

Being Basically Honest

BY MICHAEL JOSEPHSON

After a workshop, a fellow said, “I don’t always play by the rules or tell the truth and some of the things you said made me a little uncomfortable. But I realized I’m ‘basically’ honest. Isn’t that enough?”

I don’t think so.

What does it really mean when someone declares that they’re “basically honest”? I think it means that they are willing to be honest unless it costs too much. They’re willing to be honest as long as they get what they want. In the end, I think it means “being honest

enough.” It reminds me of a cartoon where one man is talking about another: “I admire honesty, but his insistence on being scrupulously honest is really annoying.”

People who are content being basically honest are admitting that, when the stakes are high enough, they’re willing to be dishonest. Doesn’t that mean they’re basically dishonest?

After all, how many times do you get to lie before you are a liar? How many times does someone get to lie to you before distrust sets in? A former

presidential press secretary told a university audience that he believed in always telling the truth to the press. “That way,” he said, “they will believe you when you have to lie.” Honesty isn’t just an illusion created for public relations. The best liars rarely lie.

That’s the secret of their success. They may be basically honest, but they’re not trustworthy. ■

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