

CHAPTER ONE

YOU'RE SOAKING IN IT

No matter how cynical you become, it is never enough to keep up.

—LILY TOMLIN

We live in an era of unprecedented bullshit production. The more polite among you might call it poppycock or balderdash or claptrap, but the concept remains the same, and the same coursing stream of crapulence washes over us all, filling our eyes and ears and thoughts with clichés, euphemisms, evasions, and fabrications. Never in the history of mankind have so many people uttered statements that they know to be untrue. Presidents, priests, politicians, lawyers, reporters, corporate executives, and countless others have taken to saying not what they actually believe, but what they want others to believe—not what is, but what works.

I am not so naive as to lay claim to some golden age when everybody meant what they said, and said what they meant, and the world entire was bright with the glare of truth. First, I came to consciousness in the eighties, so people have been conducting themselves in a sleazy manner the whole of my

short life. Second, every historical era conjures up its own lies, noble and banal. Since there have been snakes for the squeezing, there has been someone to flog their precious oil. We distinguish ourselves largely in terms of largeness. Our era is unique by virtue of its sheer scale, its massive budget, its seemingly unlimited capability to send bullshit hurtling rapidly over the globe.

There is so much bullshit that one hardly knows where to begin. The platitudinous pabulum that passes for stirring political rhetoric is bullshit. The scripted, question-proof events that pretend to be spontaneous exchanges are bullshit. The committee-crafted persona and the focus-grouped fad and the rule of the polls are straight-up bullshit. The disease hysteria du jour is bullshit, and so is the latest miracle pill. The new product that will change your life is probably just more cheap, plastic bullshit. We endure bullshit in the course of our workaday lives, in the form of management-speak memos about optimizing strategic objectives and result-based, value-added service delivery. We tolerate bullshit in common life-maintenance transactions, like banking and shopping. Most of what passes for news is bullshit, and even if you are so fortunate as to find things worth watching or reading, the content you desire will be punctuated with shills for things you don't need, like ginormous automobiles and toxic faux foodstuffs.

Even a cursory study of bullshit yields an embarrassment of riches, an all-you-can-eat buffet of phoniness, like when a Bush staffer eulogizes departing press secretary Ari Fleischer with the words, "His message discipline was extraordinary," a bullshit description of a peerless bullshitter. Or check out the Web presence of a swank PR firm, like Burson-Marsteller, mouthpieces for many a megacorp, and thrill to their proficiency in *change communications, issues management, reputa-*

tion management, and the coup de grâce, personal and social responsibility.

“Your call is important to us” has been chosen from a very deep reservoir of bullshit phrases for the title of this book because it best exemplifies the properties native to bullshit. It tries to slather some nice on the result of a simple ratio: your time versus some company’s dough. Like most bullshit, the more times you hear it, the bullshittier it gets. This is why bullshit is best served quickly, with many visuals, in mass quantities, with no questions from the floor.

Throughout this book, we will look at some of the world’s muchness of bullshit. I have elected to proceed on a sector-by-sector basis, since bullshit is not just a phenomenon but an industry—one of the growth industries of the information age, in fact. But bullshit is not a single industry unto itself, nor a sector proper. Instead, it rides shotgun, running interference for all the major modern sectors. We shall commence by looking at the two fields of human endeavor that have distinguished themselves as the most prolific producers of bullshit: advertising and public relations, which get bonus points for encouraging the industries that follow in their wake to tart themselves up. Next, we will see how financial markets, corporate structures, and lax laws allow for more merde, with entire companies—your Enrons, your WorldComs—exposed as mortared with bullshit. Then we’ll have a look at politics, which is a business as well, alas. Finally, we’ll look at a few examples of bullshit produced by some of the sectors that affect your everyday life, like pharmaceuticals, insurance, the service industry, and the media.

We are all, of course, implicated in the bullshit pandemic as minor, small-scale producers of our own ordure. I would love to be hard-core like my favorite Enlightenment philoso-

pher, Immanuel Kant, and declare that all lies are wrong, and that there are no circumstances whatsoever that condone untruth. Kant thought that any lie, no matter how minor or well-intentioned, corrodes the universality and trust that people need to live freely, and I couldn't agree more. But I'd be lying if I said I never lied, and I'm sure you could conjure a million retarded Philosophy 101 variations on the theme of virtuous fibs. It is therefore crucial to note that there are very different orders of magnitude when it comes to bullshit.

Those couple of daily white lies, about bad haircuts and spousal girth and the like, are entirely harmless and preferable to the useless, hurtful truth. Good manners sometimes call for omission, editing, and the occasional fudge. However, if your secretary is shredding documents by the light of the moon, or your testimony before the House interrupts the soaps, or you have yet to visit the country where all your money lives, you have probably concocted a whopper of inordinate size.

Nor am I unduly concerned with the gap between appearance and reality with respect to the way the common man woos his wife, greets his co-workers, or combs his hair. It takes millions and millions of dollars, and a solid toehold in the public consciousness, to prick up my ears. When something installs itself in popular culture, that is when I begin to wonder about the gaps between what that thing does, says, and says about what it does. If I fault the spectacularly wealthy and powerful the more for embroidering the truth, it is not because they bullshit more frequently than their lunchmeat-munching lessers, but simply because they get a lot more out of it, thus setting a very bad example that ensures continued bullshitting all the way down the line. Dollars may not trickle down, but lessons and images certainly do.

I am even tempted to make the case that lying is less dan-

gerous than bullshitting. In his essay “On Bullshit,” professor Harry Frankfurt draws a subtle and useful distinction between lying and bullshitting. The liar still cares about the truth. The bullshitter is unburdened by such concerns. Bullshit-related phrases like *bull session* or *talking shit* also suggest a casual, careless attitude toward veracity—a sense that the truth is totally beside the point. Bullshit distracts with exaggeration, omission, obfuscation, stock phrases, pretentious jargon, faux-folksiness, feigned ignorance, and sloganeering homilies. When Dubya speaks of freedom and liberation, and claims to be praying for peace as the army disgorges load after load of bombs, he is not lying. He is bullshitting. A lie would be a simpler, more factual thing, like, nope, we aren’t dropping any bombs. A lie would be easier to disprove. Bullshit is a committee-drafted simpleton’s sermon about evildoers and terra and freedom being God’s gift to all men.

This is bullshit because it tricks out a terrible thing in floaty, fulsome rhetoric. Bullshit is forever putting the rosiest of spins on rotten political and economic decisions. This is because bullshit is all about getting away with something, or getting someone to buy something in the broadest possible sense, which means covering arses or kissing them. Bullshit is always trying to be your buddy, getting all chummy with you, making greasy nice. Nobody passes a bill because they got a bale of cash from some industry concern; instead, they wax poetic about the good people of Any District who will benefit immensely from the new legislation. Nobody leaves office because they fucked up; no, they want to spend more time with their families. No mogul says I do it all for the money, suckers. They blah-dee-blah on about the company, or some magnificent abstract idea the company embodies.

Bullshit aggrandizes and amplifies. Sometimes this is a sign

of the bullshitter's luxuriant self-regard, like when athletes or actresses praise the original G for their achievements. This is supposed to make the star in question seem humble as well as Christian, which is a very popular bullshit pose, particularly among the obscenely wealthy. Instead of striking a modest note, though, such statements imply that the supreme being has the time, inclination, and interest to fix the Oscars or the Super Bowl. Though the famous contribute plenty of name-brand bullshit to the culture, bullshit is more often produced anonymously. It tends to be cranked out by hacks and flacks, in the interest of aggrandizing and amplifying the object it is slathered all over, whether that's a celebrity, a product, a candidate, a disease, a war, a service, or an event.

Bullshit is not just happy talk. There are also bullshit scares and threats that hold the public in a thrall of fear, all the while eclipsing many genuinely problematic international developments. Prime-time newsmagazines like *Dateline* and *20/20* excel at uncovering the latest lurid crime or horror at home, airing gross buckets of alarmist bullshit about satanic nannies and con-artist plumbers. Cable networks shine when it comes to puffing up minor hobgoblins into major panics, like shark attacks or the Summer of SARS, and making made-for-TV miniseries like the one on the Laci Peterson case, and *Saving Private Jessica*, the book, the movie, and the centcom agitprop.

Bullshit also minimizes, making sure the proverbial buck never, ever stops. Such bullshit includes the fetid apologies of irresponsible corporations and unaccountable politicians, the excuse-making and name-changing that follow any mistake or massacre. Examples of this include Phillip Morris christening itself Altria, Enron restructuring itself into the utterly generic InternationalCo, and Dow's self-flagellating Bhopal website, which, amid the mea culpas, underlines the fact that they as-

sume no legal liability for the misadventures of their offending subsidiary, Union Carbide.

One of the really fascinating things about bullshit is how utterly obvious a lot of it is. When one of the Enron dudes takes the stand and pleads the fifth or uses weasel phrases like “I cannot recall,” he is not lying. He is bullshitting. He is bullshitting because the whole routine is so flagrantly false that it sails gaily past traditional notions of deception. It’s not like he expects us to believe that early onset Alzheimer’s has rendered that whole making-millions-of-dollars thing, like, a total blur. It is not a lame excuse or limp self-justification. Dude is not even trying. He is merely repeating the legally appropriate, self-protecting thing one says on such occasions, giving voice to the typical script.

Most people believe that they can recognize the typical script as such, and consider themselves excellent bullshit detectors. Bullshit detection is the stuff of which modern social bonds are made. We huddle in little clusters, or gather on the Web, rolling our eyes in unison, bitching and moaning about the bullshit. We praise the superior interpretative skills of our respective social sets and marvel at the terminally credulous cretins, somewhere out there, who are actually swallowing this bilge. And we talk this way whether we are discussing politics or pop culture. The fact that most of us feel like we can see through the prevailing pretenses but expect and accept them is part and parcel of the way bullshit works. Bullshit thrives on the soft bigotry of low expectations.

Cynicism, irony, and apathy—the ostensible markers of Gen Xers like me—are often dismissed by elder virtuecrats as a lack of good old-fashioned values. This virtuecratic stance may be more commonly associated with conservative politicians, but Democrats like Al Gore and Joe Lieberman have also been

quick to pick on the usual pop-culture objects of blame, like video games, TV, movies, and rap music. When the banner of godliness is held aloft by hypocrites like William Bennett, who blew millions in Vegas even as he cranked out book after book of virtues, or Newt Gingrich, who talked family values but divorced his own wife in the midst of her terminal illness, it casts doubt on the very idea of a moral high ground.

Cynicism and apathy are, in fact, reasonable responses to the refulgent tide of bullshit in which we have bobbed all our lives. We have seen too many hopeful Reaganisms like “It’s morning in America” give way to scandals like Iran-Contra. One of the reasons why people—particularly the young—are opting out of old-school civic duties like voting and reading the newspaper is that they are weary of bullshit.

It would be overstating the case, though, to claim that this apathy is a form of conscientious objection. Apathy is also a consequence of being, like, sooo totally distracted. There is a lot of other bullshit that is way more entertaining than the yawny old newspaper. North Americans live at the intersection of too much and too little information—a great location for bullshit production, since bullshit often begins with some little smidge of truth, like the hearsay headline or the overheard opinion. The bullshitter knows a little something, or thinks that he does, and rather than admit ignorance, soldiers bravely on. All of us, save for the most scrupulous, have doubtless blithered our way through a conversation regarding matters we do not know much about, like talking about “unrest”—a classic bullshit euphemism—in a place we couldn’t point to on a map.

But too much information is no antidote to too little of it, since so much of this information is strictly commercial, ephemeral, or shorn of context. This semi-knowledge annexes valuable public and mental space, as do all the things not

worth knowing that you can't not know, try though you may to avoid the *Matrix* sequels or the latest Britney Spears release.

There are several different dialects of bullshit, indigenous to various institutions and professions. We will look at these later, in detail, when we encounter the bizarre lingua francas of specific industries. But now I would like to draw a more basic distinction between the two major types of bullshit: the complex and the simple. Complex bullshit is also known as bafflegab or jargon, and it is the native argot of modern bureaucracy. Simple bullshit is all about the dumbed-down, the quick hit, the ad, or the blip on the cable news crawl. Most information in North America seems to come in one of two settings: Expert or Moron. Expert is the lengthy contract you sign to get a loan or mortgage from a bank, and Moron is the brightly colored brochure that encouraged you to bank at the First National House of Usury. Expert is the snarl of subsidiaries and tax dodges established by Enron with the help of Arthur Andersen's finest; Moron is Ken Lay and the gang putting on a happy face and maintaining that all is well.

Complex bullshit is full of feats of abstract reasoning that would astonish a medieval theologian. An infinity of holding companies can be set to dance upon the head of the slenderest offshore pin. Even business types have become alarmed by their own flights of jargoneering. In 2003, Deloitte & Touche released a new software program called Bullfighter, which flags offending terms like *synergy*, *incentivize*, and *paradigm*. Deloitte's consultants argued that this sort of obfuscating bafflegab is a bad sign, business-model-wise, citing examples like the Internet bubble, when people invested gobs of spondulicks in business plans they did not understand. These plans sounded pretty fantastic, but were categorically un-understandable because they made no sense, and were not in the pedestrian

business of sense-making. Anyone can make sense. Only the revolutionary few can make millions by incentivizing synergy paradigms.

Bafflegab is not written to explain. It is written to impress and confound, and it is by no means confined to the business world, although that is where it thrives. The government also cranks out documents that impress and confound with their sheer bulk and impenetrability. Curl up with your tax code, or the North American Free Trade Agreement. Marvel at its dogged reader-resistance, the clauses of legalese and the confusing constructions. Whether you read them or not, these bricks of bafflegab determine the quality of your life. The boring is where they keep the consequences.

Simple bullshit does not demand decoding. We flee to the cozy no-think of simple bullshit after furrowing our brows at the complex stuff. It is all pretty colors and easy fixes and exactly what you want to hear. It should be fairly obvious by this point that bullshits simple and complex are Siamese twins of a sort, with simple running interference and serving as the smiling public face of complex bullshit. Simple bullshit is pitched to the lowest common denominator, and is not just stupid, but actively stupefying. One of the most important things I have learned from teaching is that the presumption of stupidity leads to the production of stupidity. Simple bullshit doesn't just lower the public discourse bar. It buries it deep in the cold, cold ground.

Simple bullshit is generally too good to be true, telling you that everything is okay, that you are loved, that you are number one, that you deserve a break today, that the solution to all your problems is but a product or ideology away. Bullshit simple comes on strong and cloying, like the cheating boyfriend who buys too many bouquets. Simple bullshit is not all sweetness

and light, though. Simple bullshit also demonizes. Bullshit simple is the tongue of political demagogues left and right, be they fundie hymn-belted creeps like John Ashcroft, covering the nipples on statues, or charmless virtuecrats like Al Gore and Joe Lieberman, condemning video games they have never played. The gossip, trash talk, bullying, and closed-minded combativeness that pass for contemporary political coverage and commentary are good examples of simple bullshit, the best-selling representatives being the eminent belligerents Rush Limbaugh, Bill O'Reilly, and Ann Coulter.

We certainly cannot take credit for inventing bullshit: You can go all the way back to ancient Egypt and find texts bemoaning the fact that everyone lies. But we have made it—to use a few of our favorite adjectives—bolder, brighter, bigger, better, stronger, faster. We have supersized it. No previous cluster of imperial or religious bullshit-production apparatuses has grown as huge, efficient, and well funded as rapidly, or dispersed itself over the face of the globe in quite the way ours has. Part of this is a consequence of technological innovations like radio, television, and computers, which provide brand-new outlets and unprecedented audiences for bullshit. Another reason is the greater volume of commercial speech on behalf of companies seeking a global market share. Not all commercial speech is bullshit, but a lot of bullshit is commercial speech.

When did you last see an actor say his latest movie was lousy? Now, when did you last see a lousy movie? Suffice it to say the latter happens far more frequently than the former. Commercial speech insists that everything it speaks of is good, and when everything is good, nothing is good. There is also escalating hyperbole going on here, insofar as everything not only has to be good, but better than all the other billions of

good things, which leads to a feedback loop of skills for an infinity of proliferating, ever-improved products. I'll see your Diet Coke with Lemon and raise you a Pepsi Twist. I'll see your Pepsi Twist and raise you a Vanilla Coke. And so on, until no corner goes cola-less, and there's a worldwide vanilla shortage.

Another property of commercial speech that leads to bullshit production is that it is not written by the people who have to say or assume responsibility for it. This is also a big problem with most political speech. I am not insisting that everyone draft his own material, though the English teacher in me reckons that anyone who cannot string together a sentence probably shouldn't lead a company or a country. But the number of people working from a script today encourages one to view every public statement as acting, an entire culture emoting like a dinner theater troupe. Hey, everyone—let's put on a show! This division of rhetorical labor means that the brains who think up the words don't have to say them, and the speakers who give voice to the words don't have to think them. All the better to disconnect them from reality, my dear.

Better communications technology and the increased volume of commercial speech are two of the major material causes of bullshit's growth, insofar as they have provided the means of distribution and the capital to produce and distribute more manure. Both these trends picked up speed during the period of postwar prosperity in North America, otherwise known as the long boom. The long boom stretched from the mid-forties to the mid-seventies. One of the reasons why Americans enjoyed such a long boom is that they never really demobbed. It took a great deal of propaganda to convince Americans to enter both World Wars, and a massive mobilization of the forces of production to sustain their participation in these wars. Once the wars were won, the forces of wartime

production and persuasion were successfully redeployed in the service of domestic affluence, convenience, and progress. This is not to say that there were no wars, for copious dollars continued to flow into the military-industrial complex, but on the domestic front, peace and prosperity prevailed. Propagandists became PR men and advertisers and we cranked out the cars, televisions, and trinkets of the new consumer culture.

This period laid the infrastructure for the bullshit explosion, but it took a few more unfortunate events, like the fiscal crumminess and stagflation of the late seventies, to finally blow it up real good. The one-two punch of Vietnam and Watergate left public trust in democratic institutions in tatters. The leaders of the eighties, folks like Reagan, Thatcher, and Mulroney, urged us to put our trust in markets instead. Reagan went so far as to claim that government itself was the problem, and markets the solution: "It's time to get government off the backs of the people," quoth the Gipper. The free market was presented as democracy in action, the public sphere vilified as inefficient, cumbersome, retrograde. In fact, the very idea of a public good was dismissed as some hippy-dippy liberal chimera. As Iron Maggie once decreed, there is no such thing as society, only individuals. This sort of individualistic, up-with-markets rhetoric has been the most consistent theme in politics for the past twenty years. Even alleged Democrats like Clinton cut the welfare rolls.

This kind of thinking has significant social side effects, ways of thinking that aid and abet bullshit production. First, saying "let the market decide" is kind of like saying "let the car drive." It's mystical, and it also implies that we should not blame whoever happens to be behind the wheel. Second, it has made us more self-interested, a natural consequence of being told twenty million times that individuals achieve amazing things

and generate fabulous wealth, while collective endeavors or shared goals lead to committees, teamsters, and gulags. This is also a result of being informed that you will never be a beneficiary of all the Great Society safety-net fun, like cheap tuition, or free health care, or a pension. You know that it's all up to you, and that you have to believe in you, to quote two of our most beloved inspirational truisms. You have to sell you, since nobody else will, and there is nobody to blame but you if you fail your way into poverty.

This emphasis on the self is by no means confined to politics and economics. Pop culture, from celebrity coverage to the memoir deluge, showcases individuals overcoming the customary impediments, like abuse and addiction and divorce and disease. The language of news broadcasts has shifted selfward, switching from the traditional collective pronouns of hard news to a more personal you-speak and increased coverage of the personal peccadillos of public figures. Pop psychology, otherwise known as self-help, is a publishing and daytime TV juggernaut worth billions. When you do an Amazon search for books about the self, the server spits out more than thirty thousand titles. For those who'd rather spruce up their outsides than their insides, there is the cavalcade of lifestyle porn: Think Martha, pre-slammer, and all the experts that have done Martha.

There is nothing inherently wrong with self-interest. The danger lies in the ego growing outsized, overfed on a steady diet of nothing. It is little wonder that we can be such selfish, shortsighted beings, considering the extent to which we are encouraged to think no further than our image, our comfort, our next snack. We are forever being wooed by new needs, and bombarded by freshly minted wants. This happy con-

sumer plenitude goes beautifully with all the scary political straight talk about supporting yourself or eating dog food in a cardboard box. Self-reliance is the stick, and self-indulgence is the carrot, but the focus remains the same: Does this work for me? What's in it for me? Enough about me—what do I think of me?

Conservative virtuecrats blame today's chronic truth decay on relativism in its many pernicious forms. Some of them castigate the "if it feels good, do it" permissiveness of hippies and boomers. Others point a finger at the godlessness of modern life. Others point to academia, which erroneously assumes that liberal arts faculties have any sway over the culture. If we did, believe me, I would be the first to do a merry power-mad jig in the town square. Alas, we do not.

If we have become a more relativist culture, less inclined to believe in absolutes like God and truth, more inclined to subjective judgments, it is largely due to the millions of choices presented by the market. One of the main articles of postmodern criticism is that there is no capital-T truth, merely competing truth claims. This is the kind of talk that makes conservatives accuse po-mo thought of being politically correct gobbledygook. But this formula does describe their beloved free market very nicely, as every product or service makes a competing claim of sorts, and no one, ideal, holy, true soda prevails. All sales pitches may strain to reach the absolute, à la Coke Is It, but they only have value in relation to one another. Or, to paraphrase philosopher Gilles Deleuze, we have shifted from moral existence to aesthetic existence, where questions of taste engage us more frequently than questions about the good. Ironically, many of the people who, through their policies and their ideologies, have pushed us into this

world of constant consumption castigate the decadence that invariably accompanies the very affluence they seek as the greatest of all goods.

This is not to claim that the old dogmas do not persist. This is merely to note that in most North American cities the Christian store, with its Left Behind books and saint decor and Jesus fish for the car, is never more than a drive away from the place that sells the Che T-shirts, face jewelry, and bongos. The free market is powerful and lucrative and fun precisely because it is the great Relativizer, leveler of all values, equally glad to crank out the trappings of kink or conformity, ready to cater to the lewd or the prude. Money does not care whether you are using it to buy a gross of Bibles or of nipple clamps.

One of the great paradoxes of modern life is that money is our major good, since money is equally glad to pal around with the honest dealer and the flimflam artist. Money is me-minded, as well. There's nothing money loves more than hanging around with other money. Money can't get enough of money. It's like a Zen koan: It takes it to make it.

The free market has provided unparalleled levels of affluence, comfort, and peace for North Americans. I am enjoying the blandishments of glorious capitalism even as I type this sentence. Mmmm, comfy couch, big-screen TV, effervescent beverages, mmmm. But, and it is a great big but, it would be a mistake to consider the current setup of the global economy a meritocracy, democracy in action, or a final moral arbiter. The free market ain't that free. You have to pay to get in. The global economy is a crazy patchwork quilt of mixed economies. Every major North American industry is propped up by public infrastructure, like government subsidies, tax entitlements, and protectionist trade regulations. Many North American industries are dominated by a few huge colluding concerns,

which hardly squares with classical economic visions of independence, competition, efficiency, and transparency. Some North American concerns have entirely abandoned old-school notions like providing services or products people are willing to pay for, and instead make their profits via book cooking, numbers juggling, speculation, liquidation, outsourcing, and downsizing. The latter practices are not just the mark of corrupt concerns like Enron, WorldCom, or Global Crossing; most leading CEOs have presided over layoffs in the thousands, and General Electric has divested itself of almost half of its workers over the past decade.

Moreover, it is what the free market sets people to doing that really matters. The last long boom was the result of a vibrant manufacturing sector. The gilded notion of mid-century family values has everything to do with the fact that Mom could stay home with the kids and Jesus, baking pies, because Dad made enough dough to provide for the whole brood. One of the great Republican conundrums is that their aggressively pro-rich economic policies have made it virtually impossible for anyone to live in the kind of good old-fashioned family that their social policies strive to create. The great Democratic conundrum is that they have become New High-Fashion Republicans for Girls.

Now more of us work, we spend more time at work, and more of us work in the service sector, the fastest-growing in North America. The service sector is not as well paid, has a lower economic multiplier effect, and involves tons of phony cheer. The growth of the service sector is certainly implicated in the production of bullshit, insofar as customer service involves repeating lickspittle mantras. And since you are what you soak in, a long, hard day of making things is bound to produce a different sort of person than a long, hard day of greeting

folks in the foyer of the Wal-Mart, asking if they want fries with their burger, or conducting phone surveys.

There are several other reasons why there is so much bullshit, not the least of which is that we continue to tolerate it. We might grumble about bullshit, but few of us are inclined to ask for the manager or boycott the offender. This is partly due to a sense that resistance is futile. You, as a lone consumer, can hardly put a dent in any of the reigning oligopolies with your singular refusal, no matter how cruddy their service or product may be. You, as a single voter, can hardly influence matters of state to the same degree that industry concerns and special interest lobbies can. These feelings of impotence, insignificance, and isolation represent the bumper underside of all that self-interest speak, for you are but a superfluous drop in the mighty churning sea that will wash on with or without you. It's the triple-A of apathy, alienation, and atomization.

The business of ordinary life involves speaking to loads of different people we do not know and who do not know us. I realize this is a Well, Duh proposition, but it is an important part of why we continue to produce and perpetuate bullshit. Relative anonymity, or lack of direct contact, lowers the truth stakes. Lying guides emphasize that it is always easier to slide a fib past someone you do not know; someone who knows you well is more likely to notice your tells. More important, you probably wouldn't want to abuse their trust to begin with. We may be connected to many more people, but not enough to develop a sense of trust. It is far easier to fib on the phone than it is in person. It is far easier to fib on the TV or the Web than on the phone.

It is a banal example of a larger phenomenon, but when you hear the familiar words, "your call is important to us," are you, personally, being lied to? Yes and no. The nice people who put

you on hold are not out to deceive you. They are merely doing their jobs, which they more likely than not dislike, and with good reason. Employees at call centers are trained to develop a phoniness that is deeply demeaning, for workers and customers both. They have to act like you are King or Queen Customer, because their company has doubtless adopted some Service Quality Excellence Formula, even though your call is but one of the thousands that the cubicle farm will field today. Even when you get past the recording, many phone jockeys aren't really talking to you at all. They, like so many little Gwyneth Paltrows, are simply giving voice to a script, a protocol of politesse expressly designed to defuse a screwed consumer's outrage without actually solving anything.

You, the indignant consumer, probably picked up the phone because this company has your lovely money and you have nothing to show for it. No tickets, no credit card, no dial tone, no reservation, no service, no power, none of the things they promised you in the pretty ads. And hey, what are you going to do, now that you've been waiting on hold this long, chump? Hang up? Get bumped down the priority-sequence queue?

It disproves itself every time it plays, and still, everyone keeps on playing it.

If my call is so important to you, why isn't anyone answering the damn phone?