

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.” For example, I had a back injury that took about 8 months to diagnose. Literally, there were times I couldn’t sit down, stand up, or 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.

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. It wasn’t that they weren’t well intended. The problem is when we don’t take the time to expand that first little question of “how are you” to get the full story or learn what others want from us.

This kind of advice is a lot like the kind of ‘help’ my husband receives. Dan uses a wheelchair to get around. He is self-sufficient and gets in and out of places mostly on his own; but it looks different from those of us traveling on two legs. In public others are constantly asking him if they can help him. When he says “no”, it amazes me how many people just continue to move in with “help”. They grab the handles of his chair; try to push him, often endangering his balance during highly controlled transfers. For my husband this is not only irritating and demeaning, it can be dangerous.

How much of our well-intended advice is really a cover for working our own issues? When I am overly invested in someone doing what I think they should do, is that about helping them or about taking care of me? As an ace problem solver, I found myself falling into this trap with my kids as they got into their teens and twenties. I found myself wanting to influence them to meet MY needs, rather than to help them learn to find their own answers. I will never forget the wisdom my daughter once offered me during a conversation we were having about a challenge 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.”

When someone listens deeply, and asks me a question, the genuinely curious kind, not the kind that already has an answer imbedded in it, I find I learn more. The best questions help me sort out the facts from my story. They help me explore alternative perspectives and dig deeply into my assumptions. I find myself opening to other perspectives and unseen resources. I am able to find my own answers.