

## Who's Right and Who's Wrong By Bruce Johns, Ph.D.

"When I'm wrong, I know I'm wrong and I say that I'm wrong. And that's how I know I'm right!"  
— C. JoyBell C.

I've never liked being wrong. Yet it's a talent of mine. I'm right good at it. It seems to come naturally. Mind you, I'm not always wrong, but mistakes are not an anomaly either. And so far, my capacity for smudges hasn't been dropping off.

Apparently I'm not alone. Yesterday, a friend of mine said, of his wife, "Wouldn't you think she would get tired of being right?" The fact is that most of us never tire of imagining ourselves as right and have immense investment in not being wrong. My experience suggests that who's right and who's wrong is the most common and hotly contested theme of couple arguments—outnumbering, by far, quarrels over finances, sex, sharing the work-load, how to raise kids, and in-laws. An argument may start over housework and quickly digress into an argument over how much time is spent golfing, why we don't eat dinner together, and who's got the worse relationship with the kids. Despite changing topics, the underlying skirmish centers on who's going to walk away with the most blame. That's why couples are able to suddenly switch subjects and continue bickering, without blinking an eye. Any issue will do because it's not about the housework. It's about winning, or at least not losing. And changing topics is a way of regaining the upper hand if you were losing ground.

How did being wrong become so odious? Why is being right so important to us? Those are questions to which Kathryn Schultz has devoted her career. Schultz says we get conditioned to fearing being wrong due to the frequent verbal, social, and even physical floggings that we witnessed or experienced as kids, following childhood mistakes, omissions, oversights, or underperformances. She says, "By the time you are nine years old, you've already learned, first of all, that people who get stuff wrong are lazy, irresponsible dimwits -- and second of all, that the way to succeed in life is to never make any mistakes." She suggests that many of us respond to such lessons by becoming perfectionists, over-achievers, or at least wrong-phobic. That sets us up to freak out over any mistakes we make, because that means there's something amiss in us.

We insist that we're right, because it makes us feel better about ourselves. I had one man explain to me that he didn't feel any special need to be right. He had just never found his ideas to be wrong, which meant that he had a responsibility to convince his wife of her errors whenever she disagreed. But feeling right didn't make him right. We are all capable of feeling perfectly right when we are actually perfectly wrong. Our sense of "rightness" can be completely at odds with the objective, external reality. And when we quit considering the fact that we can be wrong, we are most vulnerable to making titanic-like mistakes.

Schultz says when we are afraid to be wrong, we tend to dismiss counter-arguments in one of three ways. First, we assume ignorance. If that doesn't work because the other person has the same facts we do and still disagrees, we assume idiocy (they're just too incompetent to put the pieces together). If they happen to be equally intelligent and have the same facts, we assume they're evil (distorting the truth for malevolent purposes). It's like we want to believe that, if everyone would just look at the world using our lenses, everyone would see things as we do. However, individual differences in background, abilities, experiences, and cultures grind different lenses, and create different perceptions. Schultz suggests we admit that, "Unlike God, we don't really know what's going on out there." Mutual understanding, therefore, relies on us describing to one another our individual perceptions.

Sixteen hundred years ago, St. Augustine said, "I err, therefore I am." Perhaps our capacity for mistakes is not a defect. Being wrong may be undervalued. Almost all of the great discoveries in history were preceded with wrong-headed efforts. We seldom get to right without first being wrong. In fact, acknowledging being wrong is usually the first step toward progress and change. Schultz says, "I encourage us to see error as a gift in itself, a rich and irreplaceable source of humor, art, illumination, individuality, and change." Being humble enough to consider being wrong, may allow us to see different viewpoints with less distortion. It does require the ability to swallow some pride, but nobody has ever choked to death from that.