

Dirty Rotten Liar



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Around 5 years old each of my boys went through a stage where they called me a liar when I made any statement that did not turn out to be strictly accurate. When they would ask how much longer until we got home, if it took longer than my estimate I was a liar. If I said I thought that Santa might be at the mall and he wasn't, I was a liar. If I said I thought we could probably go to the water park over the weekend and we didn't, I was a *dirty rotten* liar! You can't let them go to kindergarten like this so I explained that, following Aristotle, lying is a matter of intention and commitment rather than of accuracy, and they got this right away. Kids *dig* Aristotle.

Of course the boys were really just expressing their disappointment with outcomes they didn't like rather than making ethical judgments about my integrity. Their rationale for calling me a liar was based on their assertion that I had *seriously committed* to forecasts I had actually made quite casually in the course of ordinary conversation. Such forecasts are obviously quite different than explicit commitments, solemn promises, and contracts. We couldn't have a decent conversation, bull session, or charrette if we constrained ourselves only to assertions that commanded our solemn commitment. I would barely be able to communicate at all and, *whoa*, you should have seen my father-in-law smoking and holding forth with the other old coots at the Gaslight Cafe! Little that Carl said at the Gaslight was accurate but Carl was from Vermont and he was as good as his word on those rare occasions when he gave it seriously.

Integrity and reliability are at the heart of all commerce and civilization. If you break your word you will be regarded as an unreliable liar and you will be ostracized. The question is how serious you are when you express your intentions. It is fine and productive to spout off freely most of the time, without being held to account, so long as you have a way to highlight when you are serious. When you are serious it is very important to do what you say you are going to do, or else you lose the power to direct your own life.

New Year's resolutions are often expressed with great solemnity and commitment and then disregarded. Other resolutions and declarations also. I can think of little that is more damaging to personal self-efficacy than a habitual stream of meaningless resolutions. Being unreliable and disappointing others is bad enough, but if you can't rely on yourself you are rudderless. Did you make any New Year's resolutions? Were you serious? Call me.

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