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There is nothing wrong with being wrong

Intellectual humility. This is a new and interesting term being studied by social scientists and popularized by the media in response to the current political climate.

Intellectual humility, according to Brian Resnick, a reporter at Vox, is “a method of thinking. It’s about entertaining the possibility that you may be wrong and being open to learning from experiences of others.”

Admitting being wrong is difficult for most people, for attorneys perhaps it is even more challenging. We see it globally when political leaders have opposing views all the way to a couple embroiled in a divorce.

It often feels more comfortable and intuitive to dig your heels in, instead of admitting that you may be wrong — the best example being children and the stubbornness exhibited by growing toddlers and teenagers. It is troubling to acknowledge these same behaviors can be seen in adults going through a divorce.

In a divorce, it is challenging to accept another point of view or a different suggestion, especially when it comes from someone the person no longer wants to be married to.

Andrew Griffin, a writer at The Independent, says this happens frequently “in interpersonal relationships, the minor squabbles we have with our friends, lovers and co-workers are often about relatively trivial things where we are convinced that our view of the world is current and their view is wrong.”

Intellectual humility is “a crucial tool ... for learning,” Resnick says, especially in a world where “technology makes it easier to lie and spread false information incredibly quickly.” It is so easy to trust the lies we see and hear through social media platforms.

When we are only seeing the worst in people it becomes especially easy to do. The people we

want to think poorly of are typically those we are in conflict with, like an ex-spouse. However, this way of thinking contributes to litigiousness and more hardship.

As lawyers, we can do better.

These are not our own divorce proceedings. Even if we are playing within the rules in a winner-takes-all approach, we are not doing our clients any favors.

Those who are “intellectually arrogant” usually recount “bogus historical events.” In the divorce process this can be detrimental. Resnick points out “we’re overconfident in our ability to remember.” Many conflicts that arise during divorce come from each person’s memory. When did things go wrong, whose conduct initiated the breakdown?

In the divorce context, one must not forget the proverbial saying it takes two to tango. More likely than not, both spouses contributed to the marital breakdown in some way. Nevertheless, divorcing couples spend months fighting over their recollection of events, instead of practicing intellectual humility and recognizing they both may be wrong.

Often more importantly, it doesn’t matter who is right or

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wrong. Again, it is a lawyer’s obligation to break that down and assist them forward to the end game rather than to feed the fire. We are considered counselors at law, and this is a gentle reminder of that.

Being intellectually humble during a divorce can be difficult because it requires us “to expose ourselves to opposing perspectives.” Cindy Lamothe, author of

COLLABORATIVE CONCEPTS



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“How ‘Intellectual Humility’ Can Make You a Better Person,” describes intellectual humility as “empathy with the emotions removed. And, like empathy, intellectual humility is about listening over talking — and then using what we hear to make our interactions more civil, more meaningful and more productive for all involved.”

A great lawyer will help the clients treat the divorce like a business transaction, by calming emotions to reach a settlement and move on more quickly.

Resnick explains people who score highest on “intellectual humility questionnaires are more

and financially and emotionally draining.

Resnick emphasizes, to practice intellectual humility, “we need environments where it can thrive.” We need to remember being wrong is not only expected, but acceptable. There is nothing wrong with misremembering. To move forward and make the smartest decisions, it is imperative we recognize when we have made a mistake.

The truth is, there is no reason to be nervous about failure.

“Adam Fetterman, a social psychologist at the University of Texas El Paso, has found in a few studies ... ‘the wrongness admitter is seen as more communal, more friendly.’” In sum, people perceive those who can admit wrongdoing, and practice humility, positively.

Choosing to be “intellectually flexible” allows us to gain more than we lose. Especially in a divorce process where loss is felt so intensely.

It is about being a better equipped human being, giving yourself and your clients tools and resources to make the world around you more positive by admitting you might be wrong and listening to other’s perspectives. It can simply help us and our clients live our best lives.

The author would like to thank law clerk Adeline Sulentich for her substantial contributions to this article.

To read more about intellectual humility, take a look at the following:

- Brian Resnick, “Intellectual Humility: The Importance of Knowing You Might Be Wrong,” Vox, Jan. 4, 2019, link.
- Cindy Lamothe, “How ‘Intellectual Humility’ Can Make You a Better Person,” The Cut, Feb. 3, 2017, link.
- Andrew Griffin, “‘Intellectual Humility’ Could Be Key to Becoming a Better Person, Scientists Say,” The Independent, March 17, 2017, link.