

The Whole Truth About the Truth

“I’ve been over what I’m supposed to say and I’ve got to tell you, it’s pretty persuasive stuff, but is it the whole truth? It’s a slice of truth, a morsel, a fraction. It’s a piece of the pie, certainly not the whole enchilada, and now that I’ve been thinking about it, I don’t think I could tell the whole truth about anything. That’s a pretty heavy burden, because we all just view the world through this little piece of Coke bottle. Is there such a thing as objective truth? I wonder.”

—JEFF MELVOIN, EXCERPT FROM THE 1992 CRIME AND PUNISHMENT EPISODE OF THE TV SHOW “NORTHERN EXPOSURE.”

Whether you are at work, at home or with friends, few things are more upsetting than believing someone isn’t telling you the truth. But, before you jump to conclusions about the other person’s honesty and char-

BY KAY CANNON

acter, stop and remember that the truth is rarely carved in stone. Even with the most noble of intentions, truth often varies from person to person and situation to situation. Even though you and I are experiencing the same exact set of circumstances, your truth may not match my truth. That doesn’t necessarily make either of us wrong or dishonest. Much of what we call the truth is actually determined by our own unique perspective.

In its most basic form, truth comes in at least three versions: 1) my truth of the situation; 2) your truth of the situation; and 3) the objective facts or truth that we can both

agree upon. For instance, you and I sit down to a dinner of fried chicken livers. I hate the taste of liver. You love the taste of liver. My truth is that it was a repulsive dinner. Your truth is that it was delightful. The truth we can both agree upon is that fried chicken livers were served for dinner. Our truths do not match, yet we are each telling the truth as we experience it. Rather than calling you a liar or arguing, I simply acknowledge that we have a different perspective and, consequently, a different truth in this situation.

The three elements of basic truth – my truth, your truth and our shared truth – are formed out of our individual perspectives. Within our individual perspectives, we may encounter five additional kinds of truth that shape our perceptions. These five additional types of truths are:

TIME-BASED TRUTH

This is a truth that exists at one point in time, but not necessarily before or after

that point in time. History offers us many examples of concepts that were treated as truths only to be discarded when additional information (e.g., an expanded perspective) became available. The notion that the earth was flat was held to be a truth by earlier civilizations. Anyone who dared to question this truth was treated as a heretic. As time passed and information increased, this truth was replaced by a new truth: the earth is round.

COMMUNITY-BASED TRUTH

Commonly referred to as the “us vs. them,” this truth represents a concept or perspective that is shared by like-minded groups of people. These groups often arise from a common cultural background, socioeconomic status, geographic location, religious affiliation, political orientation or organizational hierarchy. When a shared perspective becomes expressed as a group truth, it takes on importance and power within that group. As the power

“There are very few human beings who receive the truth, complete and staggering, by instant illumination. Most of them acquire it fragment by fragment, on a small scale, by successive developments, cellularly, like a laborious mosaic.”

—ANNAIS NIN, JUNE 1936

and importance increases, the group may begin to consider the shared perspective to be an indisputable, absolute truth worth fighting for. Many religious and political wars have arisen from conflicts between truths held to be absolute by opposing groups. On a more secular note, I’ve witnessed some pretty good debates about whether “real” chili contains beans or not.

REACTIVE TRUTH

In many instances, we interpret the situation, form our truth and take action based upon our past experiences. As a child growing up on a ranch in Texas, I was taught to be constantly on guard for poisonous snakes. Over time, my vigilance turned into a paralyzing phobia of snakes. Years later, I found myself sitting in a dark movie theatre watching “Raiders of the Lost Ark.” As I sat there, totally engrossed in the movie and mindlessly eating popcorn and drinking a soda, Indiana Jones suddenly fell into a viper-filled pit. At precisely that same instant, my soda cup let

loose a drop of cold condensation. The water drop hit my leg, I let out a blood curdling scream and threw my popcorn into the row of unsuspecting folks in front of me. I reacted with complete honesty from a place of learned fear. My reactive truth was that one of those vipers had bitten me. It was only when I could step out of the immediate moment that I realized how ridiculous my reaction was.

EMOTIONAL TRUTH

Whether we are aware of it or not, most of us anchor our lives in one or two emotional domains: fear and doubt or love and trust. The emotional domain of our lives becomes our emotional operating system, colors how we see the world and, consequently, impacts our truth. A recent greeting card commercial illustrates how our emotional operating system impacts our perception of the truth.

In the commercial we see a teenage girl being summoned to her school principal’s office. The request throws the young girl into a panic. When she enters the office, the young girl immediately begins to defend herself and adamantly proclaims that she has been staying out of trouble just like she was told. The principal smiles warmly and says, “I know.” He then hands the distraught girl a greeting card that says “I’m proud of you.” The girl, expecting to be reprimanded, looks at the card in bewilderment. The girl’s fearful reaction and ensuing bewilderment reflected her emotional truth that the principal’s office was a place to be feared.

AUTHENTIC TRUTH

When we patiently sort through all of the other types of truth, we discover our authentic truth. This is the truth that accurately reflects the core of our being. It serves as a lighthouse to guide us safely through the treacherous waters encountered in life and work. It arises out of our individual needs, values and guiding principles. It honors who we are and nourishes our life’s purpose. The wise directive, “Know thyself,” speaks to discovering and embracing our authentic truth. The words of Nelson Mandela, spoken during his trial at Rivonia, express his authentic truth, which has served as an unbreakable thread throughout his life:

“I have fought against white domination, and I have fought against black domination. I have cherished the ideal of a democratic and free society in which all persons live together in harmony and with equal opportunities. It is an ideal which I hope to live for and to achieve. But if needs be, it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die.”

The next time you find yourself searching for the truth or challenging the truth as spoken by someone else, remember that the truth seldom, if ever, comes in one form. ■

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