

Discretion is the poorest part of honesty

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Two-year-old Zoe toddled up to her mother and stated emphatically, “Something STINKS!” You notice these things when your nose is so close to your diaper. And, like most children—but, sadly, unlike most adults—my granddaughter’s honesty isn’t tempered by discretion. Discretion, I’ve always thought, may be the better part of valor, but it’s the poorest part of honesty. To lie or not to lie, that is the question of discretion when confronted with painful truth.

Will Zoe be so excruciatingly honest at 13 as she is at 2? No way! Discretion—the product of embarrassment—will cause her to be much more circumspect. My guess is that the child who blurted, “The emperor has no clothes!” was a pre-teen.

Most elderly folks, I’ve found, also tend to be more honest than the rest of us. I think it’s because they’ve grown weary of years of pretense. And then there are rare individuals, like my friend Emily, who have always made it a practice to “tell it like it is.” My friend Gary confirmed that aspect of her character when I mentioned that I wanted to grow up to be like Emily—old enough and rich enough to say anything I liked—and he replied, “I think Emily was doing that long before she was either old or rich!”

Her sister Gen once remarked that some people were afraid of Emily and I retorted that those same people were afraid of me, too, “not because they think I have power like Emily,” I admitted, “but because they think I have PMS!”

Later, Emily corrected me: “It’s not that they think I have power,” she said, “they’re just afraid of what I might say!” And what she’s likely to say is the truth. The truth may set some people free, but it seems to scare the daylights out of others. Like Emily, President Harry Truman had a reputation for “givin’ ‘em hell.” But Harry, himself, had a different view. “I just tell them the truth,” he reportedly said, “and they think it’s hell.”

It is a sad fact of life, however, that some people maintain they’re “just being honest” when their actual motive is to “put someone down.” I’m certainly not advocating that type of honesty! A cousin once told me, “You know, Marsha, your hair is your only good feature.” (I’m grateful that she hasn’t seen my hair lately or she’d no doubt apprise me of her revised opinion.)

When someone precedes a comment with the words “I don’t want to hurt your feelings, but . . .” or “I don’t mean to criticize, but . . .,” you can be certain that those words will be followed by other words that 1) hurt your feelings and 2) are harshly critical.

But if a child’s honesty hurts someone’s feelings, it’s the result of their young innocence. Our Jewel Tea man (do you remember when those salesmen would drive door-to-door selling household products?) got a record order from my mother when 3-year-old me greeted him at the door by asking, “Do you know what my mommy said when she saw you coming to our house? She said, ‘Here comes that damn Jewel . . .’” Before I got out the word “Tea,” my mother had her hand over my mouth. But it was far too late to save the situation.

Years later, I felt Mom’s pain when Ray, Jr. shared with a nice—but rather homely—man, the comment that, “My daddy says you’re the ugliest man he’s ever seen!”

Fortunately, the man wasn't selling anything or he would have found a very willing customer in me!

Recently, when grandson Gabe was with me in the car, he observed, "Grammy, the veins in your hand are green."

"What color are yours?" I inquired.

"Blue."

"Well, mine are green because I have green eyes."

"No," he said matter-of-factly, "green veins happen when you get really, really old."

Wouldn't it be a nice world if we could count on everyone to say what they mean, mean what they say . . . and, like a child, never be intentionally mean when they say it?