

KILROY CAFÉ

Philosophy for the Modern Age

©2010, Glenn Campbell, PO Box 30303, Las Vegas 89173
glenn@kilroycafe.com www.KilroyCafe.com



Issue #63
February 15, 2010

TRUTH, LIES & DISCRETION

Honesty isn't always the best policy.

By GLENN CAMPBELL

As children, we are taught not to lie. At first it is because we fear we will be punished, but eventually we realize that lies are expensive in themselves. When you tell a lie, you have to remember what you said so you don't trip yourself up later. This entails keeping two sets of mental books—the true one and the cooked version—which requires a lot of internal energy. It is usually easier to deal with only one reality because then you don't have to remember anything.

But this doesn't mean you should always tell the truth. Just because you know or believe something doesn't mean you should blurt it out. Society is built on a delicate web of withheld information. Speaking the truth in inappropriate circumstances disrupts this web and can be as destructive as any lie.

Between truth and lie is discretion. That's the wisdom to know when a truth should be held inside and not spoken. The fate of nations can ride on discretion and your relationships as well.

Why is discretion necessary? Two things: strategy and ego.

Strategy is important in any kind of competition. You don't want to tell your opponent exactly what you plan to do before you do it. This applies in war, of course, but equally in love, business, politics, management, child rearing—in virtually any circumstance of leadership or competition where information given to an opponent can be used against you. Discretion involves withholding information until such time as it is safe and appropriate to release.

If a spy sells a list of his own agents to the other side, he can't defend himself by saying, "I merely told the truth,"

because that truth is going to kill people.

Likewise, if you are bidding in an sealed auction, you don't want to tell your fellow bidders how high you are willing to go, because they will beat you by bidding one dollar more. After the game, it may be okay to show your cards, but during the competition—in virtually any kind of negotiation—you can't tell your opponent the hand you hold.

Why must this be so? It is simply the way of the world. As long as people have differing agendas, there will be negotiation, and that requires discretion at least until an agreement is reached.

Discretion is a lynchpin of liberty. It lies behind our most cherished right: that government stay out of our lives unless specifically authorized. Whenever we empower a government to protect us, we also empower it to hurt us. The law, as written by detached legislators, is never suited to every real-world circumstance, and discretion is often our sole means of limiting its destructive power.

Should you lie to law enforcement? No. Should you report every violation of law no matter how minor and obey every law regardless of the circumstances? No, also. A quiet evasion of rules is sometimes the most moral action, and that requires discretion.

The second reason for discretion is ego. We all have one, and it is usually a hornet's nest of sensitivities and inconsistencies. Discretion is necessary to avoid tipping fragile people over the edge, offending them and starting wars where they aren't necessary. In this venue, it is unlikely that anyone will die if you are indiscreet, but it can sure muck up your social relations.

Each person is a product of his investments, and whether or not his

investments are working out, he is going to believe in them simply because they have already cost him so much.

You don't tell a fat lady she's fat. Little children may blurt it out, but adults shouldn't, because you'll offend the fat lady without accomplishing anything. There is usually little merit in telling people their obvious flaws, because in all likelihood you'll get a defensive reaction, not change.

If people ask for the truth about themselves and are truly open to hearing it, you can tell them. Otherwise, you are only going to stir up the hornet's nest and disrupt the relationship. Exposing people's weaknesses sounds good in theory—"How else are they going to change?" we say.—but in practice it usually prompts a backlash that is counterproductive to change.

One of the great fears of modern life is that a private email message intended for one person gets mistakenly sent to others, especially to the person the message is critical of. It's embarrassing because we know instinctively that the subject shouldn't be told his own flaws. If the boss knows what you really think of him, you could be fired, whether you tell it to his face or email it to a colleague. The politics of the world and the sensitivities of personality require that we keep this information to ourselves.

People who are comfortable with themselves have a thicker skin and are better able to process any truth you throw at them. Unfortunately, such enlightened ones will always be in the minority.

We know the people we should tiptoe around, would can't handle any kind of uncensored truth. They are walking landmines and discretion is necessary to keep them from going off.

—G.C.

www.Glenn-Campbell.com