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Honest Communication

THIS HAS BEEN DESCRIBED as an age of science, and it is time that the dominant principle of science should be universally adopted: insistence upon truth. All departments of life, social and political and physical, base themselves upon knowledge, but without honesty in communicating knowledge society becomes a battlefield of wits, a waste land of half-truths, and a make-believe of civilization.

"Honesty" is an old-fashioned word that includes responsibility, duty, and respect for values. And yet, in all the books on sociology, economics, and philosophy examined for material on this topic, not one had the word "honesty" in its index. Why is not honesty listed among the cardinal virtues? One would like to think the answer to be that its observance is so commonplace as not to be worth book space, or that its principles are so obvious as not to need stating.

Experience has sought to teach mankind the benefit of honesty in communication, but there are still many persons to whom honesty, though recognized as a possible ideal, is not an engrossing matter of practice.

Honesty is not a simple subject, because it goes to the very heart of human nature. Honesty is born of the union of a perception of what is right and wrong with the choice to do what is right.

What are the basic qualities in honest communication of ideas? First of all is the Golden Rule; then follow sincerity, frankness, integrity and truthfulness. A person is not practising honesty who speaks or writes without having made a clear-sighted inquiry into the facts of the matter about which he is stating his views.

Honest communication involves a sense of obligation to one's self, to other people, and to the absolute. Rightness is known by intuition in the mind. Respect for it gives one an expertness in living.

The philosopher Kant remarked long ago: "Prudence is hypothetical; its motto is, Honesty when it is the best policy; but the moral law in our hearts is unconditional and absolute." This was doubtless in Washington's mind when he said: "I hope I shall always possess firmness and virtue enough to maintain

what I consider the most enviable of all titles: the character of an honest man."

In society and politics

One of the noblest words among the social virtues is "honesty". It is the essential quality in binding people together in the family, in the community, and in society. It has been esteemed in the lives of people in all civilizations, even though the standards have been different from time to time and from place to place. It would be difficult to imagine what life would be like if we gave up such a fundamental rule of conduct.

In our dealings with other people honesty may be taken as coming under the cardinal virtue "Justice". This does not mean merely being faithful to contracts and carrying out the duties required by the laws of the community, but also fidelity in all one's relationships with others, including the obligation to speak honestly.

Honest communication is for everyone. There is a tendency to apply the rigorous ideal of honesty in communication to a few classes like the clergy and teachers. To others we grant the privilege of being second-best and having that accounted as virtue. Their faults are overlooked when their self-interest proves too strong for their social interest, and overrules in their minds the principle of the obligation to speak honestly.

It is useful, in considering the need for honest communication in our political society, to realize that every proposed law is in the nature of an alternative. It is not to be judged good or bad except as it is better or worse than some other equally definite course of proceeding which might be adopted instead of it.

One of the merits of parliamentary government is that it provides the opportunity for expression of differing views. The urge to talk may lead a politician into making misleading statements, but if misrepresentation goes too far it exposes itself and discredits the author.

A speaker does not help the nation to find the right path by throwing dust in citizens' eyes. To the rule that public servants must speak honestly there are no exceptions. Plutarch, who lived in the first century

A.D., wrote a great book in which he told the characteristics of noted Greeks and Romans. What he wrote about Phocion, the Athenian statesman who was elected forty-five times as one of the ten chief officers of the State, provides a model for today. Said Plutarch: "Appreciation of him was due not so much to his eloquence as to the influence of his character, since not only a word, but even a nod from a person who is esteemed is of more force than a thousand arguments or studied sentences from others." To this the *Harmsworth Encyclopedia* adds: "Phocion was neither a great statesman nor a brilliant general; but he was a man of incorruptible honesty and downright common sense and bluntness of speech."

How different that is from the belief that there is no need for the orator to learn what is really just, but only what is likely to be considered just by the multitude who are to sit as judges.

Science paints a picture very different from that. Here is a profession where success is not possible on any other terms than truth and honesty. A false statement of fact, made deliberately, is the most serious crime a scientist can commit.

Scientists employ the word "truth" in a rather special sense. In judging the truth of a theory they expect it to take hold of a mass of facts which seem isolated and perhaps meaningless and to bind them together into an intelligible system so that they can see the connections between them. That is a first-rate guiding principle for all who speak and write.

In business

Honesty is not a cloistered virtue, but one that must stand up against the tests of the world of action. There is no difference between ethics in general and business ethics: the moral standards that ought to govern man's private behaviour should apply to his actions in the market-place.

No person aware of the conditions upon which business is conducted today would think of urging the adoption of some standard that is in the clouds of speculative refinement. Nevertheless, a sense of stewardship as a practical code of business behaviour is spreading. Business men are trying to harmonize the impersonal imperative of business life with the personal imperative of ethics.

The doctrine of merchandising called "*Caveat emptor* — let the buyer beware" — grew out of the nature of trading long ago when sellers and buyers gathered from far-distant places at some oasis in the desert to do business. They might never meet again, therefore the buyer showed good sense when he used caution. With passage of the years the slogan became twisted so as to mean that the seller accepted no responsibility. Let the buyer look after his own interests; the seller righteously washed his hands.

Today, with seller and buyer up to half a world apart, and with offer and acceptance made swiftly by telephone or telex, trading would be impracticable if

it were shadowed by misrepresentation, deceit and humbug. All the sales cleverness in the universe cannot sell products unless the buyers can rely upon goods being up to standard or represented quality.

What are the questions to which buyers expect straightforward answers? How efficient is it? Will it do what you say it will do? How long will it last? How easily does it operate? How much does it cost to run? These representative questions have to do with quality: of the ingredients, of component parts, and of workmanship.

Deceit in the giving or withholding of such information is as reprehensible as theft. Indeed, John Ruskin, the great essayist who was early in the field in support of national education, the organization of labour, and other social reforms, said this: "It is an incomparably less guilty form of robbery to steal a purse out of a man's pocket, than to take it out of his hand on the understanding that you are to steer his ship up channel when you do not know the soundings."

Living up to promises

Promises made in speeches, letters and advertising should be fulfilled scrupulously. We may learn from architects and technicians the need for living up to what is promised and expected. When a building has some parts hidden from the eye which are the continuation of others bearing some consistent ornament, said Ruskin, it is not well that the ornament should cease in the parts concealed, because credit is given for it, and it should not be deceptively withdrawn.

Giotto, the shepherd boy painter who became leader of Renaissance art, was honest in designing the exquisite campanile beside the cathedral in Florence. At eye-level and a little above are bas-reliefs picturing in some detail artisans at work; above them are statues, more boldly fashioned; and thence to the top are patterned mosaic and twisted columns. All levels are so designed as to be visible according to their purpose: to inform, to memorialize, and to decorate.

Consider the honesty required in those who design and build space craft and prepare them for flight. Every single one of the thousands of parts in the system, seen and unseen, must function perfectly. Not only skilled craftsmanship is required, but also precise discharge of responsibilities, so that the director can say with honesty, in the language of the astronauts, "all systems go".

Honesty in business communication reaches its most visible public testing point in advertising, labelling and selling. The conviction has grown in recent years that business not only might but must enhance its reputation for trustworthiness in its published statements. What is said in advertising and on labels should give customers a correct understanding of the quality, quantity, function and price of the products. The numerous consumer organizations are teaching their members and the public to accept nothing less.

Expressing honesty

The style of writing and speaking is important because gracefulness in the telling of facts makes them more pleasant to read or to hear, but in displaying honesty we need plain talk rather than flowery language. We seek simplicity and precision. Our words must convey significance and frankness.

This is essential in writing sales letters, and nearly every letter is a sales letter of some sort. Even a family letter is promoting the idea of affection and goodwill.

Here are some points to consider in planning a speech or a letter: (1) What is the complete, logical statement I want to make about each point I wish to present? (2) What facts are required to support each point? (3) How does this proposal of mine affect or interest the hearer or reader? (4) Have I the necessary material with which to build a presentation that will gain attention, rouse interest, inspire trust, and create desire? (5) What can I do to assure that what I say is concrete, honest, clear, complete and correct?

Building confidence is most important. Consumers are increasingly wary of the "something for nothing" gimmick. *Consumer Education*, by N. E. Brown of Wetaskiwin High School in Alberta, says: "It has been estimated that there are some eight hundred known schemes that have been used to 'fleece' the public."

Those who are accustomed to finding their mail boxes stuffed with gorgeous announcements of "new" or "better" or "more up to date" things to buy are relieved when they open a letter or a pamphlet that does nothing but tell the facts about goods that are for sale.

Avoiding half-truths

Communication of any effective sort needs to keep its purpose in mind; what is said should be in harmony with the subject and the occasion, adapted to the requirements and capabilities of the hearer or reader, and carry within itself the assurance of integrity.

We must beware of stating half-truths as whole truths. All through the ages it has been said that half a loaf is better than no bread, but half a truth is not only not better than no truth, it is worse than some lies. To describe one facet of a diamond is not to describe the diamond, but only one ray of it.

The expert who is selling a machine knows it by acquaintance: the prospective customer has only knowledge by description. That description, in the interests of the seller's conscience and of the buyer's satisfaction, must be honest and complete.

That is why the seller's presentation must be so clear as to be readily understood. He who knows that a thing is right, but does not explain it with clearness, is no better than if he had never had a conception of it. Confidence demands evidence, and evidence means facts presented understandably.

Some writers and orators can take ornamental

phrases and use them to win attention, but it is not honest communication if the ornamentation obscures the facts or the truth.

Logical exchange of ideas and honest assertion of facts are made unintelligent by the loose use of adjectives and other descriptive words. An ancient philosopher put it simply when he said: "Doth a man bathe himself quickly? Then say not 'wrongly' but 'quickly'. Doth he drink much wine? Then say not 'wrongly' but 'much'."

This illustrates the point that words have consequences. Some words convey judgments instead of simply stating facts. Corporate managers, like political representatives, need to weigh the public consequences of their words; they need to use words with reference to the understanding of the people to whom they are addressed; and they need to check their words — particularly descriptive words — to make sure that their meaning is genuine.

What is truth?

There are people like the busy-body Werle in Ibsen's play *The Wild Duck* who pat themselves on the back in recognition of their righteousness in telling the truth. To tell the truth should be so natural as not to be something to crow about. It is merely living up to the insight given mankind into what is right and proper.

The value of truth is too clear to be called in question by intelligent people. Frightened people may resent honesty, preferring to be soothed; ignorant people may deride truth as a burden they do not wish to carry; malicious people may distort it in the hope of doing harm; thieves may spurn it as a hindrance to their trade.

Whether by design or negligence, dishonesty is a losing game. As soon as we enter into a weighing of the evidence for or against telling the truth in a given case we are attempting to give it a price, and when we do that we are implying that truth is a piece of property which we may keep or withhold at will.

Exaggeration, which is either a form of ignorance or of dishonesty, weakens what we say and destroys confidence in our opinions. An educated man will have the same impulse to exaggerate benefits and minimize drawbacks as an ignorant man, but being intelligent he can control them better.

Bias is an enemy to honest communication, often in an insidious and unrecognized way. How unwillingly we think of things which affect adversely the opinions we hold and express, and with what difficulty we determine to lay them before our intellects for careful and serious investigation. When our minds are full of one side of an issue we are not likely to reach or express an honest opinion.

Codes of ethics

Here is where ethics enters the scene. Honesty can be maintained only by the submission of individual

judgments to general rules. All moral action must have a standard by reference to which conduct is to be judged.

In days when ideas about honesty have become dangerously elastic, codes of ethics provide standards enabling us to determine the fundamental distinction between right and wrong human conduct.

The early codes of ethics were made by men living in a simpler society than ours, but among all the differing beliefs of today there are constants that have lasted through the ages.

Our problem is to apply well-tried and stable general principles to cases that could not have arisen in an earlier age simply because the facts and situations involved could not have arisen.

There is a gray zone between what is clearly honest and what is dishonest. The question whether we must always tell the truth has two facets. Is there any obligation upon us to reveal the truth about something to people whether they ask for our views or do not? Are we justified sometimes in deliberately distorting the truth in order to attain some end we desire but which seems to be unattainable in any other way?

A physician may have to deceive his patient in order to save the patient's life; the lawyer and the priest may have to observe secrecy and keep confidences under conditions where it might be a layman's duty to divulge them. Was Michelangelo justified when, to stimulate the Pope to order needed repairs, he painted cracks on the Sistine Chapel ceiling? Is a man in a resistance movement during a war justified in deciding that a lie to the enemy is free from sin in a good cause?

Are there different yardsticks for different people? Is it believable that in the field of honesty a man as a carpenter or as a business manager or as a politician or as a writer has a function of his own to which he can apply special degrees or rules of honesty?

Matters arising in this gray area between the white and the black are not dealt with by law: they remain the responsibility of individuals.

Responsibility

Everyone who advocates a cause, preaches a crusade, leads a movement or issues orders, must accept responsibility and assume accountability for the effects of what he says or writes and what he omits saying or writing.

Some of the rules of honest communication of ideas are: (1) When the speaker uses a sentence to make a statement, it is implied that he believes it to be true; (2) He implies that he has what he himself believes to be good reasons for his statement. (3) He implies that what he is saying is relevant to the interests and problems of his audience.

These rules, of course, are far wider than mere legality. There has always been a class of person holding that any practice that is legal is permissible. But confidence in one's honesty cannot be established simply by avoiding what is illegal. The maxim of the Law of Equity applies to men and women in all life

activities: that all things be done faithfully and honestly.

These are required

Honesty in communication has three basic requirements and one incentive: knowledge, facts, accuracy, and the desire to be honest.

We judge a person to be prudent and wise when he finds out the truth about things before expressing his opinion. He cannot determine the truth unless he has previous knowledge against which to lay it.

Knowledge enables a speaker or a writer to describe intelligently and intelligibly instead of using fig-leaf phrases to cover up his ignorance.

Knowledge of one's product or service is needed, coupled with the willingness to examine all available evidence bearing upon the situation being dealt with. It is not enough for a salesman to know the mechanical details about a machine: he needs also to know what the purchaser expects of it and whether it will do what he wants. This applies equally to groceries and political proposals.

The person who is writing a sales letter or any other business letter is under just as much obligation to check the facts and to get the small details correct as is the scientific or other professional worker.

This is illustrated by reference to the difference between meaning and truth. A person might say "There are six species of animal on Mars", but though the sentence has clear meaning we do not know whether it is true. What is the man's authority? How does he know?

Another man may say "The shoe polish I sell is the best in the world." What is the evidence behind his statement? How does he know?

Beyond all this, there is dignity in the effort to be right. The soft strata of mere opinion are washed away by the spray of honest fact. One emerges as a person who knows.

What is BEST

To admit that honesty in communication is difficult is not to take away from its desirability and attractiveness and effectiveness. Honesty is among the chivalries of gentlemen; it is not only the best policy but one of the most rewarding of human attributes.

Honesty in communication includes that sincerity which does its best to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth; where it is uncertain it confesses to uncertainty; where it lacks knowledge it does not pretend to have it. This standard can be attained by any speaker or writer, even though he may not be able to command great, or beautiful, or picturesque prose.

To justify a claim for honest communication it is not enough to have a corner of one eye on a corner of the truth. You must see it whole and see it plain insofar as your intelligence allows. Thus you find out what is *best* — not "best for" — and do it, say it, write it.