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As told to Sophie Kemp, 2166 words.

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On being brutally honest in your life and your work

Filmmaker Caveh Zahedi discusses why telling and showing the complete truth is essential in art and life.

Your work has a tendency towards being brutally honest at all costs. When did you realize that you were good at being honest?

I wasn't born good at it. It took a while to get better at it. At some point I realized that I feel dead inside when I am not honest. I don't think I felt very loved as a child by my parents. I think I have a real need to feel loved by others. And I think I've noticed that if I'm not honest, I don't believe the love. If someone loves you, do they really love you, or do they just love the person you're pretending to be? So I think maybe around the sex addiction stuff, when I felt like there was something in me that I felt was unlovable that I needed to express in order to feel loved or to feel lovable... Maybe around then, in my late 20s, I started to realize how crucial [honesty] was to my sense of feeling accepted or loved by others. I need that, otherwise, it doesn't feel real.

What is it like to toggle between being extremely honest with your subjects and also attempting to be extremely honest with your viewer?

Well, they're related, but you're right that they're different. Some people *feel* like they're fine with you being honest with them, but they don't *want* you to be honest with other people about your honesty with them. A lot of people have privacy issues and they feel, "Okay, I'll tell you this, but I don't want you telling anybody else this." People want to decide what the circle of gossip is. And gossip by definition kind of exceeds the circle of one's revelations. So I feel there's always been this kind of like... I kind of hate it when people say "Don't tell anybody, but..." It just kind of puts you in this weird position. If everybody knew everything about everybody, everything would be much better. We would be with the right partners, we would understand who are not our friends and who are. Everything would just be more efficient, effective, and appropriate. I think in the way we have with trying to pretend that we feel things we don't feel, we sort of create these labyrinthine systems of deceit that always end up biting us in the ass.

At the same time, it seems like in your art, especially in The Show About The Show, the truth and the timeline of everything can be a little unreliable.

Well, I love it because I just love irreducibility. For example [in a forthcoming season of *The Show*], Ashley says some pretty harsh things about me that I would argue with about their truth quotient. At the same time, I like having something where you're like, "Really? Did that happen?" And then, "He let that in?" I just like all those questions that [irreducibility] poses. And then in that episode, I keep cutting back to me, behind the camera, and I keep interrupting her and giving her direction. There's this kind of complicated puppet master/string situation in that episode where you're like, "Hmm, this was so weird." It's just kind of a bit of a mindfuck. I just don't believe in truth discourse. I really believe that everything is radically subjective. I think a lot of people have complained about *The Show* being just from my perspective as if there's a true perspective. And it's like, yeah, that's kind of what all art is, I think. Art is subjective. It's the artist's perspective on life. That being said, I do like art that includes multiple perspectives. I love *Ulysses* by James Joyce, and *The Sound and the Fury*.

You could talk from a philosophical level about the nature of truth for hours, and it is usually confusing, and sometimes boring and frustrating. All art is obviously sort of inherently subjective. I was wondering if you could tell me about some of your earliest forays into filmmaking, and the things that you were inspired by when you first started making film.

I think probably the biggest influences on me were experimental cinema, where you could just do anything, and Godard, where you realize that the way that films are made have ideological implications, and sort of try to deconstruct what those implications are and see if there's a way to not have those implications in one's own work. It's like the prison house of language and we're stuck in it, and yet you try to push the envelope of it and what it means. I think every artist kind of has a worldview that their art embodies. You can call it a vibrational frequency also. It doesn't have to be ideas, it can even be just appealing, like a lot of music. Music is like that, a certain musician, what they are is, they're a frequency.

You either connect with that frequency, and if it elevates you, it makes you feel like you resonate with it in a pleasurable way, or you don't. One of things I like about film is that because it's a time-based medium, the audience starts to understand how you see the world, and then you invite them in, and it's a kind of propaganda or hypnotism. It's like, check out this way of thinking about things.

Some people, they resonate with it. People say that my films inspire them to be more honest in their lives, for example. [My films are] an invitation to be more honest and a demonstration of its advantages. Other people, they run screaming, "I don't want that." I think there's a war of perspectives, because of the Culture Wars, there's different ways of thinking about reality, and it's an agon, it's a contest, it's a competition then. The whole narrative of the Right versus the narrative of the Left, it's just these different narratives about what's important and what's true, and what the building blocks of goodness are, of virtue.

I think my films really tackle mainstream norms about what virtue is pretty head-on. I think they feel very immoral to people because they posit a very different moral system than the usually accepted one. People who are dissatisfied with the moral status quo [often will find that my films] speak to them, and it sort of is healing because it makes them feel less bad about the subtleties of their own moral stances. So we're talking about honesty, but also morality is the other kind of key element to my films. And it's a frontal attack on moralism. It has its own kind of morality, but it's definitely not the norm.

I was watching that scene in Waking Life that you were animated into, and in it you ask questions about what makes art holy. Is that something that you think is still a throughline in your work? Is holiness and spirituality and god still essential to your practice?

Well, I mean, I believe in God and by that, I mean I believe that there's a kind of meaningfulness in the universe and that I don't believe in randomness, for example. I think everything is holy. Everything is happening for a reason. I think if you're a moralist, then some things are bad and some things are good, and you reject things as not being good, or good enough, or bad. But if you believe that god is sort of at work in the world, then everything kind of is grist for the mill and is part of the plan. It doesn't mean you don't try and change things sometimes, but the basic impulse is to accept and to embrace, which is a very different impulse than the impulse to change or to criticize.

When I was younger, I was very critical. I still am very critical, and I'm kind of a negativist, I see the glass half empty, but I believe in seeing it half full. I aspire to that. I think that the spiritual path is one of embrace. And morally, it's so easy to reject. For me, it's very easy to reject reality and to say, "I don't like it. I don't like the way the world is." It's a lot harder and I think more artistically high to see what's beautiful about it.

I know a lot of people, who are against honesty because they're like, "Oh, it hurts people's feelings". Like, yeah. So what? But why are people's feelings more important than the truth? Like, I don't think it is. I think people's feelings get hurt because they're out of alignment with reality, you know? You think something which isn't true, and then someone points out to you that it's not true, then you feel bad, because you had some kind of assumption about it. But it's like, that wasn't true. I mean, someone tells you that they're cheating on you. That hurts, but they really are cheating on you. The only reason it hurts is because you thought this was somebody who wasn't. But they are. And so you just had a misperception about reality.

I think the main thing we're here to do is to shift our perceptions, to embrace what actually is happening, and stop imagining or pretending that things are not what they are. There's always a disparity between what we wish things were and what they are. I think that the bigger that disparity, the more suffering we have. The more you can sort of close that gap and be in alignment with what's really happening, the more you can integrate your life into your sense of what's good and be happy and also helpful in the world.

Does it feel scary for you to make this kind of art where you're asking people to do that kind of work?

Yeah. I mean, if it didn't feel scary, it wouldn't be fun. It's nice to feel like you're challenging yourself or growing. I think my work is challenging to people, morally, certainly, if not on an entertainment level. A lot of people don't like it, they don't want to be challenged and it makes them mad. A lot of people, they feel very much like if they didn't have their opinions about things, they would have nothing. They would be adrift at sea and they would, I don't know, they would have no meaning of note. But identities are based on certain assumptions. If you question those assumptions, identity starts to falter and instead of finding a new, truer identity, they just cling to it and attack you for threatening it. That's kind of what people do, you know? So yeah, it is challenging and everyone's not interested in having their identity or their assumptions questioned.

Something that I think a lot about in my own life is recognizing an internal truth about myself, but

acting completely differently on an external level. Do you think that there was a time in your life where you were sort of existing on two planes: that of inner truth and behaving differently to the world? Is that something that you relate to at all?

Yeah, totally. I think my life is an ongoing attempt to sort of collapse those two differences, but I still do it. I mean, I still am constantly catching myself, withholding some bit of information that I find embarrassing or might upset somebody, and I try to be conscious about it and do it as little as possible. There's always a delay between the impulse and the expression of the impulse, you know? I aspire to a situation where that delay is non-existent. Like I just think something and say it. Not because I want to be thoughtless, but because I think that impulses are kind of holy. If you feel something, that there is value there. I think our guidance systems are based on our feelings and our desires and our thoughts.

Like with a loved one, they'll say, "What are you thinking right now?" And sometimes you're like, "Oh, I don't want to say what I'm thinking right now, because you might not like it." But it's kind of a beautiful question. It's like, if you really loved someone and you really trusted them and you were really kind of connected or committed, you would want to know what they're thinking right now. Wanting to know would be important to you. I just think desire is holy, and when I have a thought, I try to act on it immediately so it stays spontaneous and true.

Caveh Zahedi Recommends:

"Alec Eiffel" by the Pixies

Ulysses by James Joyce

A Separation by Asghar Farhadi

A Course of Love


The poetry of Wallace Stevens


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