



## LOSING OUR HUMANITY: HOW DID WE GET HERE?

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Of all the things we are wrong about, this idea of error might well top the list. It is our meta-mistake; we are wrong about what it means to be wrong.

Far from being a sign of intellectual inferiority, the capacity to err is crucial to human cognition. Far from being a moral flaw, it is inextricable from some of our most humane and honorable qualities: empathy, optimism, imagination, conviction, and courage. And far from being a mark of indifference or intolerance, wrongness is a vital part of how we learn and change. Thanks to error, we can revise our understanding of ourselves and amend our ideas about the world.

—Kathryn Schulz, *Being Wrong:  
Adventures in the Margin of Error*

Once again, all you need to do is turn on the evening news (or your favorite online news feed, podcast, or social media outlet), if you're so brave to do that anymore, and you'll get a sense of how we're losing our humanity. Pick whatever topic, in whatever country, state, or city, and you'll see some stunning similarities. It's amazing to me how people are so eager to debase one another, call one another names, and call people's integrity into question. The media we consume is becoming more mean-spirited, less tolerant, and much less forgiving—and we as a species are following along.

How did we get here? It's been a progression, and I have a theory about it. As the world gets more complex and our connections to the world become more virtual, we seem to have retreated into our shells—where we can stand back and judge, criticize, condemn, be snarky, and name-call. It's a bit like the dynamic we experience in our cars, where many of us feel far freer to shout, spout expletives, and give angry, nonverbal feedback to those around us in other cars. We'd *never* do that (OK, some of us would) without the car around us (again, the shell).

The anonymity of web browsers gives us the same kind of shell—this one virtual—and we experience the same kind of dynamic.

We've become absolutely fixated on our need to be right about things, and somehow if we're perceived as being wrong, there's something wrong with us as individuals. Our identities are tied up in the ability to be perceived as being right.

Well, there's a TED Talk for that. I like watching TED Talks, and one of my favorites, by a woman named Kathryn Schulz, is called "On Being Wrong." Schulz begins her talk with a question for the audience. She asks, "How does it feel when you're wrong?" People in the audience shout out answers like "Embarrassing!" or "Frustrating!" or "Shameful!" She pauses, ever so slightly, and then says, "No, that's how it feels when you *realize* that you're wrong. How does it feel when you're wrong? It feels like you're right."

She's absolutely right. We don't know that we're wrong—we think we're right! Furthermore, we don't seem to question what we're saying. Often we repeat a post on Facebook, Twitter, or some "news

source” without checking. Whole websites (Snopes.com, for example) have been built just to debunk all the misleading, inaccurate, downright wrong information out there. Even when someone quotes Snopes (and other websites) as a rebuttal to a comment on a post, I find it fascinating the number of people who *still* want to believe that the inaccurate (OK, downright *wrong*) statement is right. We’ve lost our curiosity. We’ve lost our ability to discern and dig in. We don’t think critically, and we certainly have no patience to seek alternative viewpoints. Like Schulz says in her book, we are wrong about the whole notion of being wrong!

What are some examples of where we’ll continue to describe something that’s not true? How about these simple, relatively innocuous items: misheard lines from movies and TV shows. For example, the *Star Wars* character Darth Vader *never* said, “Luke, I am your father.” And *Dragnet*’s Joe Friday *never* said, “Just the facts, ma’am.” But, we think that both Darth Vader and Joe Friday said what we think they said, and we perpetuate the “wrongness,” believing we are right. It’s the land of “alternative facts.”

## WHAT'S RIGHT, NOT WHO'S RIGHT

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By the way, the dialog in *Star Wars* is this:

Vader: “Obi Wan never told you what happened to your father.”

Luke: “He told me enough! He told me you killed him!”

Vader: “No, I am your father.”

The need to be right—or to hang on to our perceived correctness (which may be proven wrong at some point in the future)—causes us to do some really strange things at times. Depending on our need to be right, when someone disagrees with us, a progression of three reactions and countering responses may occur:

1. If people disagree with us, well, our response might be that they're just ignorant. Let's give them “the facts” (as we see them) and then expect them to agree.
2. However, even after getting “the facts” from us, they may still disagree. “Yes, I see the information you've shared, but I still don't agree,” they might say. When that happens, we might say, “Well, you're just stupid.”

3. Then those people might say, “No, no, no. I have your information. I understand your information. But I still don’t agree with you.” The next reaction might be this: “Well, then, you’re evil.”

This three-step progression happens *every* day—on social media in particular. Have you ever posted a somewhat “controversial” Facebook status update? “What’s on your mind, Bob?” Have your post threads ever been hijacked by people with an ax to grind about a particular topic? First, they act as if you’re ignorant; you must not have the facts. So they give you the facts or try to convince you of their viewpoint. And you say, “No, no, no, I have the facts. I still disagree with you.”

“Well, you’re just stupid,” they say.

“No. I have the facts. I understand them, and I’m not an idiot.”

“Well—then—you’re *evil!*” When you become evil, you are to be eliminated, eradicated from the situation. Block, unfriend, snark. Sound familiar? All too familiar in my experience.

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It can get toxic quickly.

It gets toxic because we've lost our humanity, and that's because we're unwilling any longer to be able to be wrong in a situation. We're so wrapped up in this notion of being right that we can't see our own humility, our own vulnerability, our own "wrongness." If we can't see that in ourselves, how can we see it in someone else?

Again, watch Kathryn Schulz's video. She does a great job of making this dynamic *very* real. How does it feel when you're wrong? It feels like you're right. Are we willing to be wrong? Until that's true, we're unable to regain our own humanity.

### **Questions, Insights, Implications**

1. What are the causes behind our tendency to tend to render instant judgment without healthy curiosity?
2. What are your views about the acceptability of "alternative facts"?
3. Have you seen examples of the "ignorance, stupidity, evil progression" in conversations you've had with others?

Again, reflect on these questions, and allow yourself to be wrong and to be open to new perspectives. By doing so, you'll likely find new insights in the most unexpected places.