

Being truthful with yourself can save you frustration

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Telling the truth is an important ethical obligation. When asked, “Do you want to know the truth?” most of us immediately say “yes.” We want others to be honest with us, especially if their knowledge affects us personally.

In everyday life most people wish that businesses would represent their products accurately and avoid deception in advertisements. We want politicians to tell us truthfully in advance what they are prepared to do if elected. Caring parents want teachers to tell them honestly how well, or poorly, their children are progressing in school. When doctors have information about our health, we want to know the truth. In short, we want others to be honest and have a caring attitude, especially when it is important that the truth still leaves us with hope that things may be better in the future.

But when called upon to be truthful with others, there are times that telling the truth seems less important than when other people are revealing information to us. When we are invited to a home-cooked meal, we are likely to tell the host or hostess how much we enjoyed the food. We may sacrifice some of our desire to be completely honest because we value other social obligations such as friendship and hospitality. In this case, the value of telling the truth with precise accuracy may become secondary to maintaining good relationships with our host. In everyday language, we often call these kindly responses “white lies” because they are designed to save the feelings of others from embarrassment or feelings of failure.

There are many kinds of partnerships that require honesty. In business and in legal agreements honesty and clarity are necessary to protect the interests of the individuals involved. Without such agreements partners can be badly treated and harmed by dishonesty. Marriage and common-law partnerships require trust, but more than that truth and honesty are essential. These are special relationships that are formed in their beginnings by trusting each other in love and admiration. But in the end they must be based on truth. Especially in arguments and strong disagreements marriages will not

succeed without honesty. In fact most arguments cannot be settled without honesty from both partners.

In politics, nothing is more damaging to politicians and disappointing to their supporters than losing the trust they had when electing their leaders at the ballot box. While it is necessary, even in democracies, to maintain privacy and confidential information, as much transparency as possible is desirable. Dwight Eisenhower once wrote “The supreme quality for leadership is unquestionably integrity. Without it, no real success is possible, no matter whether it is on a section gang, a football field, in an army, or in an office.”

While it is important to be honest with others, there is the need to be honest with ourselves. We need to know who we really are. If we are too demanding about our own talents and our ambitions, we may be hard on ourselves. We may become depressed or discouraged or we may lose our ability and desire to help others if we are not realistic about ourselves. On the other hand, we need to know ourselves well enough to understand the limits of our talents. We may come to demand praise when we don't deserve it. We may become narcissistic and think of ourselves as more capable than others in solving problems. This latter tendency does not fit well with democratic forms of government. In the earlier growth of democracy, Greek philosophers commented on the importance of truth and knowledge of the self. Socrates said “nosce te ipsam” (know thyself) and Aristotle believed “knowing yourself is the beginning of wisdom.”

When Barack Obama was President of United States. his wife Michelle said, “We learned about honesty and integrity ... that the truth matters ... that you don't take shortcuts or play by your own set of rules ... and success doesn't count unless you can earn it fair and square.”

As Benjamin Franklin and other founders of the American Constitution believed, “honesty is the best policy,” and most Canadians would agree.