

What Informs Your Belief?

By Mel Schwartz

While I was in the midst of delivering a somewhat provocative talk, a gentleman in the audience indicated that he had a question. As he began to speak, it was evident from both his tone and his question that he was challenging the material that I was sharing. Simply stated, his core belief was that people don't change and he suggested that I was being an idealist. Although I readily welcome challenging discourse and alternative points of view, his position was quite charged and confrontational. My presentation was evidently offending his beliefs. I noticed my reaction arising and felt a surging desire to prove him wrong and reveal the flaw in his thinking. Thankfully, I didn't attach to my reaction. In the space of a few nanoseconds I quieted myself and felt a question arising from within. It emerged from a deeper place and it took form in the words, "May I ask what informs your belief?"

In that moment I chose not to engage in the meaningless ping-pong match of right and wrong, but to delve into a more meaningful communication. That is the essence of effective communication. Not surprisingly, my question took him off guard, and he struggled with his response. Understanding and sharing what underlies our thoughts and positions is essential in coming into deeper and more authentic forums of discussion. Our thoughts are underscored by our beliefs. The man in the audience eventually suggested that his belief was in fact due to his personal life experience. Now we were on to something. I asked him to consider how different his position might have been if only he had had a different experience. He reluctantly agreed. The doorway now opened toward an evolving dialogue.

If we actually language our positions by subjectively sharing what informs our beliefs, we'd be inviting a participatory discussion and hopefully, a vital dialogue. This manner of dialogue is far removed from the objective statements of fact that degenerate into neither party actually listening. This style of communication plagues us; from levels of personal intimate relationships, to opposing experts and pundits, all the way to the level of international and religious conflict. After all, war and terrorism are the manifestation of conflicting beliefs, typically not exposed to a shared understanding.

Conflict, whether verbal, emotional or physical, is ultimately due to oppositional thinking, beliefs and worldviews. Yet, we fail miserably in being able to clearly communicate that which informs our positions. Regrettably, we default into simply asserting our truth; ad nauseam. Learning the art of inquiry enables opposing beliefs and attitudes to surface in an endeavor to appreciate the other's lived experience and values. When our mind shuts down there is little chance of altering our perception. As such, our conversations aren't generative and there is a lack of new learning. Asking what informs one's belief is both respectful and genuine.

Without such an inquiry, we're simply spewing the end product of our thinking upon one another, but neglecting the deeper unfolding. For example, if a woman utters, "all men are untrustworthy, they cheat and lie," it would be futile to respond that this isn't

necessarily so. Asking her how she came to believe that would be much more productive. To that end, she would likely share some of her very personal life experiences, which might open the pathway for a deeper understanding of how she came to this belief.

Most of us become very deeply identified with our core beliefs and we defend them mightily. Doing so without sharing how we came to these positions cuts off vitally important information from one another. On a more intra-personal level, appreciating how we have become influenced to think and believe as we do opens pathways for change. Beliefs are informed and shaped by our families of origin, our culture, our education, our experiences, and our worldview, to cite just a few. We shouldn't make the error of concluding that these are commensurate with being some objective truth. For if they are, they will deny other's truths.

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