



"Being Wrong"

Rosh Hashanah Older Family Service Sermonette

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So I was speaking with one of our members last week about what I was going to talk about for this Rosh Hashanah Family Service. I told her that I wanted to speak about a book that I read recently called Being Wrong. The book, which has received some pretty positive reviews, is by journalist Kathryn Schulz, and is about how we find it so satisfying to be right, and so disappointing to be wrong, and how this affects our relationships and our growth.

So this congregant, I'll call her Jean, says to me, Cantor Shochet, I know exactly what you mean. I want to tell you a story about what happened to me in the grocery store recently which got me thinking about how I really try to avoid admitting when I'm wrong.

She told me she was rushing to get into the checkout line at Whole Foods, after having come from one of those boot-camp-style classes at her gym, so she was feeling physically and mentally pumped up. She had to pick up a few things for dinner, it was getting late and she knew her family was waiting at home.

Jean was in such a rush to get her groceries and get home that she darted in front of a hesitant, slow-moving older couple to get a place in the express line.

But as soon as she won her place in line she glanced back at the couple, and thought, how bad of a person she was for cutting in front of this older couple.

When she looked at the couple, it became immediately clear that the woman was not well. She was wearing a bulky sweat suit and cap that covered what appeared to be thinning and bald patches of silver-flecked hair. Her hands clutched at the handles of the shopping cart, as if she was relying on them to keep her body from losing its balance. She raised one hand, holding a wad of Kleenex, and coughed into it.

The first thing that came into Jean's head, looking at this woman, was that maybe she is sick or even dying.



Her husband was a gentle presence by her side, touching her elbow to guide her forward, or to protect her from people barging in and around her -- like Jean.

Jean realized she was wrong in what she did, and she turned to the couple and said, "I'm sorry. I cut in front of you. That was really rude of me."

She stepped aside, and gestured for the couple to move ahead of her. The man nodded his thanks, and he and his wife shuffled forward. The woman coughed some more into her Kleenex.

Jean told me that as she continued to wait in line, there was a moment, when her eyes again met the man's. He gave Jean a quick smile. It seemed filled with so much – Jean wasn't sure -- sadness, forgiveness, shame?

Jean said, "I just knew that in that moment, his smile meant the world to me. It told me that perhaps my gesture had made a difference to him and his wife. Certainly, his smile made a difference to me."

She said that moment confirmed that she had done one right thing that day. Or one small right thing to correct the wrong thing.

We all err... as the 18th century poet said.

But that's not Kathryn Schulz's point. It's not about doing something wrong, making a mistake, it's more about knowing that we are not always right, and realizing that it's ok to be wrong.

We all know that people make mistakes, and we accept that in the abstract, but can you honestly say that your beliefs... what you believe day in and day out... in the present tense, are...or could be wrong? Can you think of anything that you are wrong about?

Schulz says that most of us don't like to admit that we are wrong, and typically think, that we are right about nearly everything, from the origins of the universe to how to load a dishwasher.

Schulz says we all go through life – and make decisions – in a bubble in which we know to be true... and she says that, as a culture, that is a bad thing.



She says it feels good to be right. How does it feel to be wrong? The problem is, if you don't know you're wrong – it feels the same as when you feel you are right. There's no difference. It's only when we recognize that we are wrong, do we feel embarrassed, ashamed or even like the bottom has fallen out from under us.

You remember the "Looney Tunes" cartoon featuring the Coyote always chasing the Road Runner? In almost every episode, the Coyote chases the roadrunner and the Coyote invariably ends up running off a cliff. You remember what happens... before the Coyote starts to fall...he freezes... at that moment in time, he doesn't know that he's wrong. But when he looks down, he realizes it, and that's when he starts to fall and you see the expression change on his face---to oh my God, I'm wrong. That's the realization moment. When we do something wrong, we don't know it until we find ourselves off that cliff. We may be already wrong, but until we realize it, we don't start to fall, like the Coyote. So, it's only when we realize we are wrong, does it change how we feel.

Now some of you learn about the realization of being wrong in elementary school. You turn in your homework thinking you are right about your answers, and then you get it back with the bad grade. That's when you realize that what you thought was right, was really wrong. Unfortunately some people learn from this that a bad grade means you're not smart... you're not responsible... you didn't study enough... you didn't spend enough time on it. Unfortunately, we learn this early on. And we learn that success is about not making mistakes. This isn't good because as time goes on, we become perfectionists, overachievers... we do everything we can to avoid making mistakes, and live in a world where we never want to be wrong.

And when we do get something wrong, we freak out because, according to Kathryn Shulz, that means there is something wrong with us.

So, we insist that we are right, and it makes us feel smarter. It makes us think that, our beliefs are right, and they reflect reality.

I would venture to guess that many of you sitting here know someone who thinks they are always right and would never admit to being wrong.



But being wrong is part of who we are. It's even in our tradition. Remember the story of the struggles between Jacob and Esau? The brothers didn't get a long, and Jacob ended up tricking his father and his brother, stealing away Esau's first born status and blessing. Jacob left the house after that and the two stayed enemies until many years later when the two were about to go to war. Jacob, on the eve of battle, prayed to God and comes face to face with an angel, who began to wrestle with him. Some say it was Esau's guardian angel. . .some say it was Jacob's conscience...Jacob wrestling with the fact that he was indeed wrong to steal his brother's birthright – and that he needed to admit that he was wrong. It isn't until he makes this realization that he and his brother, Esau, can truly reconcile, and Esau eventually forgives him. It first required Jacob to admit and realize that he was wrong.

What Shulz teaches us is that realizing and acknowledging that we are wrong ultimately makes us a better person. We would never learn, we would never grow, we would never broaden our knowledge base if we went through life thinking we were always right. Yet it's much easier to not admit our mistakes. It takes a lot of courage to say those words, "I was wrong."

You know who is really good at admitting mistakes... the Disney people. They admit they are wrong, even when they are not... it's part of good customer service. The customer is always right. Perhaps we should all be Disney team members. No, we shouldn't always take the blame for someone else's errors, but sometimes we take the blame on behalf of other people, because it's much better to admit that we were wrong, and made a mistake, then to pass the blame.

Kathryn Shulz says it's fun to be right. Unlike many of life's other delights such as chocolate, challah dipped in honey, going to the beach, going swimming, sitting outside on a beautiful day, or giving someone you love a kiss – being right does not access any of our biochemistry... our appetites, our adrenal glands, etc... and yet the thrill of being right is undeniable, universal and indiscriminating, says Shulz. We can't enjoy kissing just anyone, but we can relish being right about almost anything.

Of course, often we are right... very right. Look at the scientists who were right about their discoveries... chemists were right when they discovered medicines that cure us... computer techies were right about what the microprocessor could do... the writers of Star Trek were right



about typing on glass without a keyboard to enter data into a computer... I believe we call that an iPad now. Or the communicator that they used...don't we now call that a flip-phone?

These moments of rightness affirm our sense of being smart, competent and, in fact, keep us alive. In short, being right is imperative for survival, gratifying for our egos and overall one of life's cheapest satisfactions.

Yet, Kathryn Shulz's book is all about the opposite of that. If we relish being right, you can imagine how we feel about being wrong. We feel ashamed, embarrassed, and in some cases downright devastated.

But she says we are wrong about being wrong. That accepting our wrongness is a vital part of how we learn and change. Thanks to errors, we can revise our understandings of ourselves and amend our ideas about the world, broaden our insights and accept other people's way of thinking. It teaches us who we are.

Now, of course, not all wrongs are acceptable. We don't want the surgeon to be wrong when he or she picks up the scalpel; or the airplane pilot when they go throttle up, or the person who pays our salaries...unless it's wrong in our favor! But a doctor who accepts the fact that he or she might be wrong about a diagnosis is likely to be more inclined to hear other opinions. A pilot who thinks he or she is capable of being wrong at times, is open to a co-pilot re-examining the check lists!

Understanding our fallibilities can transform our worldviews, our relationships and most profoundly, ourselves. It allows us the creativity to reform our beliefs, reshape our views about ourselves, others and the world.

For the younger members of our congregation, getting a bad grade doesn't necessarily mean you're not smart. It may mean you need to rethink what you thought you learned. Learning that you are wrong is hard, but it does two things: it opens your mind up to new possibilities, and it changes your relationship with the people who saw it differently, and perhaps got it right.

Now, don't get me wrong. I'm not suggesting that it's okay to do poorly. It's not. But when you do something that you worked really hard to get right, and you get it wrong, don't kick yourself, learn from



it. Acknowledge that you're not always right, and learn now what is right in that particular instance.

That's one of the problems with testing and not showing you the correct answers...how will you ever learn from your mistakes?

For the adults among us, this is a huge social problem, according to Shulz. She asks us to think for a minute about what it means to feel right. It means that you think that your beliefs perfectly reflect reality. And when you feel that way, you have a problem to solve. How are you going to explain all of those people who disagree with you? Shulz says most people think about those people the same way.

First, we assume that the people who think differently than us are ignorant. That those people don't have the same facts as us, and once we give them the facts, they are going to see the light and come over to our team.

But when that doesn't work, and they still don't agree with us, then Shulz says we move on to the second assumption, which is, that they are idiots. They have all the same pieces of the puzzle that we have, but they can't figure it out the way we can.

And so the third assumption... after the first two don't explain it... is that the people who don't think like us, they're doing it because they are distorting the truth on purpose and are evil.

Think of what this does. It causes us to treat each other terribly. What happened to the holiness code?

A perfect example of this is what is happening in our political world. Half the country thinks they are right, and half the country thinks they are right. Somebody is not right. And it's gotten to the point that one side hates the other.

Perhaps if both sides thought they each could be wrong, they (we) could come to an agreement.

So, why this message on Rosh Hashanah? Because it's that time of the year again when we hold up a spiritual mirror to ourselves and reexamine our lives; reexamine our relationships, our journeys, our strengths and our fallibilities.



Where do we find the holiness in our lives? If we are made in God's image, then we accept our fallibilities in the same way that God does. Even God admitted being wrong by realizing in the story of Noah that God needed to start over – go back to the drawing board and recreate the world.

Hear the voice inside... hear the whisper...that should remind you that there is a vast universe out there being recreated each and every day. It is mysterious and complex and most importantly, none of us have all the answers... none of us are always right.

We can look back on the past... but no one can see the future. It can unfold in a myriad of ways. Open yourself up to endless possibilities and step out of that space of rightness into uncharted territory and consider saying, I don't know. Maybe I'm wrong. Shana tovah.