

Lily Zheng & Inge Hansen



The Ethical Sellout

Maintaining Your Integrity
in the Age of Compromise

Praise for *The Ethical Sellout*

“Lily Zheng and Inge Hansen have written a new guidebook on the importance of managing and maintaining one’s integrity as we work to navigate what they call ‘the age of compromise.’ I coach LGBTQ leaders and professionals on the importance of being truly authentic to oneself in all aspects of life. Zheng and Hansen wrap this all up in their book. I especially love the last line of their manifesto: ‘Commit to being open to flexibility, growth, and exploration, to take up space in the world, and to live . . . life with integrity.’ Authenticity is key in everything we do and become! This is a must-read!”

—**David P. Whittleton, life and leadership coach and founder of Whittleton Consulting**

“*The Ethical Sellout* is an honest exploration of the inevitable gray areas in which marginalized people find themselves in today’s society. The book is a push-and-pull dance between the impossible pressure for absolutism shouldered by marginalized people and the need for accountability in the midst of small and big compromises. The authors take us on a journey beyond ‘justification’ for our choices to creating breathing room for our complex lives to be held with compassion, accountability, and possibility.”

—**Michelle Kim, cofounder and CEO, Awaken**

“From college admissions scandals to exposés on organizations like Theranos, it is easy to point out where ethics have jumped the track. But what about our smaller, individual decisions that we make on an almost daily basis? What happens to your personal ethics when you have something to lose? This book does a masterful job of laying a framework to help you answer those questions and hear how others have struggled to come to their own conclusions.”

—**Todd Wilms, Chief Marketing Officer, FoundersPlace.co, and coauthor of *Beyond Product***

“Helpful, grounding, encouraging, and gentle. I needed a new way of looking at my life and my choices. This book helped me be kinder to myself at a really tough juncture—and allowed something surprising to unfold.”

—**Shea McGuier, Director of Communications, Telecare Corporation**

“The Ethical Sellout combines practical advice with relatable stories—deciding how to both define and choose between your values and needs has never been more compassionately explained.”

—**Stephanie Eberle, Assistant Dean and Director, Stanford BioSci Careers**

“The Ethical Sellout presents an uncomplicated framework for navigating the complicated choices that confront us in our increasingly complex lives as we struggle to make the compromises necessary for success without surrendering the essence of our beliefs.”

—**Vineet Buch, venture capitalist and former Google executive and entrepreneur**

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To my younger self, who thought she had
to be a perfect activist to be a good one.

I'm glad you were wrong.

Lily

To my parents, in gratitude for
all their love and support.

Inge

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Introduction

When we decided to write this book, we had been working in separate but overlapping spheres for several years. Our work was different in many ways: Inge was a university clinician; Lily was a diversity, equity, and inclusion consultant. What brought us together were stories.

Lily, as an activist, researcher, and consultant, was inundated with stories of all kinds: that of the grassroots organizer fighting for justice, the entry-level employee working to climb up in the workplace, the startup founder grappling with hiring a diverse team. Lily noticed, however, that other stories, beneath the surface, weren't being told. One close friend shared that she wanted to leave the activist community. A research participant nervously described compromising her appearance to avoid discrimination. Some of the people with the strongest identities and most deeply held values seemed also to be struggling most with feelings of fear, apprehension, and self-doubt around the everyday decisions they made. They experienced guilt, shame, and self-blame around their choices yet constantly worked to maintain the impression that they were model members of their communities.

Inge, a clinical psychologist who has worked everywhere from the San Diego LGBT Center to the California prison system and who currently directs student health equity and well-being services at Stanford University, has heard more than her fair share of stories as well in the course of her work. She was struck by the decisions that her clients grappled with the most, which often seemed to be conflicts between who they thought they were supposed to be and

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who they were becoming. It seemed that over and over, people would come to her office as though seeking permission—or forgiveness—for being themselves. They worried that they were letting down their family or community by seeking their own path, which was confusing in the face of the predominant cultural message: “Be yourself.”

We have deeply personal reasons for writing this book as well: namely, that we’ve both had our own experiences of selling out.

Lily sold out when she decided to work for the same institution that, as a student activist, she had protested. She sold out her own belief in the importance of grassroots change when she started her own for-profit business working with large corporations. And she sells out every day as she tries to create a public-facing persona that balances authenticity and rebelliousness with the respectability she needs to work with her clients.

Inge sells out her queer identity when people assume based on her appearance that she’s straight and she doesn’t correct them—she gets to be out when it’s safe and convenient, and she doesn’t have to be when it’s not. Similar to Lily, she sold out her activist communities and her own social justice beliefs by working within a well-funded elite institution rather than dedicating her time to supporting the struggling nonprofits that need her more.

Based on our own stories and those we heard from others, we suspected that despite our aversion to the idea of becoming sellouts, all of us nevertheless sell out at some point in our lives. In fact, it seemed likely that most of us sell out in small ways on a regular basis. We wrote this book to answer two questions: “What compels so many of us to sell out?” and “How can we sell out ethically?”

We started this book as a search to find the so-called sellouts in the world. We suspected that after hearing their

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stories, we would be able to identify “unethical” sellouts from their “ethical” counterparts: those who made selling-out decisions based on necessity rather than greed. We were surprised to find that all the people we spoke with described the same challenges. They worked to find their place within their social and demographic groups, whether racial or religious, professional or political. They faced situations where they were tempted in the moment to sacrifice their beliefs or values for something else, whether for safety, security, personal gain, or other reasons. And overwhelmingly, they struggled with whether they were making the right choice. In other words, we found that the line between ethical and unethical selling out was much blurrier than we had anticipated.

In the first section of this book, we’ll share a framework we developed to understand and interpret the many stories we heard. We’ll explore the stories of over a dozen people from a colorful range of backgrounds who have all struggled with decisions to sell out, whose stories span contexts from high-tech corporations, elite universities, the US military, and beyond. After each story, we’ll unpack the decisions that people made for themselves and discuss what their stories teach us about selling out ethically.

In the second section of this book, we’ll pull everything together. We’ll revisit our framework and adapt it into a toolkit that all of us can use in our own lives—not to become ethical sellouts but to sell out more ethically.

If you are a young person navigating how your identities and beliefs might color your career and life decisions, this book is for you. If you are middle-aged and seeking personal or professional balance, new meaning, and authenticity, this book is for you. If you are an activist or a person with strong community ties wondering how to live your values given the realities of our current economic and political climate, this

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book is for you. This book is for all who have ever felt forced to choose between their needs and their values. This book is for those who strive every day to maintain their integrity in the face of constant pressure to compromise.

This book is for you.

Framing CHANGE

John formed his first band with his friends when he was sixteen years old. His mother gave him a cheap guitar to support his new hobby, but his family expected (maybe even hoped) that not much would come of it. Music wasn't a real way to make a living, after all. Four years later, John's band was still playing. It had been renamed, gathered some new members, and played regularly at red-light-district clubs around town.

One night, the band's growing underground popularity attracted the attention of a local record-store owner who recognized their untapped mainstream potential. After wooing John and his bandmates with talk of record contracts and stardom, this man was signed on to be their manager. True to his word, he catapulted John's band to success—but at a price. He told them that their underground look would have to go. They had to dress and act differently than they wanted: wear “professional” clothing on stage and tame their stage presence. John resisted the idea but eventually gave in, saying, “I'll wear a bloody balloon if somebody's going to pay me.”

The band John Lennon formed, the Beatles, gained international stardom, yet John felt conflicted about how they got there. In a 1971 *Rolling Stone* interview, he stated,

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As soon as we made it, we made it, but the edges were knocked off.

You know [our manager] Brian put us in suits and all that, and we made it very, very big. But we sold out, you know. The music was dead before we even went on the theater tour of Britain. . . .

The Beatles music died then, as musicians. That's why we never improved as musicians; we killed ourselves then to make it.¹

Define “Sellout”

When we first started interviewing the people whose stories appear in this book, we asked each of them to define the word “sellout.” Here are a few of the answers:

- “When you sell out, you have nothing left of your ‘authentic’ self to give.”
- “Sacrificing the integrity of your original mission.”
- “Compromising your ethics or code of values for money.”

People’s understanding of what makes a sellout is surprisingly consistent. In fact, it matches up well with Dictionary.com’s definition:

sellout

noun

A person who compromises his or her personal values, integrity, or talent, or the like, for money or personal advancement.

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“Sellout” isn’t a word that many think of in neutral terms. Say the word in your head and you might catch yourself injecting a hint of malice in it, a bite of scorn. You’d likely say it the same way you might say “traitor,” “poser,” or “liar.” Start imagining the face of a modern-day sellout and you’ll soon see why. You might think of the politician who leaves campaign promises unfulfilled after meeting lobbyists with deep pockets, or the musician who turns their back on their roots to pursue big record deals and corporate sponsorships. You might think of the small-town nobody who strikes it rich and leaves their old friends and communities behind or the activist who backsteps on their radical opinions after gaining celebrity status and joining the establishment.

These kinds of stories tend to be shared with the same moral message: when you betray your communities, your cause, or even your own values, you lose something sacred about yourself. Even if what you’ve traded your values for isn’t money, you’ve compromised your integrity and become a traitor in the process. We don’t want to call ourselves sell-outs because, well, we’re not traitors.

It’s true that we’re not all traitors toward others, at least not in a way that is dangerous or damaging. But we are all at times traitors to our own values, beliefs, and identities. The reasons for this are rooted in the economic, social, and political structure of our society. The people we spoke with had some ideas about that as well:

- “Selling out is to some extent inevitable because we live in capitalism and we need money to live. I don’t know that it’s possible not to sell out. I would say it’s about selling out the minimum amount possible to survive.”

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- “Our society encourages selling out, or this incremental march away from your ideals. We have to be on alert for it. If you’re an activist or artist or one of these things that doesn’t generate wealth for those who are more powerful, then you are encouraged to find a way to sell your labor to the highest bidder to survive.”

More and more signs seemed to suggest that stories of tough choices and uncomfortable compromises are, in fact, universal. We might not all be sellouts. But it seems like all of us, at some point and in some circumstances, sell out.

The Context

We live in a capitalist society. As a consequence, people feel pressure to do what sells to get by, which can impact job choice, how one markets oneself, how one’s work is negotiated (e.g., you may be an artist needing to produce work that appeals to the masses), and also what type of lifestyle is affordable (e.g., you may believe in a completely organic diet and cruelty-free clothing and walking to work each day, but you have a Walmart clothing budget and can’t afford to live close enough to your work to walk there).

Systems of Oppression

Our society values some types of bodies, identities, and experiences over others. This means that women, LGBTQ+ people, people of color, people with disabilities, the elderly, and people with persecuted systems of faith will not have the same access to opportunity as people with more privileged identities. People who hold one or more marginalized identities can find themselves torn between their loyalty to their community and the freedom and opportunities that come with doing what it takes to get ahead, whether that

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means distancing from an identity, hiding it, or even using it for profit.

These factors create a cultural context in which selling out in some form is often necessary for survival. If you've ever struggled with tough compromises that are more about safety and getting by than about making it big, you are far from alone.

Suffering in Silence

Despite how commonplace selling out is, you would never guess it because people don't tend to talk about it. Not only that, we tend to go to some lengths to promote the *opposite* narrative: I know who I am, I'm uncompromising in my values, I follow my moral compass in times of struggle, meaningful work matters more than money.

In the 1990s, Deborah Prentice and Dale Miller looked into the culture of alcoholism and drinking at Princeton University. They found that overall, students were largely uncomfortable with the drinking culture on campus yet consistently believed other students to be more comfortable than they were. To "fit in," students would make jokes about drinking, allude to feats of intoxication, and otherwise give the impression that they were just like everyone else—even though students who didn't drink were part of the majority.² This phenomenon, called pluralistic ignorance, also describes many people's beliefs about selling out.

Largely because of the stigma surrounding decisions to sell out and the label of "sellout," few people feel able to talk about their real experiences. They worry that by sharing their decisions, they will be mocked and ostracized by their communities and seen as failures. The prevailing assumption is *most people don't sell out or compromise in the way that I did, which makes me a bad person*. As a result, people deal with the intense feelings that accompany a sellout

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decision in isolation. In the stories we heard, this marginalization and stigma surrounding decisions to sell out led to significant challenges for people in these situations.

The Concepts

We developed two concepts that helped us understand choices to sell out and their aftermath. These concepts, the *impossible choice* and the *moral smoke detector*, illustrate the types of situations that lead to selling out dilemmas, as well as the process by which many of us make moral or ethical decisions.

The Impossible Choice

You make a mistake at work that, if you told your supervisor, would potentially lead to your being fired. Your family is in a tough financial patch, and you can't afford to lose your job.

Your faith community is your home, yet you don't always agree with the members' beliefs. For instance, your pastor has made it very clear that women should be subservient to men. When you make an attempt to gently challenge this assertion, he doubles down on his statement that women must know their place, and the congregation nods along with him.

You're doing groundbreaking research that could change the trajectory of your field in important ways. You just found out that the organization funding your research has white supremacist ties.

We've all had to make choices in our own lives between two or more things that are important to us. Sometimes these things are the identities that make us who we are. Sometimes they are the beliefs and values that we've committed to. Other times, they are the duties and responsibilities we have to our families, communities, and people we care about.

Framing CHANGE

When we imagine the act of selling out, it's easy to project an easy indifference onto the act and assume that those who sell out are heartless people without values or morals. But over the course of our story-collecting journey, we didn't meet anyone like that. We did meet a professional who had to choose between upholding his values and supporting his family, an entrepreneur who had to choose between her racial identity and her career, a professor who had to choose between loyalty to his friend and fulfilling his professional obligations, and many others struggling with painful dilemmas. As the grief, stress, anxiety, and frustration that they expressed to us indicated, these decisions were rarely easy.

We've named the feeling of being forced to choose between two or more things we care deeply about the *impossible choice* to highlight just how challenging such decisions can be. Of course, few "impossible choices" are literally impossible to make. But the struggle that accompanies these decisions, whether they're made after months of consideration or in the heat of the moment, is worthy of attention. We call this conflict the impossible choice in recognition of how difficult it can feel at its worst and in the hopes that we can find gems of insight in the stories we heard that can make these experiences feel a little less impossible.

Compasses and Smoke Detectors

When faced with a dilemma involving your values, you might try to frame the decision with a question: "What does my moral compass say?" That's how most of us think about morality and integrity: as a choice to walk in the direction of our compass or away from it.

But a moral compass isn't an accurate way to talk about how we make decisions. If we really want to get into the weeds of it, humans make decisions through a mix of (some) rational and (mostly) irrational processes. We favor the choices people like us have made before us. Our