

# WHY I CAN'T SAY ANYTHING WITHOUT BEING Interrupted?

This is the third in a series of articles about relationship communication – how it works, why it doesn't, and how to make it work in our relationships. Thank you for your feedback on my last article. Keep those e-mails and comments coming!

by Philip Mulford

Dear Philip,

Whenever I open my mouth my husband jumps in to "correct" me. It seems he disagrees with everything I say. Sometimes he'll interrupt me by saying, "It didn't happen that way." Sometimes he just takes over my conversation or finishes my sentences for me. Sometimes he finds fault with the way I've said it. I am sooooo tired of it. He makes me feel me uncomfortable saying anything within his earshot. I find myself avoiding him if we're in a social gathering so I can carry on a conversation without his "contributions." What can I do? When I bring it to his attention, he says I'm making a big deal out of nothing. He tells me he doesn't mean anything by it and that I shouldn't feel the way I do. He's a wonderful man in so many respects, but this is driving a wedge between us and it's getting worse. This is no way to live. How can I make him stop?

Kendra

Dear Kendra:

Thank you for your e-mail. You have described something we all do to each other from time to time, but in some relationships, like the one you describe, it's an all too frequent experience that doesn't wear well. In a previous article I discussed the impact of telling each other what to do, so I won't spend time here on that issue.

First, I'm going to talk about why we feel the need to "correct" each other. It's not right, but we all do it to some extent. We hear someone telling a story or offering someone information and we listen with a judgmental ear to decide whether the story/information is "correct" or not. If we deem it "incorrect" we feel an urge, a seemingly uncontrollable urge in some cases, to "correct" it. Where does that urge come from?

Here's what I think drives that urge. We each have a general sense of "the way things work" in the world. That sense comes from a variety of influences - our own experiences, the way we were raised, our genetic makeup, where we grew up, who our friends are, what we do for a living, our education, our political persuasions, our religious beliefs, to name a few. Call it our own "perspective" or "point of view." For the most part, we each think that the way we see things is the way things are. That sense gives each of us a degree of comfort as we go about our daily lives. That sense gets disrupted when we hear someone say something or behave in a manner that is inconsistent with our own "point of view." It challenges us personally. It can be very unsettling.

One day a while back, as I was sitting outdoors early in the morning preparing my notes for a presentation I was to give later that day on communication, an elderly man came out and sat down near me. We exchanged, "Good Mornings," and I

*Interruptions Continued on page 14*

then went back to my thoughts. Where we sat overlooked a marina; it was an entirely peaceful morning.

Not long after the man sat down two mallard ducks appeared. They both wore the distinctive fluorescent green plumage of the male mallard on their heads. Well, the old gentleman observed them for a bit and then said, "Looks like they're looking for their nest." I found myself speaking, before even consciously thinking, "I don't think so. They're both male." The old man responded, "Yeah, I guess you're right; the one is bigger than the other." How's that for a *non sequitur*? I was about to tell him they were carbon copies in all respects, that they could be twins, and anyway their green heads were the give away, when it hit me; he had his point of view and I had mine. Mine wasn't going to change his without an argument and maybe wouldn't change it even with one. It occurred to me that I could, if I chose, allow his point of view to exist while leaving room for my own. How? By simply acknowledging his.

And so I responded, "So you think the one is bigger than the other?" "Yep, I do believe so," he said. He soon advised me that they were probably looking for their "chicks."

That just about got me. I so wanted to inform him, for his own good, that baby ducks aren't called "chicks," but I held back. A moment later he was off. We exchange pleasantries as I smiled to myself about the gift of insight into the way we communicate that he'd just given me.

I considered what had driven me to contradict him without even thinking? If I hadn't been reflecting on the very nature of communication at the time, I probably would have continued to take him on – he was so wrong! He obviously needed help. Or did he? I so wanted to help the old man. Was I worried that he might embarrass himself in front of someone? Or was I afraid that he might be right? If he were right, that'd make me wrong! All my years of believing green headed ducks were male would be a lie. I would be so embarrassed. Who could I ever admit that to? My sense of duckdom couldn't accept

that possibility. Not that ducks are a big factor in my view of the world, but it's the little things, you know, that can really get to you. But what if we could all step back and give each other room to call ducklings "chicks?" Room to share our differing views of the world without argument? How would that work? On that particular morning, it resulted in unexpected insight and shared pleasantries. I could have become exasperated with his lack of mallard awareness. I was this close to straightening him out. But instead of challenging him further, we shared the morning peacefully.

If we all weren't so challenged by apparent contradictions and were able to be reflective, might we ask, "Why is that person's point of view

different from mine?"

Maybe we'd learn something new. Instead we often respond, without thinking, both outwardly by interruption or in our minds with thoughts like "He doesn't have a clue," as if the other person's point of

view is a threat to our own, to our very selves. If we could accept the differences we see and hear when interacting with each other simply as expressions of the other person's point of view - knowing that we each have unique points of view - then maybe we wouldn't feel so challenged by our differences. If we made room for our differences as normal and expected, then maybe we could listen and observe without the unsettled feelings that so often arise when we witness a different way of doing things. In certain relationships that's exactly what we do – at school for example, or on the job when being trained. In those cases we tend to be open to different ways of doing things.

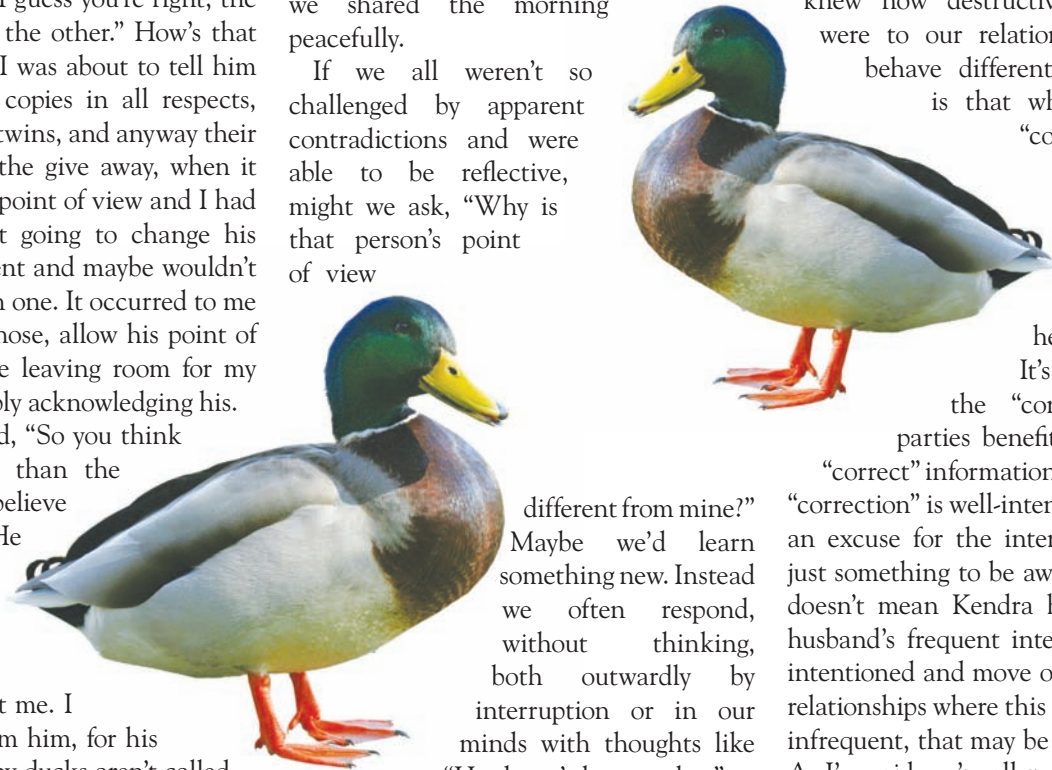
But too often in our personal lives we

adopt "our" way and it becomes "the" way. We consider our "point of view" to be the "Truth." Then if someone expresses a different point of view it can mean only one of two things; either we're wrong or the other is wrong. But we've been taught there's only one "Truth," right? And nobody likes being wrong, especially about our own, self-determined "Truths."

With respect to our spouses the urge to correct is often pretty powerful. Acting on that urge, however, can be destructive to our relationships, as Kendra has so well described. I believe if we knew how destructive such behavior were to our relationships, we would behave differently. The difficulty is that when we're in our "corrective" mode, we don't realize the damage we're doing. In fact, we think we're being helpful.

It's so "obvious" to the "corrector" that all parties benefit by receiving the "correct" information. And after all, our "correction" is well-intentioned. That's not an excuse for the interrupter's behavior; just something to be aware of. It certainly doesn't mean Kendra has to accept her husband's frequent interruptions as well-intentioned and move on, but for those in relationships where this kind of behavior is infrequent, that may be the best response. As I've said, we're all guilty of it from time to time.

I imagine we can all recall times when we have played the role of "corrector." (If you can't think of a past experience, watch yourself over the next few days.) But instead of interrupting and correcting each other, we can listen to each other so we can understand the other's point of view, especially when it's different from our own. There's absolutely no reason why anyone should share your unique point of view. It's yours and you are unique. But so is everyone else, including your spouse. If the message we give each other is, "I'll let you speak as long as I agree," then why speak? Why listen? As my friend Joe so eloquently said, "If we both think the same thing, one of us isn't necessary." Slowly but



surely our relationships, our marriages, that once thrived on our curiosity with each other's differences will become stagnant and suffocating because we won't allow each other to think, feel, live, and grow unless it fits our own perspective. One of us may become unnecessary.

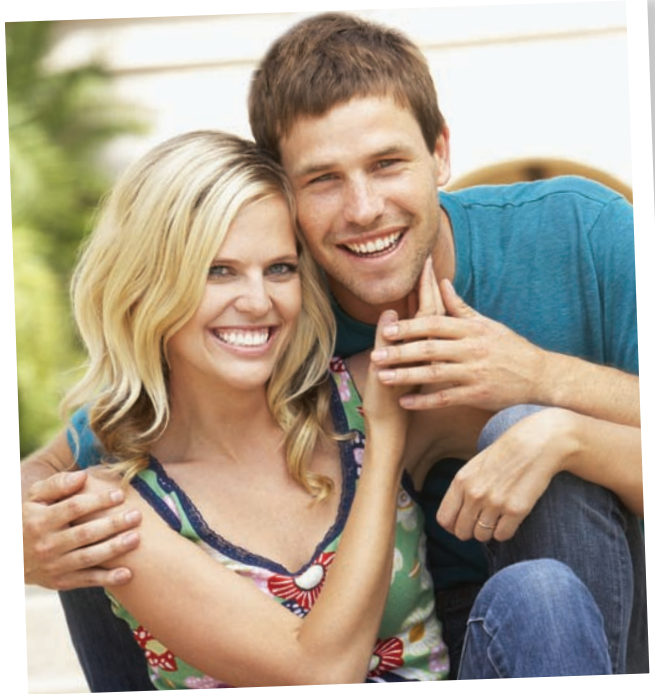
So what can be done for the interrupter? Perhaps a different mindset would help. The interrupter is only expressing the interrupter's point of view. It does not have to change yours, unless you choose. If the interrupter insists on interrupting, you can yield and then acknowledge the interrupter's version by repeating it to him. Then ask if he'd be willing to hear your point of view. You can also ask the interrupter if he likes being interrupted. The answer and the resulting awareness of the unacceptable behavior can be very powerful. (But be prepared, you might get a smart aleck response like, "I don't mind being interrupted if I'm wrong!" to which you can answer, "Well, I don't like being interrupted. When you interrupt me it makes me feel like you don't care about me.") And remember, he's likely interrupting because he's afraid his point of view, being different from yours, is wrong. So it may help to suggest when interrupted that you know he has a different point of view, but that you'd like to finish your thoughts before hearing his. Interrupter, you're not wrong in your point of view, but neither is the one you interrupted. Your two truths, and the truths of all those we come in contact with, can co-exist peacefully and simultaneously. Your different point of view is not wrong; it's just yours. Agreement is a funny thing. Don't let it get in the way of your relationship.

So stop with the interruptions. Allow your spouse to speak freely. Listen to his or her point of view. It's not a threat to yours. You may be surprised at what you don't know about your spouse, but most importantly, eliminating the habit of interrupting will do wonders for your marriage.

Once a practicing attorney, Philip founded Mulford Mediation in 1990 and has mediated professionally for over 20 years. With offices in Fairfax and Warrenton, VA, Philip specializes in marriage, divorce, and family business mediation and communication. Philip may be reached at [pmulford@mulfordmediation.com](mailto:pmulford@mulfordmediation.com) or at 540-341-4615. For more information about Mulford Mediation, please visit [www.mulfordmediation.com](http://www.mulfordmediation.com). In addition, Philip and his wife, Lisa, are the creators and co-hosts of a weekly radio talk show called Communication360 where the topic is relationship communication. The show, with over 170,000 listeners per month, is available on the air at WWPR 1490 AM in Sarasota-Bradenton-Tampa and on the internet at [www.webtalkradio.net](http://www.webtalkradio.net). All shows are archived and can be listened to on demand or downloaded. For more information about Communication360, please visit [www.C360today.com](http://www.C360today.com).



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