



## Honesty is Love

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THINK OF AN OPINION that people around you don't know you hold. Now think about what keeps you from sharing it.

Perhaps you fear offending others. You wouldn't be alone here: According to a recent survey from the Cato Institute, most Americans — 62 percent — say that the political climate these days prevents them from “saying things they believe because others might find them offensive.” Research shows that people display significantly more silence when they believe their opinions represent the minority view.

There are a lot of good and logical reasons not to say what you think, especially when others disagree. Offending people isn't nice, and it can lead to professional or social consequences. Nodding along might seem practical or charitable, despite the fact that you are screaming dissent on the inside. Just maybe, however, the true act of charity is to be courageous, and to say what you really think. Your honesty can be an act of love, and committing to radical honesty might just make you happier in the end.

One of my friends — who, like me, has a public-facing job — believes this, and takes honesty to the extreme. He regularly disagrees with me on controversial topics, but more impressive, he has a policy to always tell the truth in front of audiences. If he pretends to agree with something just because he's in front of an audience, he told me recently, “I'm not truly being loving to myself or you.” He calls talks with others that get to the complete truth of things, even difficult admissions and big differences in views, “love conversations.” Once two people have such a conversation, his theory goes, they can understand each other and act accordingly. And amazingly to me, he extends this love to strangers, who make up the majority of his audiences when he is on stage. This requires significant courage. But is it wise and prudent — and does it make him happier?

As a philosophical matter, my friend's doctrine of "love conversations" is Kantian. The 18th-century German philosopher Immanuel Kant argued that lying is always morally wrong. "By a lie a human being throws away and, as it were, annihilates his dignity," he wrote. Lying to others, Kant wrote, prevents them from making choices based on the truth, which is incompatible with friendship and love.

Offering love to others, as I have written before, is one of the greatest secrets to happiness. Thus, if my friend (and Kant) are right that honesty enables love, complete truthfulness—though not easy—might be a key to a better life. In the 1990s, the writer and psychotherapist Brad Blanton argued just that in his book Radical Honesty. When the truth is hard to accept, telling it can have costs, including social disapproval and frayed relationships. But Blanton argued that complete honesty—no white lies, no exceptions—is worth the consequences because it can reduce stress, deepen connections with others, and reduce emotional reactivity. If this argument is correct, then most of us have been screwing up our whole lives. We lie all the time—precisely because we want more love and happiness. We lie to impress others, garner sympathy, protect people's feelings, and avoid conflict.

BOTH SIDES CAN'T BE right here. Either Kant, Blanton, and my friend are embracing a faulty theory, or our society is missing a big opportunity for moral growth and higher well-being.

In 2008, a pair of psychologists grouped lies into three broad categories: self-centered lies to influence others or make a good impression ("Joe Biden asked me to be his vice president, but I turned him down"), other-oriented lies to protect the feelings of the person you're fibbing to ("You haven't aged a day"), and altruistic lies to protect a third party ("She was with me all night, officer"). With close friends and romantic partners, we are most likely to tell other-oriented and altruistic lies and least likely to tell self-centered lies. With strangers, we do the opposite.

And then there's sheer laziness. When the waiter asks, "How's your lunch?" you might not have the energy to explain that it is too salty. As one team of evolutionary psychologists theorized in 2014, these kinds of "white lies" could prove useful by "smoothing the flow of interactions" within a community, making it easier to communicate without undue conflict. You might say that little white lies are a societal lubricant. They can even seem virtuous. After telling a white lie, I sometimes pat myself on the back for my sensitivity and tact, turning my vice into a virtue inside my own head.

Some lies might make life easier, but they don't necessarily make life *happier*. When it's discovered, lying generally makes you less likable, which harms relationships and thus lowers happiness. I believe even little white lies can do this. I wouldn't want my wife to tell me what she thinks I want to hear, as if we were strangers avoiding conflict, and finding out that she had done so would make me feel distrusted and therefore hurt our relationship. For me, closeness beats harmony, every day of the week. For that matter, I don't want a stranger to tell me she likes my writing if she doesn't, because inauthentic compliments make me suspicious.

On balance, I believe the evidence favors Kant, not social convention. The point of complete honesty is having enough love for yourself to be precisely who you are, and to love others enough to give them complete transparency, even if that is difficult for both of you. If you join me in this conviction and want to fight the instinct to lie, here are three ways to make sure your honesty improves your life.

### **1. Seek and accept honesty from others.**

I have met more than a few people who seem quite willing to tell the truth to everyone, no matter who gets offended, but who become prickly when presented with truths that they find difficult to accept. The tendency to dish out criticism while being unable to take it is one of the classic traits of narcissists, and, to put it less academically, it's the style of the thin-skinned jerk. Such behavior is not an expression of love.

Committing yourself to honesty starts with a commitment to be honest with yourself, and an effort to seek out and accept complete honesty from others, whether they be loved ones or strangers. Ask people for the truth as they see it, starting with those closest to you, and make a commitment not to be offended when they give it. Note that their opinions are not facts, meaning that you have to use your judgment on letting the truth you hear affect your actions. Furthermore, sometimes what you hear will be intended to offend you. But you can almost always choose not to take offense.

### **2. Offer truth to heal, not harm.**

I have written in the past that what generally holds us back in our ability to persuade one another is that we use our opinions as a weapon instead of as a gift. The same principle applies in even greater force when it comes to the truth. If you keep the truth to yourself when it's convenient and use it to hurt others when you're feeling hurt—as we often do in emotional arguments with loved ones—then your honesty is not an expression of love.

Look for the virtues rather than the imperfections in others. If you do that, most of the truth you will speak will be honest appreciation and praise.

### **3. Make the truth appealing.**

If you do need to offer an occasional less-than-positive appraisal, think of a way to reframe it as an opportunity for growth. Rather than telling someone, “You’re wrong,” say, “Here’s a way you can think about this issue differently.” When your boss asks, “Do you like working here?” say, “There are some things that could make it much more interesting and fun.” Your honest feedback will not always be appreciated, of course. But it can help you hold on to some of the benefits of prosocial lies without losing others’ respect.

LATELY, I’VE BEEN imitating my friend and experimenting with more honesty. I’ve asked people close to me to give me their unvarnished views. In a spirit of respect, I am more

forthcoming with my own personal views, which are often out of step in my community of academia. So far, I haven't gotten divorced, beaten up, or fired. I feel freer and, perhaps paradoxically, less concerned with the opinions of others.

And little by little, it is getting easier. It's kind of like exercise: It takes a while, but it becomes a habit, and then feels like a necessity. As I build up this muscle, I hope to expand my honesty outward to strangers. I will, however, always remember to do so while healing and appealing, so that my honesty continues to be an act of love.