

WISDOM CIRCLES
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How Do I Relate To Authority?

“Question Authority,” says the ubiquitous bumper sticker. We are living in an age where the questioning of authority is almost reflexive. Institutions that, in previous times, were trusted and held in high regard, like governments, law enforcement organizations, organized religion, the education establishment, the medical establishment, and even the scientific establishment, are now questioned and often distrusted. Of course, each of the sources of authority has been shown, in recent years, to have betrayed the trust of the public in ways large and small. One need only think about the pedophile priest scandal and the Watergate scandal.

So what authority do we trust? Each of these institutions, and the people who make them work (or not) are vital to the functioning of our civilization. How do we live in relationship to them? Many today have answered that question by trusting only themselves, by being the authority themselves on almost all matters. There is great hubris in this. We need to understand that our knowledge is limited and that, like everybody, we are prone to bias and self-deception. We need to question authority in the sense that we shouldn't just uncritically accept what people in authority say. Skepticism is healthy here. But not cynicism. Every government official and law enforcement officer is not corrupt. Every teacher is not lazy. Every clergy person is not a hypocrite. Every health care professional is not in thrall to the drug companies. Most of the people in positions of authority, while flawed human beings, have generally good motives and want to do their jobs well and contribute to society. So question authority. They know things you don't.

Spiritual Exercise

This month, we have a writing exercise. Make a list of all the people in authority in your life. Some are people you know, like your boss. Others are generic people such as judges, police officers and the like. Still others are those who think they speak from a position of authority, such as religious leaders, current events commentators, and politicians.

Once you have listed everyone you can think of, go back over your list and star any that you greatly trust. Cross out those you hold with a great deal of skepticism or don't trust at all. Who are the rest? They are probably those who you trust conditionally, those you are willing to trust if they show themselves worthy. Reflect. What are the conditions that would need to be established so that you could trust these authority figures?

Questions for Reflection

Are you now, or have you ever been, in a position of authority? What was/is that experience like for you? Many leaders say that followers project all kinds of both positive and negative traits on them. Has that happened to you?

Have you ever been betrayed by a person in authority? Was this due to malice or error or a combination of the two? How did this affect you?

Words of Wisdom

The key to successful leadership today is influence, not authority.

~ Kenneth Blanchard

You can't make your kids do anything. All you can do is make them wish they had. And then, they will make you wish you hadn't made them wish they had.

~ Marshall Rosenberg

Unthinking respect for authority is the greatest enemy of truth.

~ Albert Einstein

What we really need to be understanding is that all of these things matter and they all stem from the fact that certain people live with power and authority and they want to maintain it.

~ Anita Hill

There are two kinds of [people] who never amount to much: Those who cannot do what they are told, and those who can do nothing else.

~ Cyrus H. Curtis

Power takes as ingratitude the writhing of its victims.

~ Rabindranath Tagore

But the fact that some geniuses were laughed at does not imply that all who are laughed at are geniuses. They laughed at Columbus, they laughed at Fulton, they laughed at the Wright brothers. But they also laughed at Bozo the Clown.

~ Carl Sagan

What you need is sustained outrage...there's far too much unthinking respect given to authority.

~ Molly Ivins

In religion and politics people's beliefs and convictions are in almost every case gotten at second-hand, and without examination, from authorities who have not themselves examined

the questions at issue but have taken them at second-hand from other non-examiners, whose opinions about them were not worth a brass farthing.

~ Mark Twain