

## The Meaning of Honest Lying

Written by Jamy Ian Swiss  
Wednesday, 20 March 2013 09:00

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What's it mean to be "an honest liar?"

The magician Karl Germain, a famous American stage performer at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, said that: "Conjuring is the only absolutely honest profession – the conjuror promises to deceive, and does."

Germain nailed it. Once I use the word "magician," I'm saying: I'm going to fool you. But that's okay – it's my job.

Whereas a self-proclaimed psychic who is aware of his own deceptions – and you can't bend a spoon with sleight-of-hand without knowing that you are doing so – is being a dishonest liar. He's lying about the fact that he's lying. He's saying: No, honest, I'm telling you the truth: It's not a trick. I have supernatural powers.

Well I say: Screw that lying SOB and the unicorn he rode in on.

People sometimes wonder why someone who makes his living as a professional deceiver might get upset about people being deceived.

The answer is that it's because magicians make an honest living as honest liars. Indeed, after years of experience in sales and marketing, when I changed careers to become a professional magician I discovered that a particularly satisfying aspect turned out to be the fact that it is the most honest living I had ever made. And some of us – not all of us – but many magicians are offended when people misuse the tools of our honest living to mislead people about the way the universe works. People who want to manipulate your worldview for prestige, power, or profit.

Now it turns out that magicians have been speaking out about this subject for a very, very long time. In my previous post I mentioned that the first book published in English that included explanations of magic tricks was called *The Discoverie of Witchcraft*, by Reginald Scot, published in England in 1584. But

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### *Discoverie of Witchcraft*

– “discoverie” in that time and usage means “explanation of” – is not a book about magic tricks. It’s a book of rational inquiry. Scot wrote the book to debunk the witch burnings that were prevalent in the time of Jamesian England. It has been oft repeated that in fact when James the

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subsequently took the throne in 1603 he declared the book heretical and ordered all copies burned – an unmistakable sign of a good book – although recent evidence seems to raise significant doubt about whether there was ever such a decree issued.

Now, Scot doesn’t claim in the book that witches don’t exist. Rather, he questions the evidence. He says that the evidence being presented was insufficient to convict people of witchcraft, and he provides a brief chapter explaining magic tricks to make the point that people *can* be deceived, but that seeing a magician perform a trick like the Cups and Balls should not be sufficient cause to burn him at the stake. (Thankfully, my job is a little safer these days.) Scot was in effect foreshadowing a basic credo of critical thinking popularized by Carl Sagan, among others, to wit: Thine extraordinary claim requireth that thou presenteth some extraordinary provingeth. Whatever.

So that makes more than four centuries that magicians and skeptics have been conjoined at least in the literature, and it’s likely that our role as critical thinkers and debunkers of paranormal claims long predates that.

I think it’s the job of a magician to take my audience on a kind of rollercoaster ride. To feel that otherworldly experience – on the rollercoaster, a near-death sensation, while for the magician, a near real-magic experience – and then it’s my responsibility to



return that person whence they began, safe and sound, in a not significantly altered state. And perhaps with a newly expanded vision of how to think about life and death, or the nature of

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possibility and impossibility.

In the world of magic there are magicians – especially those whom we call “mentalists,” which are magicians who specialize in illusions of mind-reading – who sometimes dance into areas of confusion about what claims they are and are not making. Those who deliberately confuse the audience as to what might or might not be real. Or who might dip their toes into the muddy waters of supernatural claims.

This is the equivalent of taking a rider up on the rollercoaster, and then after enjoying the ride for awhile, reaching a high peak – and stopping the car there. And then leaving the rider – the audience – to climb down on their own, in the hopes they will make it back to their safe home ground again, still whole and uninjured. Still clear about their grasp on what is illusion and what is reality. It is a laissez faire attitude, at best, that rejects the performer’s responsibility to the audience, when they put themselves and their confidence in your hands. It may be unfortunate that a theatrical audience looks to a stage performer to educate them and draw conclusions about the nature of science and physics and the paranormal, but the fact is that it does happen, and denying any responsibility is not the same thing as proving you have no responsibility. As a performer, I want my audience to leave the theater better prepared to face the challenges of their world, even if it is only in the sense of being uplifted or inspired or gifted with a new experience. But I certainly don’t want them to leave the theater less equipped than when they entered. Caveat Emptor is not my credo.

And then there is the phony psychic (redundancy aside). He brings the rider up on the rollercoaster, lets them feel a dose of that near-death experience, and then, stopping the machinery at the highest peak – he pushes you off the ledge.

So, I’m an honest liar. I help get you home safe, so you can enjoy the ride again.

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