

I'm Right, You're Wrong

By Eileen Pease, BA, B.Ed., M.Ed.

We are all familiar with that moment when we overreact to something a person has said. We assume that we know exactly what he or she means and we just don't agree. In response, we assert our own opposing point of view. Inevitably an argument ensues—and sometimes it's not very pretty. "I'm right—you're wrong!"

Although we would rarely, if ever, make that bold statement out loud, we often act as if we believe that our interpretation of a situation is the "correct" or only possible one. This thinking pattern can lead to misunderstanding, frustration, conflict, and stress.

The important thing to understand is that the more firmly you believe that your interpretation of a situation is the only "right" one, the more likely it is that you are going to be in conflict with other people. We live in a very diverse world these days. The free movement of people, ideas, and technologies throughout the world makes it very likely that we will frequently deal with people with views very different from our own. This makes for a very creative and exciting environment, but one that will also inevitably create conflict and misunderstanding. We are all bound to run into people who have different interpretations of almost any situation we encounter.

The cost of misunderstanding is enormous. It annoys our customers, it upsets our colleagues, it disappoints our bosses, and it can enrage our family members. But the good news is that there is a lot we can do about it, so long as we appreciate that learning to avoid damaging conflicts starts with understanding ourselves and our thought process.

Each of us interprets events through the filter of our previous life experiences. As the *Talmud* says, "We don't see the world as it is; we see it as we are." When we encounter somebody who sees the world differently, rather than thinking, "Oh, that's interesting, tell me more about how you see it," we are more likely to advocate for our own interpretation. Instead of listening to understand, we listen to defend or to advocate. Then the other person starts to do the same thing. Once we are at loggerheads and getting nowhere, we may damage the relationship and miss the opportunity to learn and grow.

We have to recognize that in our conscious mind, we are constantly talking to ourselves about what we are perceiving through our five senses. Actually, a lot of the perception goes on subconsciously because it happens so quickly. The words and concepts in our language as well as our memories, beliefs, and attitudes cause us to constantly delete, distort, and generalize what our senses tell us.

Have you ever shared a meal or watched a movie with someone and then discussed it afterwards only to find out that it seems as if you took part in two different experiences? Some aspects of a shared experience often seem very much in sync while other aspects seem to be interpreted completely differently. "You thought she was angry? That's funny, I just thought her feelings were hurt and she was very sad." Such differing interpretations usually don't cause much difficulty, but the same process is operating when we disagree over more significant matters.

When we see things differently and disagree, the issue is *not* who is *right* and who is *wrong*. What's most important is to appreciate the value that each person can offer by understanding how the other person has interpreted the situation differently. Within those differences lies a much more creative solution. The first step to appreciating other interpretations and avoiding the trap of fighting over right and wrong is to understand our own self – a pretty complicated beast. Most of the time we simply don't appreciate how changeable our perceptions are and how deep-seated and hidden some of our habits of viewing the world may be.

Let me offer a small example. The only way a human baby can survive the first few years of life is to "model" whoever cares for him or her. We all start out as copy cats. From a very young age, we copy and display nearly every behaviour of our parents. As we get older, we recognize that we don't like some of

those behaviours, so we promise ourselves that we will never do things that way, think that way, talk that way, or treat people that way.

However, many of us notice in the middle of our lives that even though in our childhood we promised ourselves we would never ever say something the way our parents did, at some point we find ourselves saying precisely the same words to our own children or thinking those same words about someone else's children. We didn't know our father was lurking deep within, and then one day he pops out. He's been in there colouring how we see the world.

I use this example to help you understand that all our life experiences—even very early ones—influence how we see the world today. Our perception is our reality. Other people's perceptions are their reality. There is nothing wrong with that, but in order to be able to communicate, negotiate, and persuade successfully, we have to understand how we create our own reality. And we have to recognize that if we are alive and breathing, our perception of reality *must* be different from anybody else's. Otherwise, they would be us. Once we finally understand that, we can begin to work on discovering creative possibilities within the reality that we do share—instead of frittering away energy and goodwill trying to make other people's reality match our own. That's just never going to happen.

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