

Am I Right or Am I Right?

By the time I was 14, I was experiencing an existential crisis – the same one that all people of this age face – one filled with teen angst, anger, and frustration with the world. I was vying for my place in a world brimming with so many people, so many problems, so many big ideas and events. I was even contemplating the fear of the possibility that perhaps, I didn't fit in anywhere at all. Every person has a particular theme to their teen angst – mine was directed towards the patriarchy I was beginning to take more and more notice of – in my own school, where teachers so comfortably tolerated different behavior from boys versus girls, in my mosque, where people tried to dictate my own faith, and even within my family, when I noticed that my parents treated me differently than my brother. This made my struggle with adolescence even more awkward, because it turns out, after all, that it's not so easy to make friends when you're a post-modern feminist in junior high. Initially, I was very persistent with my beliefs, probably a little too persistent, declaring them everywhere and anywhere I found the chance – in the classroom, at family dinners, while spending time with friends – but after a while, the strange looks and the hurtful comments began to affect me, and in time, I began to fear one of the most destructive things a person can ever fear: I feared being wrong.

Although, for the most part, I have overcome that fear, from time to time, it still comes back to haunt me, like when I realize my worldview is fundamentally wrong, or when I realize I have hurt someone I truly care about. I fear these instances because they

mean that I am wrong, and in the culture that we live in, being wrong is viewed as the ultimate form of calamity and catastrophe, and we can see this taboo everywhere: in our hospitals, our homes, our relationships, our corporate world, and yes, even in the classrooms at this very university. In fact, the fear of being wrong is so pervasive it is the very subject of Kathryn Schulz's book titled, conveniently, *Being Wrong: Adventures in the Margin of Error*. In her book, Schulz discusses the fear of being wrong and expounds on its many forms, eventually making the crux of her argument that "error, even though it sometimes feels like despair, is actually much closer to hope" (338).

Because my adolescent fear was the fear of being wrong, the emotions coupled with being wrong are all too familiar to me – the cringing sourness, the shame, the guilt, the blaming, the backtracking, and the worrying. I even began thinking that if I could have any superpower, I'd like to read people's minds. That way, I could never cause anyone any harm because I would always know if I was ever wrong.

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Right now as I write this essay, and even as you read it, Malala Yousafzai sits in a hospital recovering from a bullet shot to the head. Malala is a fifteen-year-old girl from the town of Minorca, Pakistan, and she was targeted by the Taliban for voicing the apparently radical opinion that she and her female classmates have basic human rights, among them, the right to an education. We might say that Malala is right and the Taliban is wrong. In fact, we might even say that that Malala is definitely right and that the Taliban is definitely wrong, but a closer look would reveal that there is a deeper,

underlying phenomenon to this scenario. In defending their actions, the Taliban said that they targeted Malala not because she advocated for girls' education, but because she "oppos[ed] mujahideen and their war," and they have pledged to finish off the job in the future ("Malala Yousafzai deserved to die, says Taliban").

In essence, the Taliban is what Schulz would call "an insular group," and because of that, "they are highly dependent on reinforcement of their belief system from within. As a result, internal dissent can be deeply destabilizing" (155). In other words, the Taliban ensures that Pakistan has no forums for open discussions, no interfaith dialogues, and no political debates. What is proper and honorable has already been agreed upon by an elite group, and everybody else who is not so important had better agree with it.

From this perspective, we might say that Malala was not fighting for what was right - she was fighting for the right to be wrong, for the right to have an open discussion, for the right to banter back and forth, exchange ideas, and learn something new from the experience of someone outside of ourselves. The fact that we can be wrong means something good because it means that we are learning, that we are moving forward. If we were never wrong, today we would not have iPhones or Airplanes or Skype or the Polio vaccine because everything we invented a long time ago never needed to be fixed because there was nothing, well, *wrong* with it; there was never a reason to go back to the drawing board.

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My mother is a professor at the University of Pittsburgh. During the middle of the semester, she asks her students to offer feedback about her courses, and she asks me to create a database of all the comments and suggestions. As I began reading them, I became more and more furious, figuratively shaking my fists in anger at the students' responses. I could picture these students in my head, spoiled 20 something year olds having everything they could ever need – a family, a home, access to higher education, a source of income – complaining that the tests were too tough, that the pop quizzes weren't fair, or that they didn't like the specific way she made her powerpoints or wrote her notes.

They didn't know that my mother was watching her husband slowly die from cancer, a beautiful mind dwindled down to the basic capacities of eating, drinking, and sleeping. They didn't know the guilt she carried from not giving enough to her children or her job or her husband. They didn't know any of her struggles or her problems, and I wondered what they would do, how they would react, what they would think if they did know. I was so angry, I wanted more than anything just to show them how wrong they really were.

But that's when I stopped and realized that I was wrong. In the same way that they didn't know my mother, I didn't know them. For all I knew, one of these students or many of these students could have a father or mother dying from cancer, or they themselves could be dying from cancer. They could be struggling to make end's meets or

fighting to end an addiction. I didn't know the first thing about any of them and I was already angry with them, vilifying them. But the fact that I was wrong, or actually, the fact that I felt wrong, is a good thing, because it means that I was willing to looking at things from another person's point of view, a person who with different experiences from that of myself.

To Schulz the wrongologist, this is important because "the ability to let go of our own worldview long enough to be intrigued and moved by somebody else's" is about "letting love change us," and necessarily, realizing there is something about us that would be better if it were changed (272). I, with my own quirks, my penchant for writing, my love for warm weather and ear for political discourse, am not a product of myself: I am everyone who came before me, everyone who spoke to me, everyone who gave me an extra push or a word of advice. I wouldn't be who I am today if my mother hadn't pushed me to read books instead of socialize with friends or if I hadn't been able to truly experience what it meant to be an Egyptian. Without opening up my worldview, without opening myself to the possibility that I am wrong, to the painful feeling of being wrong, to listening and not just hearing, instead of talking, I wouldn't be where I am or who I am today.

In the end, I agree with Schulz because of one of the most captivating and memorable things she says in her entire book:

The miracle of the human mind, after all, is that it can show us the world not only as it is, but also as it is *not*: as we remember it from the past, as

we hope or fear it will be in the future, as we imagine it might be in some other place or for some other person.... Seeing the world as it is not is pretty much the definition of erring – but it is also the essence of imagination, invention, and hope. As that suggests, our errors sometimes bear far sweeter fruits than the failure and shame we associate with them. True, they represent a moment of alienation, both from ourselves and from a previously convincing vision of the world. But what’s wrong with that? ‘To alienate’ means to make unfamiliar; and to see things – including ourselves – as unfamiliar is an opportunity to see them anew.... (23)

That is the reason that Vincent Van Gogh looks up at the night sky and paints *Starry Night* and Picasso paints *Night Fishing at Antibes*. It’s the reason that, in my composition class, my professor hands out a sample of student essays, not because they highlight the *correct* way of writing, but because they show a different way of writing, a way that enlightens us, that opens up our minds to new ways of thinking, to new cultures, peoples, and places we may have never heard of or thought about.

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One night in Egypt, I was discussing my college plans with my Aunt Hoda and I told her that I was planning on moving to campus housing. She claimed that it was an Islamic sin for a woman to live on her own, and she was so outraged that she insisted on calling my father and consulting him on the matter, to which he replied, “Of course not. Why would you even think that?” To her, my moving away was evidence of me distancing myself from the family, our traditions, our culture, thereby threatening the thread that united us together. To her, I was alienating myself from a culture that is an integral part of who she is and what she values.

Both of these experiences, the moments I discovered feminism and struggled to make it a part of me, and the moments in Egypt where I spent time with people I barely knew yet who were so close to me, were moments of alienation, moments when I didn't know what to think or how to act, and they were strenuous times, but these experiences also gave me hope, because I was able to carry on through them, and because of that, I was awarded with the rich opportunity of learning to understand and appreciate a culture and a way of living that were so different from mine, yet played an integral role in how I define myself today.

Even though I often have trouble understanding a culture so different than mine, even though I often can't understand certain practices or beliefs, like why my Aunt Hoda thinks this way, or why my cousin Ayah can't leave her house whenever she wants, Egypt is still such a big part of who I am. If I close my eyes, I can feel what it feels like to walk down its streets, to drink *Aseer Asab* (sugar cane juice) to see its people in the streets and hear their conversations, to watch the soap operas and laugh at their jokes. It feels a certain way to be an Egypt, and that feeling is really heartfelt, a kind of warm and fuzzy feeling, kind of what it feels like to be home after a long absence. Alienation, even though it can be heart wrenching, is not so bad after all.

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Being wrong to me means hope because it means that even though I know I am fallible, I still struggle against the odds. I know that no matter how hard I study, inevitably, I won't understand everything, and I will be mistaken often, even when I

don't even know it. But I still try because the fact that I am getting things wrong and realizing that I am wrong means that I am learning. During my childhood, my father and I had a distant relationship. We didn't really see eye-to-eye on many issues, and I often felt that he resented me because of the cultural rift between us. It wasn't until after he died that I learned that my father kept his distance from me because he knew that he wasn't going to live for very long, and he didn't want me to deal with the pain of losing someone close to me. Being wrong means hope to me because even though I was wrong about my father, I am awarded with having the honor of knowing such a noble man, and moving forward with a newfound appreciation for life and incredible wisdom. Similarly, yet undoubtedly more powerfully, even though Malala knows that discrimination will always exist, that powerful, insular groups will always endeavor to wound other people, she still tries, she still risks her life, because the experience, the knowledge we will gain, is worth it all. Schulz's claim here, the claim that error is, essentially, what leads us to innovation is captivating because the feeling of despair that hits us when we realize that we are wrong is so strong and so powerful that we will cling to any source of comfort about the matter, and Schulz provides that in a way that is eloquent, powerful, and hopeful.