

“The Right to Be Wrong”  
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When I was about 12, I was sitting in the kitchen having an after-school snack. My younger sister was in the living room, practicing the piano. She was learning the same songs I had learned a couple of years before. She was playing a song in the key of F, which has a B flat in it (one of the black keys). [Ruth plays scale.] But every time that note came along, she played a regular B, which is on a white key, a half a step too high. [Ruth plays Row, Row, Row Your Boat incorrectly.] It was driving me nuts. And every time she hit that B, I would shout in her direction, “B flat!”

Fortunately, she survived her overbearing sister. But here’s something I’ve been wondering about: where do we get the idea that it’s our job to point out other people’s mistakes? Take other drivers, for example. Why is it that we feel compelled to point out their stupid moves and further, try to educate them on how to be better drivers? Or worse, that we should “punish” them for their idiotic maneuvers?

One type of driver that can really push my buttons is the tailgater. I mean, don’t they realize how dangerous it is to get so close to the back of someone’s car? Or those people right in front of you who put on the brakes, come to a complete stop and then turn. What, are their blinkers broken? Or how about the ones who first of all, don’t bother to stop at the stop sign, and then, they pull right in front of you without even looking? And then, if it’s really not your day, they will drive so slowly in front of you that you want to scream.

For years and years, I had my ways of communicating with all of these bad drivers. The tailgaters? I’d hit the brakes a few times; that usually made them back off. But they’d creep up behind me again. So I started putting on my flashers; that usually got them to back off permanently. I’d smile with satisfaction: I had taught THEM: “They should not tailgate!”

Those non-signaling drivers would get a loud “honk” and a dirty look from me as I zoomed past them. I’d get so angry my heart would be pounding, and I would

feel so self-righteous as I leaned on the horn. I made sure they knew what bad drivers they were.

Oh, and the ones who pull out in front of me without looking, they would get a long and very heartfelt lean on the horn. I wanted to make sure they got my message loud and clear: You are being totally oblivious and are a danger to society! Maybe next time you'll remember to stop and look, you (cover mouth to muffle name)!

And if somebody does something especially dumb and crazy, and maybe because of it you narrowly miss being in an accident, don't you go over the story in your head and make sure you have all the details straight? Because you can't wait to tell your friends or your spouse what this crazy person did!

So, what is it? Are we reacting to these other drivers because we expect everyone to drive perfectly? Or at least safely? Or, is our motive pure? Maybe we're simply trying to make the world a better place. Do we actually think these people will become better drivers as a result of their encounters with us?

Assuming they drive away and we never see them again, we'll never really know. We'd like to think we're changing these drivers for the better, having some positive effect. Although chances are... (shrug –who knows?)

Have you ever learned a life lesson, you had an insight, or maybe you learned a better way to do something, and then you couldn't wait to share it with everyone else you knew? I remember one of the first self-help type books I read, in college. It was, Your Erroneous Zones, by Wayne Dyer. I was pretty shy at that time, and the book really spoke to me. It seemed so logical and sensible. He explained simply and persuasively how to be assertive. Basically, he said, you just repeat yourself as many times as necessary until you get the results you want.

It didn't take long before I had the perfect opportunity to use my newly-learned assertiveness skills. I'd had my down jacket dry-cleaned. When I went to pick it up, it was still pretty dirty around the pockets. I said, "This is still dirty. I need you to clean it again." The dry-cleaner man responded that they had cleaned it as well as possible. I repeated my line, "This is still dirty. I need to you to clean it again." "Well, sometimes things are allowed to get so dirty that nothing will ever

get them clean again.” I repeated my line a third time. Then he said, “Oh, OK. We’ll run it through again.” He wasn’t too happy about it, but I was secretly thrilled. It worked!

After that, when my friends would tell me about their frustrations, any time assertiveness could solve the problem (in my mind, anyway), I would explain exactly what they needed to do in order to make it work for them. I told them about Wayne Dyer’s book, and my experience at the dry cleaner’s. But it never seemed to hit them the way it hit me. I was mystified. Here I was giving them the key to solving their problems and it was like they were refusing to take it.

It can be so frustrating to believe with all our hearts that we have the right answer, and then to fail to convince the other person of what we know to be true. Susan Page, in her insightful book, How One of You can Bring the Two of You Together, speaks to this point in the context of partnerships. Who has never argued a point with a friend or a loved one? It could be anything from remembering an experience differently or the merits of one thing over another, or something more serious, like if Person A says, “I’m the reasonable one in this relationship and you’re being selfish and unreasonable, so why don’t we stop right here and agree that I’m right?”

There are a couple of possibilities here. Maybe Person A is completely right. More likely, there are several different ways of looking at the dynamics between these two people. BUT, even if Person A IS right, and even if Person B agrees, what has Person A gained? They get to be right. That’s all. They just get to be right. Does getting to be right help the relationship? No, it doesn’t. Being right turns out to be what Page calls the “Booby Prize.”

I know of a woman who had come to realize that being right was the Booby Prize, but still, it was so difficult to let go of that desire to be right, of having that satisfaction of “winning.” One day, in the midst of arguing her point with her husband, she realized with horror that she was completely wrong. Swallowing her pride, she said to her husband, “You know, you might be right...” That was a break-through moment. (Pause) And something, there is no wrong or right. People simply disagree!

As the oldest of three children, I delighted in being right. A corollary of that was the glee in pointing out that others were wrong –especially my younger sister and brother. I loved feeling smart, and being able to point out others’ mistakes boosted my ego. Furthermore, as the eldest, and in theory the responsible one, I thought it was my JOB. (Pause.) My younger siblings are making good progress in therapy.

Of course, it’s not too hard to figure out that as a young person I was, in fact, afraid of being wrong. As children, many of us learned to do whatever we had to do to please our parents and other people in our lives. We learned to look for feelings of self-worth from the world outside ourselves. We may have come to believe that if we showed the world that we were competent and perfect, we would be loved, or loved more.

I had a slow and gradual transformation from a know-it-all kid, advice-giving college student, and bad driver reformer.

One of the concepts that changed the way I see myself in relation to others is gaining a healthier understanding of what’s my business and what’s other people’s business. It sounds pretty basic, but for me it takes constant vigilance.

For example, advice-giving. I realized that one reason people often didn’t appreciate my suggestions is that 99 percent of the time, I didn’t understand the whole picture. And how could I? I’m not them. The other thing is that I’m where I am and they’re where they are. The other person has had a completely different set of life experiences from mine. They might just not be ready to absorb what I’m saying and apply it to their life, **EVEN IF IT WOULD BE HELPFUL TO THEM IF THEY DID.**

It’s my business to make sure my house is in order, that I keep my side of the street swept clean. It’s my business to take responsibility for my happiness, for my feelings, for my own actions. It’s my job to figure out what’s right for me, not for anyone else. In point of fact, people have the right to be wrong.

Allowing others, I would even say, giving others the gift of making their own mistakes, of encouraging them to find their own answers: who are we to

interfere with that? Who are we? Sometimes we act out of misguided love. We want to make things easier, we don't want people we care about to suffer. When my kids were growing up, one of the most important things I read, I think, was that if parents always provided answers to their children's problems, if we didn't allow them to struggle through and figure out what they needed to do, it would actually inhibit the growth of their frontal lobes and their ability to think critically!

So, when they were faced with decisions of the non-life-threatening variety, I stopped giving answers and started encouraging them to think through their problems. This change in our interactions began to feel more respectful somehow. I believe one of the greatest gifts we can give another person, whether a child or an adult, is to honor their process, their path.

Therapist Pia Mellody writes, "Positive control takes place when I determine my own reality apart from the reality of others...I establish for myself what I look like, think, feel, and do and not do." She continues, "Negative control of reality happens whenever I give myself permission to determine for another person what he or she should look like...or think, feel, and do or not do."

It's not our job to fix other people –not strangers, not friends, not even the people closest to us. Our job is to focus on ourselves! When we want to scream, "wrong, wrong, wrong," remember they have the right to be wrong. Our job, our spiritual task, is to take care of ourselves. It's to maintain our serenity and equanimity. Our job is to focus on developing our own spiritual and emotional maturity.

When we allow others to live their own lives and to follow their own paths, we can let go. Sometimes the hardest, but the best thing we can do is to detach from our loved ones and their decisions while still maintaining our love and compassion for them.

When we let go of what we can't control anyway, we gain freedom and inner peace.

This is not about accepting unacceptable behavior. Pia Mellody says, "If [a person] has acted abusively or transgressed our boundaries...we can...keep them out of our lives and not spend that much time around them. It doesn't mean that

I must keep the person in my life, constantly battling to protect myself and being hurt in the process. It doesn't mean I approve of the person's actions."

I have changed the ways in which I deal with other drivers. I realized that I was allowing them to upset me. I wanted to reduce the anxiety and stress in my life. Now, I focus on my serenity, not my pride or need to feel superior. Tailgaters, I want them out of my life. I pull over, let them zoom by, and I say, "goodbye!"

And, lately, I've started to admit that when other drivers honk at me, which is rare, of course, I might have been wrong. Maybe those other drivers –is it possible? – maybe they think I was one of those bad drivers! So that means...maybe some of those "bad" drivers I've encountered were mostly-good drivers, like me, who made a mistake!

So let the world play its wrong notes, I say. Let us steer clear of the bad drivers. Let people read their own self-help books –or not!

The reality is, we all make mistakes. We are all wrong, at least some of the time. As human beings, we have that right. As human beings, we are "perfectly imperfect." There is a sense of our common humanity, when, as Martin Buber said, "one human being truly turns toward another human being," and we are there for each other to share our imperfections with one other. Pia Mellody describes it as "a sense of being connected to the other person and to a power greater than self that transcends understanding."

May it be so.