The One Degree of Separation Principle in Advocacy Work

By Gloria Young

"Who is to the right of you and who is to the left of you?" can evoke different feelings. Think about it: there is the **left–right political spectrum** and there are Bible references including **sheep to the right and goats to the left.**

I came to see who is to the right of you and who is to the left of you from a different perspective. Several years ago, I was giving a talk at a leadership gathering in San Francisco. Within the professional context, one of the exercises was to encourage attendees to recognize that the person sitting to the right or left of them could be the very person who could make a difference and add value.

This exercise appears counter-intuitive to many. In the professional arena we tend to want to get to know leaders or influential people in the field, while excluding others. The reality is that the person to the right of you or to the left of you may be the person who can help connect you to the influencer you wish to meet. How often do we have a sense of "A-HA" when we spend time getting to know the person right there in our immediate presence? Being aware, being present, being attentive to accepting, and taking into our being the ones closest to us can make a significant difference in advocacy work.

Have you heard of the **"six degrees of separation"** principle? It claims that everyone is a maximum of six mutual connections away from someone else. I take this idea further. There are times when we are only **one degree of separation** from someone! We are closer to one another than we think. We are all directly or indirectly connected. But will we quiet our spirits, pray for discernment, and be attentive to what God might be doing in our midst to make divine connections and appointments?

New Wine Director Dr. Paul Louis Metzger wrote about this "who is to the right and left of you" principle recently: "Jesus took note of those around him and welcomed them, no matter their status or significance, to participate in God's kingdom reality. As Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 1, not many whom God has chosen are great by the world's standards. Jesus didn't look to Caiaphas, Herod, or Pilate to advance God's kingdom mission. Nor did he make efficiency king. What about us?" [1]

Dr. Metzger has used the story of who is to the left of you and who is to the right of you in various ways over the past several years, including at New Wine, the university, his writing and ministry projects, and advocating for his son Christopher on a daily basis. You can also draw upon this principle in your own life and work.

The point I made during that talk several years ago was to recognize the need to be present with those you encounter. Little did I know that I would have the opportunity to help a few people apply it immediately following the presentation. A couple of individuals came up to

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[1] July 2024 New Wine Director's report

ask me to help connect them to particular influencers who could provide opportunities for them in their professional pursuits. They thought I was the closest connection to these influencers. To their amazement, I pointed out that, literally speaking, those sitting to the right and left of them at the gathering were better placed to help them make those very connections to the influencers they were hoping to meet.

In our advocacy work of various kinds, we need to be attentive to this **"one degree of separation"** principle. In New Wine's bridge-building work of advocacy, we are committed to looking for the person of peace who may help us make the connections to reconcile people and groups that are at odds or at war with one another. In fact, the person who can be the best reconciling agent might not be the most prominent or have the most prestige and influence. We just might find that the person we least expect to be the person of peace to help build that bridge is immediately to the right or left of us. God works in mysterious and surprising ways. Are we attentive to God's own unique and extra-ordinary forms of networking that often emerge in our immediate surroundings among ordinary people in grassroots ways?

I have dedicated much of my life in city government, business, and Christian non-profit work to helping people network relationally and in ways that might appear counter-intuitive to the majority of people who are engaged in advocacy work. However, relational networking that involves looking for immediate, grassroots connections with others in advocacy work can often make a greater, more far-reaching impact than if we only or primarily pursue distant connections with people in positions of power. In such cases, there are no degrees of separation. The person to the right or left of us just might become the point of connection!

If you wish to learn more about this principle and how to practice it, please reach out to me. We at New Wine are committed to helping people look for those to the right and left of us who may be the very people of peace who will assist us in building relational, reconciling bridges through Jesus in our increasingly polarized culture.

You may contact Gloria Young at the following email: gyoung@new-wineskins.org.