

Why You Might Be Listening to the Wrong People

My life has been relatively public over the past few years. Sometimes I feel like I (and my family) live in a fishbowl with the rest of the world watching. During Steve's battle with ALS, the number of eyeballs looking into our world multiplied exponentially.

The great part about that is it created an army of pray-ers who truly helped to get us through that treacherous season. The challenging part was that those looking in often had opinions about how we should fight, treat symptoms, pray, believe, speak and live. Opinions aren't bad, but it's impossible to listen to all of them.

My blog readership during that time of our lives varied from 10,000-10 million. Literally, *million*—not the figurative way I usually use it like “I would like to have a million donuts for breakfast tomorrow.” Again, I'm so thankful for the concern that was expressed and the care shown, but along with it came a lot of feedback that initially shook me to my core.

I found myself investing precious time and resources responding to emails of people I had never met or hadn't spoken to in 20 years, defending our treatment choices or any number of other things. Honestly? I regret every minute I gave to that pursuit. It was entirely unsatisfying and completely unnecessary.

After Steve died, I began facing my new life as a widow and a single woman, and I made the very intentional decision that I would not steer my choices toward the cheers or away from the jeers of the crowd. I would invite a few wise and trusted voices into my life, I would tell them everything and give them permission to tell me anything. I would then weigh their

counsel together with what I felt the Holy Spirit was saying and I would move confidently in that direction. That is what I have done. I am the one on the field; the only one with the responsibility to actually live out my life in a way that honors God and blesses the world. There are coaches around me who give input—but they are not on the field. And there will always be people in the cheap seats and they are also not on the field, but—wow—they can be pretty dang loud.

These good souls have strong opinions and some of those opinions are built on truth, some on their own experience, some on pure fiction. I could spend a lot of time weighing out the motives of the shouters, I could investigate all their claims, I could stop the action on the field and shout back to them to make sure they understand why I'm doing what I'm doing and how there are so many things of which they are unaware.

I could tell them that I really am open to instruction and wisdom, and my life is absolutely lived in accountability relationships to good people, just not to all people. I could go sit with them a while and try to convert them to my way of thinking in an attempt to protect my public approval rating. But that sounds exhausting and unproductive and very much like defending the game rather than playing it.

Instead, I've decided to let the cheap seats be the cheap seats. They have opinions, and that's fine. Their opinions may even turn out to be better than mine, and that's also fine. Jesus is at work in me and He's not dependent on me getting everything right in order to make my life truly good. I can trust Him, and the people He's put in my life—and so can the people in the bleachers.

If you also have been swayed by the roar of the crowd, I have a few tips for living true to yourself and your God:

1. **Identify the voices of influence in your life.** Pick a few friends who you will trust with your heart and whose

advice you will welcome. How many? I don't know. More than 1 and less than 20 maybe? I really don't know. I have different coaching crews for different areas of my life, but the weighty voices around me number about a dozen. As I began dating, I invited four women—one who knows both of us—to speak into the entire process, no holds barred. And they have. And I value them more than I can say. I made the decision that unless they all agreed, I would not move forward. I don't think that's absolutely necessary for everyone, but I'm glad I had that level of security moving into a new relationship.

2. **Write down the names of your people of influence.** See that list? Draw a circle around it. Seriously—draw the circle. You need it, because everyone outside that circle? Cheap seats. These are not cheap people; they're mostly wonderful and valuable—they just have faraway seats. You'll still hear those voices, but you won't give their opinions the same weight because if you let everyone tell you who to be and what to do and how to do it you will lose your ever-loving mind and you will become unstable in everything you do. If someone from outside my circle expresses an opinion that is particularly intriguing or worrisome to me, I run it through the names inside the circle. I don't try to figure it out on my own. And so far, that process has worked like a dream, and the cheap seats comments have always been tossed.
3. Perhaps the most important thing I've learned in dealing with the Cheaps is to become really, really aware of the fact that for most people, I'm in the cheap seats, too. The more you focus on the way you shout your opinions (even inside your own head, because you know you do) and the more you realize: *Hey, I can just be wildly encouraging here because I don't have to answer for the way that person plays their game*—the more you'll know how to respond to the weird words that are flung your way.

This has been my year for learning how to love unconditionally and encourage relentlessly, knowing that even if someone is veering wildly off track, I'm too far from the action (and, alas, not omniscient) to give meaningful correction or to understand what's happening behind the scenes. When I can't cheer on their decisions, I mostly just cheer the fact that I know the One who is crazy about them will be there if they screw it all up, just like He's been there when I screw it all up. This is my comfort: We don't have to be perfect to be loved and accepted and encouraged.

I've always said my life goal is to make Jesus proud and famous, but hidden inside that was a third idea—that if I did that just right, people would like me, and I am a huge fan of being liked. I like it almost as much as I like donuts and cute shoes. But as I'm beginning to die to the need to please all the voices. I have come newly alive to the voice of the one who holds the world and my world in His hand. I am unendingly grateful for the way He uses the human voices in my life to speak direction and wisdom and joy to me. And I'm thankful for those far from the action—cheering or jeering—because I know God uses them to build my character and to refine my obedience to His will.

And He is doing that. I will trust Him with you if you will trust Him with me. {eoa}

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