

Say Uncle August 19, 2007

Dave Barry has said, “You can say any foolish thing to a dog, and the dog will give you a look that says, “...you’re right! I never would’ve thought of that!” That statement causes me to wonder if many of us, myself included, wouldn’t be better off if all our associations consisted primarily of dogs! After all, some of us have a rather pronounced need to be right all the time, maybe even to the point of being unbending, inflexible, unyielding. I, for one, have heard it said to me, “My goodness! You’re stubborn as a mule!”

Now, there is a sense in which being stubborn, in its most positive vein, can be a good thing. A kinder, gentler way of thinking of it is to call it “persistence.” Keeping on keeping on has its pluses, and often accomplishes that which otherwise would not happen. One of the oft-quoted lines of Winston Churchill was, “Never give up!” and he said it for a good reason—to encourage the Brits to persevere in spite of the rough time they were having in World War II. Hanging in there in the face of struggles can be a good thing.

However, being stubborn is sort of the dark side of persistence. In fact, I recall a time when our daughter was probably 9 or 10, and we were on a bike ride—never one of her favorite family activities. She got off her bike, and refused to go another inch. A friend who was riding with us said to her, “Erin, you’ve got an oppositional disorder!” to which she responded, “I do not!” Being hardheaded, stubborn, stiff-necked as the Bible often puts it, is not the same as an oppositional disorder, but I can tell you that it seems pretty unbending and unyielding at times.

That’s basically what our Bible passage for today is about. The prophet is sharing the words of God who is addressing the people of Israel, but could just as well be talking to you and me. This is how our version from The Message reads:

“But I (God) did say this: ‘Obey me. Do what I say and I will be your God and you will be my people...But do you think they listened? Not a word of it. They did just what they wanted to do, indulged any and every evil whim and got worse day by day. From the time your ancestors left the land of Egypt until now, I’ve supplied a steady stream of my servants the prophets, but do you think the people listened? Not once. Stubborn as mules, and worse than their ancestors.’”

When we’re “stubborn as mules,” we refuse to listen to any other point of view. Our minds are closed, and we’re not willing to take in any more information that might cause us to rethink our position. We think we’re absolutely right, and are unwilling to budge from our stance.

Take, for instance, a conversation between a subscriber to *Theatre Arts* magazine and an information operator. The subscriber requested the phone number of the magazine, and the operator responded, “There is no one listed by the name of Theodore Arts.” The subscriber came back with, “It’s not a person; it’s a publication. I want the number for *Theatre Arts*. The operator’s voice rose a few decibels and she repeated, “I told you, we have no listing for Theodore Arts.” By now, the subscriber was shouting, “Darn it! The word is “theatre: T-H-E-A-T-R-E!” to which the operator responded, “That is not the way to spell Theodore!” Oh, the insistence on being right...especially when we’re not.

What’s going on inside us when we are stubborn, insisting that we’re right? I’m not sure that I totally understand it, but it seems to have some roots in the fear of being wrong that resides within many of us. Perhaps it started in childhood when, for whatever reason, it wasn’t OK to make a mistake. Maybe we were expected to be perfect children, and do everything right.

I suppose coming from different backgrounds and having different life stories that say making mistakes is wrong can cause us to feel inadequate or humiliated when we do mess up. That could be part of the reason that we have so much trouble admitting when we’re wrong, and why we have such an insatiable desire to be right all the time. We have to win every argument; we want to be one-up by proving we’re right and that the other person is wrong.

It somehow seems that, if we admit we’re wrong or that we don’t know, we’re less of a person. Our self-confidence is shaken, and our self-esteem is lowered. We seemingly have problems facing the fact that we’re imperfect, that we make mistakes, that we’re often wrong. Clinging desperately to the insistence that we’re right may help us to feel better momentarily, but it can have some disastrous consequences in the long run. It creates considerable tension in a relationship, and puts us on a tightrope of perfection—fearing what will happen if we ever fall off.

The reality is that we will fall off that tightrope, because no one is perfect. By our very nature, human beings are imperfect, and stubbornly insisting that we’re always right doesn’t fool anyone. We’re all wrong some of the time, and maybe more of the time than we’re right. We just have to face it, and cut ourselves some slack, and realize that we’re OK people—warts and all.

Once we accept that fact, we have some decisions to make about how we want to live our lives. We can keep fooling ourselves and insisting on being right, or we can look at the bigger picture and see how that stubbornness can separate us from others, and lead to great unhappiness in our relationships.

It's like a story that's told about the author William Thackeray. One of his early novels appeared in serial form in a magazine, and after a few chapters had been published, the editor of the magazine summoned Thackeray to his office. Thackeray was told that the readers were becoming impatient for the hero to marry the heroine. Thackeray replied that he had no plans for them to marry, because it would weaken the plot. The editor insisted he was right, and that Thackeray's next chapter should include their marriage. Because the author was strapped for funds, he finally agreed, but he said, "If you insist, I'll marry them in the next episode. But, I cannot guarantee that it will be a happy marriage." Always insisting on being right doesn't lead to a happy anything—relationships, outcomes to disputes, life.

If we choose to look at the bigger picture, and put it all in perspective, I think we will see how harmful needing to be right all the time can be. Just seeing that can bring about some change, and a large part of that change has to do with making the decision to be more flexible, more open, more willing to listen to other perspectives, less rigid. It means having a little humility, and not always being arrogant enough to think we have to be right. There are plenty of times when we all need to "Say Uncle", and admit we're wrong.

Frankly, there's something very freeing about accepting our humanity and being more humble. It frees us up to be more honest with ourselves, and that gives us the freedom to live our lives in a new way, not holding back in fear of doing something wrong, not being afraid of falling off that tightrope.

It does something else, too. It has a major impact on our relationships with others. When we can admit our mistakes, it breaks down the walls between us. When we can acknowledge that we don't know it all, that we're wrong, that's the first step to a deeper level of relationships. Saying Uncle, admitting we're wrong, is the only chance we have of living in harmony with one another. I'm talking about apologizing, and not just hollow words, but offering a sincere apology, being a big enough person to get off our stubborn high-horse and say the words, "I was wrong." That's being real and being vulnerable, and the willingness to let go of our stubborn insistence on being right can go a long way toward healing the brokenness that so often exists in our lives.

So, I guess it's up to each of us to ask ourselves a couple of questions to decide how we want to live and how we want to relate to others:

- Do we want to be correct, or do we want to connect?
- Do we want momentary satisfaction, or are we searching for a greater, lasting satisfaction?

You and I can decide. We can be stubborn mules, insisting on being right, or we can choose

the greater good, and opt for connection. I truly believe God would say, "Opt for connection."

Closing:

One-time chaplain of the Senate, Peter Marshall, was quoted as praying, "God, where we are wrong, make us willing to change; where we are right, make us easy to live with." To that, I say "Amen."

Have a great Sunday, and go in peace. Amen.