

Being Wrong, Being Right
by Nancy Pace

Harvard's President, Drew Faust, described Kathryn Schulz's book, *Being Wrong: Adventures in the Margin of Error*—as *the one book* she wished every Harvard freshman would read. This wonderful book about human fallibility has helped me accept my own past disasters, my present shortcomings, and my innumerable and inevitable future mistakes.

Why *do* we go through life thinking we need to be *right* about everything—from how to run the country to how to run the dishwasher? Why—if being wrong about a lot of stuff is completely natural, inevitable—and universal—why are we all so bad at imagining that our own ideas, facts and beliefs might be mistaken? Why do we typically react to evidence of our errors with surprise, denial, defensiveness—and shame?

Well, *bad things happen* to those found out to be “in the wrong.” From when we are small, we learn that getting things wrong means something is very wrong *with us*, that making an awful mistake means we're an awful person. Consider how cruelly many parents, and even whole cultures sometimes punish their errant children. Think how unkindly we treat our too-fallible celebrities—and felons—whose whole lives and futures we judge—and decide—based on their very worst moments and choices.

The concepts behind “right” and “wrong” don't seem at all absolute to me. It's obvious to me that every child's conscience, values, and beliefs develop uniquely, relative to her personal experiences, her culture, her unique upbringing. Furthermore, simplistic, memorizable lists of moral maxims rarely completely untangle any complicated ethical disagreements to the equal satisfaction of all concerned. Think of the Middle East....

I can still hear my mother's voice saying: "Don't you know Right from Wrong YET?!" Well, no, Mom, I don't. Not in any absolute sense. I do have my own acquired and highly-refined set of ethical values, we all do, but none of us has yet quite convinced everyone else on the planet that we're absolutely right about all of them.

People do like to feel certain about things though—even while we find the certainties of others totally irritating—especially the stuff we disagree about—whether changing the climate or changing the thermostat. Our own equally obnoxious certainties we experience as—what?—why, clear evidence of our own “rightness!”

People with opposing views?—we think of them as *ignorant* (of the facts,) *stupid* (as in, too stupid to understand the facts) or, sometimes, just plain *evil*. *Ignorant*. *Stupid*. *Evil*. These are fairly harsh labels to attach to the people we merely disagree with. Which begins to explain our own strong preferences for not wanting to be wrong.

But coming from “being right” about everything doesn't work—whether it's about contested “facts,” or who's telling the truth, or about who the bad guys are, who “started it,” who's at fault, what happened, who meant well and who didn't, who did what to whom, or whose ideology or philosophy or government or religion or party or plan or ethnicity or nation is “right.” Insisting on “being right” just doesn't help human communications, doesn't make relationships or situations better, doesn't resolve conflicts amicably.

The Buddhist tradition encourages us to let go of our judgments, and stop *labeling* our experiences so sternly as “good,” “bad,” “right,” and “wrong.” It's all...just...reality—and when we stop condemning everything, stop clinging so earnestly to “feeling right,” stop pushing away our uncomfortable feelings of “wrongness,” we can avoid a lot of optional personal—and global—suffering. Maybe we could just stop using the words “right” and “wrong” altogether!

Humankind's greatest inspirational examples repeatedly urge us to "judge not." Pope Francis said recently, in answer to a question about gay priests: "Who am I to judge?" Our own Unitarian Universalism encourages us to accept difference, avoid judgment, and treat the broad diversity of opinions and cultures respectfully and compassionately.

I still find it excruciating to say "I was wrong"—and leave it at that. *Feeling* wrong is hard, humbling, even dangerous, like being "flayed and laid out bare to the world." Whenever I'm clearly mistaken, I cringe with embarrassment and frustration—still believing—foolishly—that I *ought*, always, to be *right*—that is, both correct *and* good. I always want to add something to my apologies, to explain away my mistakes so they won't *feel* like mistakes anymore, to say I was *almost* right, or I was wrong for the right reasons, or not *really so* very wrong after all—hoping to morph my mistakes into non-mistakes.

But those very feelings of defensiveness are my loudest and clearest signal that once again I've bought into an illusion—the illusion that somehow, some way, I can avoid making mistakes.

In the end, "feeling wrong" is what makes real growth possible. Feeling wrong is "a psychological construction site, all pits and wrecking balls and cranes: the place where we destroy and rebuild ourselves, where all the ground gives way, and all the ladders start."

Kathryn Schulz explains how humans evolved and refined our unique capacity to imagine and hypothesize, to become *the* theorizing species, *the* inventive, creative, playful, artistic, scientific, witty, adventurous, spiritual species. Unfortunately for us, this same highly-refined imaginative capacity also makes us *the mistake-making species*. More than any other animal, we humans *guess*. And it is this very capacity for creative guesswork that makes our projecting, predicting and policy-making possible, that takes us boldly where no one has gone before—and that takes us into wrongness.

By the way, I'm right about all this stuff. Well, I guess I *could* be wrong. But never Rev. Carl. I do think he knows everything. But I could be wrong....

None of us can afford to wait, however, until we're sure we're right about everything before we speak out, before we risk being wrong and making mistakes. It's only when we overcome our fears, summon our moral courage, bravely articulate our thoughtfully-weighed unique perspectives, share our personal visions, contribute our authentic voices to the planetary dialogue, and take bold action, that our ideas will finally take form, and our hopes take wing.

The best part about being a guessing, theorizing, and erring species is that we are free to “wander into error ... and wandering is the way we discover the world ... and ourselves.” In a sense, says Kathryn Schulz, “*all wrongness is optimism*”: we delight in believing that “*this* time we will succeed where in the past we have failed—or failed to try; believing the best of ourselves even when we are intimately familiar with the worst—and the merely average; believing that everything in us that is well-intentioned will triumph over all that is lazy or fickle or indifferent or unkind; *wrongness as optimism* is an endlessly renewable ... *faith* in our own potential.”

“Wrongness gets us started and keeps us going. Take away our willingness to overestimate ourselves, and we wouldn't dare undertake half the things we do....” Ultimately, no matter how often we bumbling humans get things wrong, *progress depends upon* having an abiding and touching faith in our own stories and theories. And that is why “error, even though it sometimes feels like despair, is actually much closer in spirit to hope.”

(All quotes are from Kathryn Schulz, *Being Wrong: Adventures in the Margin of Error*.)