

The Courage to Be Wrong



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I have never made a mistake that I couldn't learn from! That is if I am able to get my ego, my stress and myself out of the way. And, isn't that why I have a host of other people around me? Not to tell me I am wrong, though I am sure that is so (both that it is possible for me to be wrong and that I would benefit from hearing that), not to tell me that I am a failure but to tell me not to give up, to tell me that a course correction is possible. Can you relate? I think so; for the desire to try out new things, the propensity to

make mistakes and the ability to find courage is pretty human.

I could bring up all the people who started off by failing and then zoomed ahead in life. It is probably good to keep in mind a few names- Abraham Lincoln, Albert Einstein, Babe Ruth, Tom Brady and the Patriots (sorry to bring up this sad subject, is it too soon yet to talk about?), and Vince Lombardi, for example. The list of those like Fred Astaire who kept the memo from the testing director of MGM after his screen test wrote- “can’t act, slightly bald, can dance a little” is a reminder of the persons who had the courage to be wrong. However, good this list is what I want to focus on is the attitude of courage it takes to start something, to try something, to attempt something even if it might turn out to be wrong and to engage in the process of learning from there.

Dealing with criticism is very challenging. I mean we all know that we are not perfect, that we cannot get everything right, but dealing with criticism has got to

be one of those really challenging interpersonal things. The fine line between knowing we have done something wrong and hearing from another that we have done something wrong really depends on trust and how well we can manage our stress.

Let's talk first about stress. I heard at a workshop on Friday a lot of our ability to deal with stress has to do with how we were raised and taught to deal with it. Stress is normal and natural- yah yah we know that, stress causes systems to be dislocated or unbalanced so that they can offer course correction and yah yah we know that but when in the midst of a stress situation the body and brain create challenges that can keep us from responding with our better nature and actually prohibit learning. We have a sympathetic and a parasympathetic system. When we feel threatened it creates stress and triggers a desire for preservation of self. If the sympathetic physiological part of our brain is stimulated during stress and anxiety the fight, flight, freeze, or faint responses become activated. When any

individual perceives behaviors or words as a threat they are unable to respond in a way to learn. This involves hearing criticism, being part of meetings that are heated, or emotionally laden, sometimes being around too much stimulus, or in uncomfortable environments, until the individual can get out of what the presenter said is this “safety ethic” interpersonal, trust, cooperative companionship and communal being or the ethics of engagement cannot be entered. She proposed that we need to learn how to establish practices that will allow our parasympathetic system to become active. When this is so we are calmer, more open to being engaged with others and we can experience love/care/compassion/ attachment. Some practices to help the right brain or parasympathetic system develop are deep breathing (six deep breathes apparently can shift our brain’s function), yoga, journaling, meditation, prayer, worship, singing, dancing, for example.

The presenter Darcia Narvaez proposed that our world has gotten so out of balance and been so poor at establishing nurturing places for babies and adults that the human ability to calm and re-focus oneself has been lost. Without this environment and understanding she maintains that people are in a place of self- preservation, self-protection, and permanent stress not allowing space for exercising the option of being wrong and having the courage to learn from it. Thus criticism which most often is meant in the most loving and respectful of ways is heard as failure, heard as a threat, heard as us being useless and worthless. And she maintains that often the person delivering the criticism is coming from the same place of having to protect and make themselves feel safe that the true ability to engage in an ethic of communal imagination is lost.

I am using a couple of concepts that I want to define a bit. One is ethics. Ethics is generally that way in which individuals relate and behave with each other

both personally and in a group. Ethics just are and there are good and bad ethics. Ethics are taught and some researchers are also proposing that though ethics manifest in morals and behavior they are rooted in how the brain processes information. The presenter we heard on Friday states three ethics that are helpful for us to think about.

The Safety Ethic is the ethic of self – protection. I already told you about this. I hope I was able to demonstrate the limitations, that are put on one’s abilities, to be able to experience another ethic she labels the Engagement Ethic. The engagement ethic is the relational ethic, the compassion for all life, the social way of being with one another, including trust in other human beings. The third ethic, is the Imagination Ethic. At its worst the imagination ethic can lead to living life in disconnected pieces, driven by power seeking and unhealthy altruism that acts as if it knows the right behavior for the rest of the world. It is also narrowly focused on sets of procedures and rule based

interactions with others. At its best the imagination ethic makes us able to listen to criticism that is lovingly presented - knowing that we can always try again. It can have us be fully present in the moment, connected to the most transcendent of all feelings, it can lead to an increasingly developed intuition and the sense of awe and oneness with the universe.

Perhaps the biggest learning is that the courage to be wrong was and is an attitude carried forth from our earliest interactions with parents and a nurturing community. The other learning is that we can change when we are exposed to environments that foster companionship, kindness, imaginative play, good physical health and when we learn how to move ourselves out of places of perceived threat to imagined opportunity.

May we build such a place. so be it