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When ‘Wrong’ may be Right: In Praise of Stubbornness

By David James Poissant
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(Photo by Shelby Miller at Unsplash)

I have been tying my shoes the “wrong” way for over 30 years.

Let me explain: I’m in kindergarten, and our teacher is teaching us to tie shoes. I don’t get it. I can’t do it. I try the floppy cardboard foot with the laces woven through. I try my own shoes. Either way, the rabbit won’t go around the tree or through the hole, or whatever it is the rabbit is supposed to do. Either way, the laces won’t tie. My teacher chides those who get it wrong, and I don’t want to be chided.

Then, it hits me. I don't have to tie my shoes my teacher's way. I just have to make it *look like* I tied my shoes her way. I tie a knot. I make two loops. I knot those loops, and, voila, laces tied.

Decades later, my fraud would be vindicated when a scientific study, "The roles of impact and inertia in the failure of a shoelace knot," (I swear I am not making this up) would prove once and for all that the way we're taught to tie shoes as children is careless, inefficient and leaves laces prone to loosening. My impromptu method, devised to avoid getting yelled at by an impatient teacher, turned out to be the smarter, more efficient method after all. Sometimes stubbornness isn't such a bad thing.

I'm talking about the times your method isn't wrong, merely different, when different can be a good thing.

First, though, let me define my terms. When I say stubbornness, I'm not talking about ambition, grit or the many characteristics under the umbrella of perseverance for which most people already hold the utmost admiration. Nor am I referring to the kind of stubbornness surrounding strict adherence to a suspect or outdated tradition, times when the stubborn individual might be better served by evolution. No, I'm talking about the need, at times, to fly in the face of unfounded tradition. I'm talking about resilience when you're waiting for the world to catch up with your way of thinking. I'm talking about the times your method isn't wrong, merely different, when different can be a good thing.

Maybe shoelaces are a silly example. Here are some better ones:

Swedish pro golfer Jesper Parnevik, one of the finest golfers in the world, freely admits to holding his clubs all wrong.

"My knuckles go white," he says in an interview with *Golf* magazine. "I've putted with a glove forever, but I've worn putter grips all the way down to the metal. That's a little weird." *Weird* may be the word, but that weirdness hasn't kept Parnevik from netting over \$15 million in career earnings on the PGA Tour.

Or consider iconic painter Frida Kahlo. As art historian Gannit Ankori points out in *Imaging Her Selves: Frida Kahlo's Poetics of Identity and Fragmentation*, Kahlo, in her lifetime, was known mostly as the eccentric wife of painter Diego Rivera. She died unappreciated and virtually unknown outside of Mexico before several books and retrospectives resurrected her work and shined a long overdue spotlight on her art. But living in Rivera's shadow didn't keep Kahlo from completing a staggering 143 paintings before she died at the age of 47.

Parnevik and Kahlo are outliers, you might argue. Consider, then, something that most of us do most days: type.

Numerous experiments, including Finland's Aalto University study "How We Type: Movement Strategies and Performance in Everyday Typing," have shown that self-

taught typists can type just as fast with as few as six fingers as professional typists, trained under the traditional touch-typing method, who type with 10. What matters, in the end, isn't the "best" method but muscle memory and commitment to a single typing style.

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Stubbornness, of course, is risky. There's the risk that holding your club your way will injure your back. There's the risk that you'll paint your way into obscurity. There's the risk that you'll type your way and flunk that typing-speed test. Always there's the risk that your way is not the better way, that things are one way for a reason, that you're making things harder for yourself than they have to be. Always, always there's the risk that you're wrong.

As leadership consultant Muriel Maignan Wilkins points out, stubbornness carries with it the risk of Pyrrhic victory. Proving a thing *can* be done your way doesn't necessarily prove your way was best. In short, if you're stubborn about everything, you're doing stubbornness all wrong. As Wilkins notes, there are times when it's far better to listen to others, synthesize ideas, consider tradition, stay flexible, compromise, and even admit when you're mistaken.

My point, then, is simple but no less profound for being so, I hope. Despite platitudes and T-shirts, movie quotes and what passes for wisdom these days, there's rarely one right way to do a thing. Where a prevailing method reigns, there are nearly always practitioners achieving at high levels in opposition to the dominant or "best practices" methodology.

In other words, just because there are many ways to do a thing *wrong* doesn't mean there's only one way to do a thing *right*. And sometimes *your* way is just waiting to become the *new* dominant way of doing a thing, as when American athlete Dick Fosbury, dismissed early on as the "world's laziest high jumper," won the 1968 Olympic gold medal with his signature "Fosbury Flop" and changed the face of the sport forever.

All of which is good news for me. After all, at 40 years old, I only use seven fingers to type, and I still tie my shoes my way.

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