these cases of plagiarism and fabrication, was in the case of plagiarism, there were some interesting shades of gray. In some cases, it was editors who had been unclear about what the standards were of attribution, when you took content from another news organization.

Judith Kelley:

Sure.

Bill Adair:

And they had not communicated that well to reporters. But in the case of both kinds of journalists committing this mistake, it's an interesting human story of a journalist who has made an epic mistake. And I was fascinated to understand each one, just because I was curious. When does a journalist make this kind of mistake? What's going on in their lives? Why have they decided to do this? And then, what happens to them afterward? And I became very interested in these cases, both big and small. What happened to someone in a big case like Stephens? But also, there are many, much smaller cases: people at small newspapers, small magazines who get suspended or fired. And I just wondered what happens to them.

And so, I created these, case studies, where students had to do case studies and write about them. And then I began inviting some of these people to speak to the class, including Stephen and a former New York Times reporter named Jayson Blair, who had both plagiarized and fabricated in 2003. And that's when something else popped up, when I began to think about, at what point can someone like Stephen get to a point where they can be permitted to do journalism again, possibly, or at least to do other things that involve trust. And this is this fascinating concept of redemption.

Judith Kelley:

We'll definitely get back to that concept of redemption later on, because this story ends up taking some very fascinating twists and turns. But before that, Bill, I just want to ask you about that experience of bringing Stephen into your class. What was that like?

Bill Adair:

So, the first time was in 2016; and when Stephen came, I did not tell my students about it. I had them watch a film about him, and this was a major motion picture called Shattered Glass.

FILM CLIP

Voice 1: Wasn't an isolated incident. He handed us fiction after fiction, and we printed them all as fact.

Voice 2: What you're telling me is impossible.

Bill Adair:

And so, they had watched the film, and then I walked in the next day and said, "I'd like you to meet Stephen Glass." And they were-

Judith Kelley:

Wow.

Bill Adair:
... floored.

Judith Kelley:
Yes.

Bill Adair:
That I had brought him to class. And he spoke to them; and he did okay. They appreciated the opportunity to ask him questions, and hear how he had put his life back together. But they were not completely won over. I think they found him a little bit meek. And so... And he did announce that he was giving the money to the magazines; and that was interesting. But it was not his best talk, I don't think. And it was a function probably that he did not do this very often.

Judith Kelley:
Right.

Bill Adair:
But it was right before that, when he told me that his wife had early-onset Alzheimer's, and that she needed constant care. And I didn't make a big deal about that at the time. I was interested to know it, but I didn't know the backstory, I didn't know anything about Julie. And actually, I say wife; at the time, they had been together a while, but they were not actually married.

Judith Kelley:
Right.

Bill Adair:
So I didn't really follow up on it. But I stayed in touch with him over the next couple of years. He sent me a note when she died two years later, and stayed in touch with him. And then about a year after she died, I got back in touch, and reached out to him, to just talk to him about possibly writing something about him. And that's when the story began to emerge, and I realized that there was a really rich tale that I wanted to tell, about what had happened to him in the years since he initially met Julie in 2000.

Judith Kelley:
I want to get back, and I want to get to talking about Stephen Glass' true story. And as you mentioned before, the word redemption, Bill, a little bit. I want to talk about this story, because it's particularly relevant as we are thinking about living in a time of cancel culture, of the right to be forgotten, and about whatever you're doing in your life, living on, on the internet in perpetuity potentially. And are you always defined by your worst deed?

So there's just so many relevant questions to this story of Stephen Glass. So Bill, why don't you tell me a little bit more about it, because I know, as you mentioned, he had gone back to law school at night. And he ends up earning a living. He meets a woman, she's sick, it turns out. And what is it that becomes so interesting about this, in relationship to his past life?

Bill Adair:

So, it's important to talk a little bit about Julie. So Julie Hilden was a Harvard-educated writer and lawyer, who came from an interesting family background. Her mother had turbulent outbursts when Julie was a teenager, never fully understood. And when Julie was a young lawyer in New York, Julie's mother developed early-onset Alzheimer's.

Julie dealt with that by pretending it wasn't happening, and by abandoning her mother. And then after her mother died of Alzheimer's, Julie wrote a book that's incredibly revealing about it, a memoir that's called *The Bad Daughter*. And that book is haunting now, when you read it, and you realize how thoughtful and eloquent Julie was about this. And all of this was written right before she met Stephen. She met Stephen for the first time in 1998. She saw him when he was meeting with his lawyer at a Washington law firm. Stephen was slumped in a chair. Julie told a lawyer later, "I have never seen a human being so depressed in my life."

Judith Kelley:

Well, that's love at first sight.

Bill Adair:

Exactly. Well, I think it speaks to how much they helped each other. And they didn't actually start dating until two years later, when a friend said to Julie, "Hey, you should meet this guy, Steve. I think you guys would hit it off." And at the time, Steve was finishing up a law school at Georgetown University. And so, another friend was totally appalled at that, and said, "What? Are you going to start dating the criminals now?" And so... But they met and fell in love. And they both had a love of movies, and they loved to just talk; and they would have these endless conversations. And Steve took care of Julie, and Julie took care of Steve; and they just had this deep, deep relationship.

Judith Kelley:

But she was a little bit reluctant in the beginning right? Because she didn't know whether she herself would be coming down with Alzheimer's. And I think she entered into of the relationship with some hesitation regarding that.

Bill Adair:

She was definitely wary, knowing that she had the possibility that she might have a genetic predisposition for early-onset Alzheimer's.

Judith Kelley:

Right.

Bill Adair:

She had a test about that, as I document in the article. But that test came up negative. Steve was there when she got the test results back, and they were negative. And Julie said, "I could still get this." But Julie was thinking not about herself, but about him, about the possibility that she could pass it on if she ever had children. But they stayed together, and they eventually moved to Los Angeles. That was a way of Steve getting away from the media-obsessed worlds of New York and Washington.

They moved to Los Angeles. Steve was trying to find a job at a law firm. No law firm would hire him. He was always upfront about saying what happened to him, why he was fired from the New Republic. And as a result, no one wanted to hire him, except for this personal injury firm in Beverly Hills. And so, they hired him, and he proved that he could do a lot of work there as a legal assistant. And Julie was a columnist for a legal website; and they found happiness in Los Angeles.

Judith Kelley:

So Bill, before we get into the more, the really compelling part of the story here, you are throwing about lots of different facts about their story. And so, I know you're a facts guy. So take a step back before we get into the next part of the story, and just tell me a little bit about how you made sure that you had the true story at this point.

Bill Adair:

Yes. And that's important, because in dealing with Stephen Glass, I was dealing with one of journalism's biggest liars. And the editors that I've dealt with wanted to make sure that I had verified everything that he was telling me; so I went to great lengths to do that. And he was very open in sharing documents with me, so that I was able to see everything that I needed to see.

And one of the things that was fascinating about them in verifying scenes, was that many of the people that Stephen and Julie were friends with are some of the more prominent people in the Obama administration. One of their closest friends was Jason Furman, who was Obama's Chief Economic Advisor. Another is a prominent constitutional lawyer, who worked in the Solicitor General's Office named Neil Katyal. One was a prominent executive at Netflix named Lisa Daly.

So, in talking with them and others, I was able to verify everything that I got from Stephen; and that gave me tremendous confidence that he was telling me the truth. And that was important, because I needed to be sure that he wasn't embellishing anything. And it's actually kind of frustrating when you talk to him, because he'll pause, and then he'll... Because he wants to make sure he gets everything right.

Judith Kelley:

Yeah. I think this is really an interesting point for us to establish before the story goes on. Right? Which is that, from what I understand at this point, he had made a promise to himself that he was never, ever, going to lie again. And that he had become almost a neurotic truth-teller, right? That's exactly what you're describing now, which is that he had to double check himself and his own mind before he said anything, because he wanted to be so clear that he wasn't saying anything that it wasn't truth.

Bill Adair:

Exactly. His lying days were behind him. And so, the idea, as one long-time friend put it, the idea of sort of shaving off the corners of exaggerating is completely foreign to Stephen. He's not, as she put it, if he tells you something, you can take it to the bank. He cares about getting things right. And so, as things began to develop with Julie, the fact that he had made this vow, that he would tell the truth, really got tested.

Judith Kelley:

And it got tested because Julie ends up getting Alzheimer after all. And Julie has a particular attitude towards that. Right?

Bill Adair:

So, yeah. And this is... This scene when he told me about this, just brought tears to my eyes. And then after I wrote the scene, it made me cry multiple times. So it happened like this. So, Julie began showing some odd behaviors, and Steve began wondering if she had Alzheimer's. And so, he took her to a couple of different neurologists. The tests pointed pretty clearly toward Alzheimer's. And so, he talked to her, and he said, "It's clear it's Alzheimer's. And we need to talk about that." And Jill said, "We're not going to talk about that. I love my life. We're going to go on with our lives." And in effect, she was telling him, "We're going to pretend." And she was basically giving him a command to lie; and that was really hard.

Judith Kelley:

So he's really now looking at a choice. He can keep his promise to himself, that he's never going to lie again. But if he does that, he's going to betray the wishes of the person he loves the most, in order to keep her life as rich as possible, according her desires. He has that... There is not an in-between here.

Bill Adair:

And that's really hard; because you can think about it almost like as someone who has a substance abuse problem. He had vowed that those days were behind him; and here's the person he loves the most, who is saying, "I need you to lie for me."

Judith Kelley:

Right.

Bill Adair:

And so, it was really difficult. And so, he did it for a while, and finally, Neil, this constitutional lawyer, confronted him because Julie's behavior was so odd, and said, "What's going on?" And so, Stephen had to tell him, and had to say, "It's Alzheimer's." And this is in their kitchen, and they cried and they hugged. And then basically went back out to the dinner table, and Neil played along. And later after Julie went to bed, Neil and Stephen sat on the couch, and Stephen said this was his new life's purpose, was to care for Julie; because he knew what was going to happen.

Judith Kelley:

But this wasn't the only friend he had to deal with.

Bill Adair:

No. There were many other friends; and some became quite accusatory, because they thought maybe Stephen neglecting Julie in some way, or ignoring this problem. Lisa Daly, the Netflix executive, wondered what was going on, and confronted Stephen. And so he had to tell her; but soon they were all in on the lie, and they all pretended when they saw Julie that everything was okay.

Judith Kelley:

And there's a term for this, right? Therapeutic fibbing.

Bill Adair:

Exactly.

Judith Kelley:

Right.

Bill Adair:

And this is... And actually, I just heard from a reader, and I need to look this up. But there's some new scholarly articles about this practice, which is very new; because when I was working on this in the last two years, there was very little about it anywhere. And so, I'm glad to see that there's more discussion about it. But this... Caretakers will tell you, this is actually something that informally they have talked about for some time, which is that for someone with Alzheimer's, it often makes sense to spare them the difficult details of things. And when they say things, when they want details too often, lie. But it hasn't been studied very extensively. And so, I'm glad to see that it's getting some discussion.

But that's what they did. And what's notable to me is, these are... All of her friends have joined in this. These are prominent people. Jason Furman, Obama's Economic Advisor, is visiting from Washington; and he's going along with this, because this is what Julie wants.

And so, this went on as Julie declined over the next two years. And they went to great lengths to make her comfortable, to keep her happy. And at various times, she would express her happiness at what was going on.

Judith Kelley:

How did she indicate what she felt?

Bill Adair:

At one point, and this provides a little bit of humor in the article; just with all the attention that she was getting, they would have beauty day. Lisa would send the woman who cuts her hair to cut Julie's hair. And at one point, Stephen had given Julie the impression that all of the help in the house was there for the dog. And Julie finally says, "This is a lot of people to help the dog." But it was wonderful. And it was a sign of how much people loved Julie, and would care for Julie.

Judith Kelley:

Did they ever discuss it? Did they ever talk about what was going on?

Bill Adair:

Never. They never talked about the disease. They never talked about Julie's mother. But that's the way Julie wanted it.

Judith Kelley:

He actually took it further, right? He wasn't just pretending everything was fine. He even discussed adopting children, and things that he knew was completely out of the question.

Bill Adair:

Yeah. But that was what she wanted. She was still talking about trying to have a baby, which, a word she couldn't even remember; and so, she would say she wanted to have a person.

Judith Kelley:

So, we had mentioned talking about redemption, and can people change, and can they be redeemed? And you actually ended up bringing Stephen back to your class some years after Julie had died. Did you see any change in him?

Bill Adair:

I did. So, Julie died in March of 2018. And Steve came in March of 2020, sort of just a couple of weeks before COVID hit; and spoke to the same class, different group of students. And he was more confident, more able to talk about what he had gone through. And when Aaron Williams, a student who had helped me with some of the research on this article, asked him about lying, he talked for the first time about Julie, and what he had done, in lying at her wishes. And it was just incredibly moving; and just reading that scene just still brings tears to my eyes. He was so... It was just so eloquent. And he talked about what he did, how hard it was; but also what she did for him, and how she taught him about love. And it was just so moving. And the students in the class were really moved. And it was a very different appearance than when he had been there four years earlier.

Judith Kelley:

Bill, I know you are working on a different project, a book about why politicians lie. And I'm just wondering how this interaction with Stephen has informed your thinking about why people lie, different kinds of lies.

Bill Adair:

Yeah. It's interesting. Yeah. I've sort of become the professor of lying. And I've spent a lot of time reading what's written about this, and the different motivations, and the different types of lies. And I think it's made me appreciate that there are some lies that are completely understandable. Some of the people who've written about it say you shouldn't ever lie. And to me, that's just way too simplistic. And I don't think any reasonable person in the situation that Steve was in, would not fulfill Julie's wishes.

In the case of the book. I think it makes me wonder about the motivations of the politicians. And when I talk to them now, I think I'm more curious about their motivations, and how they justify it. If I were to put this on a continuum, what Steve did was completely understandable. In our political system, I don't think in most cases it is.

Judith Kelley:

Well, what Steve did at the end with Julie, but not what he did in the beginning, with that either.

Bill Adair:

Oh yeah, yeah. Yeah. I should be clear about that.

Judith Kelley:

Yeah.

Bill Adair:

Yeah. I'm talking about the loving lies.

Judith Kelley:

Right.

Bill Adair:

Yeah. No. I think... No, as I said at the beginning of this, what Stephen did as a journalist is completely inexcusable. And no, the... Yeah. No. Fabricating content is never okay.

Judith Kelley:

So when journalists are teaching Stephen Glass now, do they teach the whole story, or do they still have a convenient villain?

Bill Adair:

Well, it's a little early probably to say, since no one knew about this side of Stephen Glass until they read my article in Air Mail. And that's because Stephen had not talked about it. In Julie's obituary, there's no mention of Alzheimer's. There's no cause of death. And so, it took a long time for Stephen to be ready to talk about this.

At every stage of my work on this, there was a period where he had to think about, "Well, am I going to agree to do an interview, to talk about this? How far am I going to go?" And so, he's been very cautious. But ultimately, opened completely to me. And I'm very grateful for that; because I think I've told the story from all angles, and readers can judge now what they think of him.

Judith Kelley:

What do you think our generation of students that we are teaching are taking away from a story like this? What do you think they took away from it? How do you think it speaks to the climate they live in?

Bill Adair:

In a climate where we are very quick to cancel people because of one act, I hope that they take away from it that you should not be defined by your worst moments. Now again, Stephen Glass should not practice journalism again. And I don't... I'm not arguing that case, and I don't make that case in this article.

Judith Kelley:

Right.

Bill Adair:

All I... And in fact, all this article does, is recount what happened to him. I leave it to you, as a reader, to decide what you think should happen. But I hope people's takeaway is that you shouldn't be defined by your worst moments. And I'm just fascinated by this idea of redemption.

Judith Kelley:

I'm not a theologian, of course; the story that you tell here of Stephen is one where there's colossal sin, in the theological language, committed. And then there are good works that follow, that might in some way, balance against the bad. But of course, the concept of redemption is also related to salvation and forgiveness, from a religious perspective, which at least in several Christian interpretations is unconditional.

Bill Adair:

I'll leave the decision on him to the reader. I hope people will read it and see what they decide. What's fascinating to me, journalists who have been particularly harsh about Stephen over the years, read it and said, "It sure does make me think differently about him." So whether that entitles him to one thing or another, people can decide individually. But I just think it's important to look at people from many dimensions, and that's what this article does.

Judith Kelley:

I think that's, for me, one of the more important parts of this story, is that people are complex, and that I think we live in a society where we are quite quick to jump to conclusions. And your story gives us an opportunity to step back and see the complexity of one person's life. And I think that's a huge contribution. I'm really glad you wrote the story.

Bill Adair:

Well, thank you so much. I hope people will read it, and I hope they have the same reaction.

Judith Kelley:

My guest has been Bill Adair. He's the Knight Professor of the Practice of Journalism and Public Policy. And he's the creator of the Pulitzer Prize-winning website PolitiFact. We'll have a link to the story that we've been talking about on our website, policy360.org.

If you enjoyed our conversation with Bill Adair, you might like to look back at Episode 129, which was a conversation with another journalist, Frank Bruni. The title of that episode was Uncertainty on Journalism, Education, and Social Discourse. And that too, took us into territory about the ambiguities and complexities of life and human nature. I'll be back soon with another conversation. Thanks for joining me. I'm Judith Kelley.