

Learning to be wrong

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I was working with a group on racial reconciliation, and I felt frustrated. I mostly listened, but then every time I spoke, the words coming out of my mouth were all wrong. And I'm a type-A, liberal, PC, white woman. I don't like to be wrong. I like to "get it" and secretly roll my eyes at other wrong people.

I talked with a colleague about that dread of wrongness. He was a white man who had been working with African-American communities on civil rights issues for decades. I confessed that I was worried about keeping up with acceptable words, how I didn't mean to micro-aggress, but it felt like I just *would*, no matter how hard I tried. "I just feel so stupid," I said. "I'm so worried that I'm going to say the wrong thing." I told him that I didn't want to hurt someone's feelings, but to be honest, it was more about my feelings. I didn't want to be the un-enlightened one people would scoff at over drinks later that night.

My colleague laughed long and hard and said, "Of course you're going to be wrong. That's the whole point. If you want to do this work, then you're *always going to be wrong*."

It was a small thing, an adjustment, like turning the oven down a few degrees. But then, when an African-American friend would lift her eyebrows at me, I didn't try to defend or explain myself. I didn't try those clever maneuvers designed to reinforce that *I wasn't wrong*, but *she misunderstood*.

Instead, I admitted guilt swiftly, laughed at myself, and asked, "Okay. Tell me. What did I just say wrong?"

She would laugh and tell me how wrong I was, and then she would enumerate ridiculous threats if I ever said that again. I would respond with, "I'm sorry. I'm a clueless white woman." After we laughed some more, we would go on with our conversation. And I found out that it was really easy being wrong. I learned a lot. I

quit worrying about protecting my delicate tiny ego, gave up on being the most enlightened person in the room, and embraced the fact there are a whole lot of things I don't understand, but I can try.

Thank God, I have really patient friends.

Of course, it's easy for me to see the transgressions with the men in my life. When I say something that is true about my personal experience as a woman, a man might argue with me, telling me that

It's not true, because I misunderstood.

It's not true, because I blow things out of proportion all the time.

It's not true, because he can name an exception to my statement.

I can see the defensiveness, the maneuverings, and the longing to just be *right*. But the thing is, he can't be right about my experience as a woman, because it is—by definition—my experience.

We live in a culture that does not prize humility. We don't like to say we're wrong or we're sorry, or we might become liable for something. But, as Christians, we're called to a different way—one of self-awareness and confession. One where we listen, and learn, and are comfortable with being wrong.