



HEART WARMERS

Counselors Dream in Gray

By Jeni Janek

My husband once told me, “I could never be a counselor. You don’t take sides well.” I didn’t really think much of that statement until I realized that he was saying something about my approach to solving problems and that I wasn’t a “black-and-white” thinker. And the funny thing is that I used to be. And along with that came times of being overtly and blaringly opinionated; not knowing or understanding the full breadth of the destruction that words can have when they come flying out with little consideration for where they land. The recklessness of youth sometimes means the sage and wise “filter” is not nearly as well defined or developed for how to engage others on moral debates (among other things).

But as I aged (and gained more understanding of how powerful our words and actions are), combined with my training as a counselor; I realized that he was probably right. Though I make my share of mistakes and often step on my tongue with a clumsy disdain, I find that often my focus in particular situations is not to take sides if I don’t have to. Oh sure, I have my opinions and beliefs and stay pretty much grounded in them. But I really don’t want to use them to beat or belittle others. And when working with two parties who are in an unresolved conflict, I strive to see both sides and try to help them reach a facilitated resolution, and not force my opinions or beliefs on them. I don’t live in the black-and-white as much as I do in the “gray”.

Sometimes, this is to my detriment. I’ve been accused of being indecisive, or irresolute, or even indifferent when none of that is true. Cautious is perhaps a better adjective. Calculated is even better. But I’ve learned that as counselors, we do look for ways to help others that have the highest degree of positive impact for the maximum number of people involved. It’s basically Steven Covey’s “win-win” philosophy.

Working in this fashion can be taxing, and it’s hard when you know that there are sides to take in this world, in our workplaces, and even in our homes. But for every “for” side, there is always an “against”. And not all scenarios, environments, or people are going to fit all definitions or all judgments about them. Quite often, when we think we know the whole story, we find in the end that we really don’t (or at least I know I haven’t).

Just about the best we can hope for as counselors is the understanding that we band together and find comfort in simple things on days when we are dealing with issues that may seem black-and-white, and we really can’t come down on either side without destruction or negative consequence. Save the *absolute* for the handful of things in life for which it applies and be open to the things that may have varying degrees of right and wrong, of up and down, or good and bad. In a world where many things can be categorized by color, if you mix them all up they eventually turn gray anyway.