



Advice: The Good the Bad and the Ugly

By Ginny Belden-Charles

"One day you finally knew what you had to do, though the voices around you kept shouting their bad advice..." From the poem "The Journey" by Mary Oliver

How often have you received advice that turned out to be bad advice? You know, like "Those bold striped pants look great on you!" or "Try the beet salad, you'll love it." Advice, good or bad, usually has more to do with the person delivering the message than the one receiving it. At its best, advice is delivered when the receiver is open to receiving. It prompts a pause, a questioning, and a mind shift that expands options and creates possibilities for more effective action. The problem with advice is that we give out so much of it without any of these things happening. Our advice comes from our own perspective (or need or insecurity), not from the perspective of the receiver. We tell people what we think or want them to do. We end up "shoulding" all over each other.

For example, I recently had a back injury that took about 8 months to diagnose. I was hobbling around, gathering data, visiting doctors, specialists, chiropractors, physical therapists, acupuncturists. Literally, there were times I couldn't sit down, couldn't stand up, and couldn't lie down. Initially I eagerly gathered every suggestion that came my way. And, I implemented them. I bought devices on the internet, I meditated, I tried a device that sent little electric pulses into other parts of my back. If you've ever had back pain, you'll understand how willing I was to try anything.

But as the months wore on, I started noticing something about the advice coming my way. Much of it I had heard and even tried before. In many cases, my well-intentioned family, colleagues and friends did not know my history or what I had already tried. As I became more expert in understanding my own condition, I needed less advice and a more focused medical solution.

It wasn't that the advice I received wasn't well-intended. It was. But here's the thing that became clear to me. The advice I was getting was so one-sided. My medical friends recommended pharmaceuticals, tests and surgery. The holistic and alternative health crowd recommended alternative care, like acupuncture and massage therapy. Anyone who ever had a backache recommended what worked for them. Most of the advice would go something like this:

WF (Well-meaning Friend): "I see you're moving kind of slow there, what's up?"

Me: "Well I've been having some back trouble lately..."

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WF: "Oh, that's awful. You know, when I had that....or "Jeez, I'm sorry, have you tried..." or "Gosh, that can be so painful. My brother had that and he got relief from..."

You get the picture. One question, expressions of sympathy and....they were off! Like horses out of the gate, people could not wait to share offers of help. Most of us do this; we do it all the time. We mean well, we want to help. The problem is, we don't usually take the time to expand that first little question of "how are you" to get a little more information. We just aren't that good at asking questions and listening to find out what someone has tried, what they are thinking or what they want from us.

We hastily offer what we know before we know the whole story. When we ask, we often learn that things are a little more complicated than they might have first appeared. There are mitigating circumstances. There are complications. Most of us, especially those of us who are adults and have been around awhile, have experienced a lot of well-intentioned advice that often feels a bit irritating, or downright intrusive. This kind of advice is a lot like the kind of "help" my husband Dan receives.

Dan uses a wheelchair to get around. He is self-sufficient and gets in and out of most places on his own; it just looks different from those of us traveling on two legs. In public he is constantly being asked if people can help him. Now my husband is six feet four inches, is a former wheelchair basketball star and has more strength in his arms than many people have in their legs. When he says "no", it amazes me how many people just continue to move in on him. They grab the handles of chair and try to push him, often endangering his balance during highly controlled transfers. Some don't even ask before they grab his chair. He's had little old ladies grab his groceries in the check-out line. He's been prayed over while getting into his car in the parking lot. Well intentioned? For my husband, this gets tiresome, and demeaning, and dangerous.

So, the point here is that we often don't spend enough time asking questions and really listening to the answer before we offer our "help". As an ace problem solver, I catch myself doing this with my kids all the time. Gratefully, they are now in their twenties and are able to stop me before I get in too deep. Years ago, my daughter offered me some unforgettable wisdom when we were talking about a tough time she was having in her life. She said, "I don't want you to tell me what to do. I don't want to hear about what you would do. I just want you to listen." Sometimes just listening can help someone find their own answers. Sometimes when someone is injured, it is really enough to just say, "I'm sorry you are in pain" and leave it at that. Sometimes our well-intentioned help becomes an obstacle on someone else's path.

In addition to listening, great questioning can help us find the solutions to our own challenges. The best questions help us sort out the facts from the story we've woven around them. They help us explore alternative perspectives. They help us dig deeply into our assumptions and beliefs. Again, my children have been my best teachers in learning how to be a better

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questioner. Ask the standard question “How was your day?” and 99% of the time I’d get a one-word answer: “Fine”. During their teen years, I had to get really creative to get my kids to talk to me. It seemed I went for weeks with only one or two words out of my son’s mouth during those years. It was painful. Out of desperation, I found I needed better questions, a listening ear, and a muffler on my “well-intentioned” advice. I realized I didn’t have the answers to the tough questions, i.e. “What should I do with my life?” I needed to find a way to stay in relationship and provide guidance as a parent. When I started listening and questioning, instead of trying to give him advice, he opened up. A little. It got much better when he hit his twenties..

Paradoxically, when we ask questions, go a little deeper and get more of the story, we often do have ways to help. There are times when we have an alternative perspective, a critical piece of information, or a life experience that might be useful. How do we can offer it strategically, in a way that it will be received? It starts with good inquiry. It is best given when someone asks or responds positively to an offer, rather than dumped out prematurely. We need to recognize and share from our own perspective or experience, and not assume that we have the answer for someone else. And recognize that, like the striped pants or the beet salad, what works for one might not work for someone else.

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