Op-ed Draft: Stop Being Right, Start Being Open

When people are scared or uncertain--challenged, attacked, or just vulnerable--they tend to shut down to the world. It's a natural human reaction. If we are under attack (or just feel like we are), we want to defend ourselves. It's risky to remain open to the world if there are potential threats in our environment. In the realm of discourse, this instinct often manifests in a curious behavior in our culture: when our values are under attack, we claim we are right.

Let's consider an example. Two friends are talking at a coffee shop, and one says, "I love this latte. Abortion should be freely available to all women." And the other replies, "I drink my coffee black. And abortion is wrong, except in cases of rape or incest."

We can imagine many directions the conversation might go from here. "(My) God agrees with me..., so go to hell" or "It's obvious that..., so I hope you have a pregnant teenage daughter" or the classic, very concise, "You're an idiot." But very few of these imagined responses--other than the conversation ending abruptly--take a form other than here's why I am right and you are wrong, and if you disagree with me, then you're going to stay wrong, and an idiot, in hell, forever.

Emotional disagreement about contentious issues is normal. What I find particularly curious about our cultural response is that when our values are questioned, we tend to counter with the claim that what we say is right or true. There seems to be a fear that if there are not indubitable, absolute moral foundations, we are all lost, drowning in a sea of moral foam.

In fact, in March alone, the *New York Times* published two op-eds about the great dangers of moral relativism, the belief that morals are not true or false but rather contextual or relative. As philosophy professor Justin McBrayer wrote in his piece, "Why Our Children Don't Think There Are Moral Facts":

"If it's not true that it's wrong to murder a cartoonist with whom one disagrees, then how can we be outraged? If there are no truths about what is good or valuable or right, how can we prosecute people for crimes against humanity? If it's not true that all humans are created equal, then why vote for any political system that doesn't benefit you over others?"

Indeed. If my son shoplifts at the grocery store and it isn't a logical or divine truth that stealing is wrong, then how can I discipline him, never mind with what instrument? If it is not a moral fact that rape is wrong, then can I greet my neighbor, a serial practitioner, with anything other than a cheerful good morning?

(A version of this argument is sometimes put forward against atheists--that without God to tell them right from wrong, they would all be hopeless criminals.)

I want to briefly suggest three things.

First, morals may be nothing more than a special sort of social norm; but this doesn't mean they aren't real and important. Philosophers have been debating the "reality" of morality for millennia. Are morals facts or opinions? If they are facts, by what means could we know them? How could we be sure? How could we prove it to others? And if they aren't truths out there waiting to be discovered but cultural beliefs grounded in contextual practices, what then?

Although I don't believe in Plato's ideal moral truths, this isn't the place to argue about it. Instead, I want to suggest that there is nothing wrong with morals being a special sort of social norm within human communities. We have many social norms--certain pieces of paper can be exchanged for objects we desire at stores; in this country, we drive on the right side of the road; and if parents ask, their baby is very cute.

What makes these norms happen, what births and maintains their existence, is some degree of communal acceptance. To take just one example, we don't drive on the right side of the road because god says so or because it's logically true, or because it's right. And while there are many differences between this social norm and ones we might consider moral, one commonality is that the norm exists, is operational, because enough of us believe it and act on it.

A second commonality is that if we want to convince others to share our point of view--on driving or abortion, whether we believe we are finding truth or participating in a socially-embedded norm--we need to appeal to shared values. This brings me to my second suggestion: it isn't helpful to claim that you are right, that what you say is true, and that your side is the good side.

For the record, neither is it helpful to claim that they are wrong, false, or bad. No matter the intensity of the disagreement, calling other people's positions wrong or false or bad tends to increase the shutting down and thereby reinforce the disagreement. If the goal is something more than verbal chest-thumping (not that that doesn't have its place), the hope is to bridge disagreement.

Therefore, instead of building up our own defenses or trying to obliterate the opponent, it is necessary to find some common ground. Then we have to move there from our well-fortified position and invite the other party to meet us. As Rumi wrote many years ago, "Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing, there is a field. I'll meet you there." To be clear, meeting means

more than starting from common ground to manipulate the opposition to one's own point of view. Meeting involves opening up rather than shutting down.

Thus, number three: when we are able to, opening up is a more promising response to ideological disagreement than shutting down--both for our own growth and for society's.

There is an insidious idea in our culture that being open to opposing viewpoints is to be weak or to lack integrity. People find it perverse to try to imagine how a murderer, a Wall Street thief, a terrorist, or a Tea Partier comes to behave as they do. Even worse would be to find that we share some common ground with them. (Because if we did, we might have to treat them as real people rather than puppets, caricatures, animals, or demons, and then what?)

There is a lot of tension and disagreement right now across a range of axes: race, gender, privilege, class, religion, politics. But whether in daily conversations on politics with a colleague across the aisle or radical attempts to understand the harmful behaviors of people far from us, opening up creates a lot more space for possibility than shutting down. To listen, to consider, to try to understand, and to converse with each other from the space we share--these are pathways towards a less divisive world.

I want to suggest that claims to be right, or to have found the truth, or to be on the good side--no matter by whom, for what cause, or at what volume they are voiced--do not hold the same promise.