

LABELING

By Gary L. Richardson, noted trial lawyer and author of *Black Robe Fever*, *Fear Is Never Our Friend*, and *Thank God They Ate the Apple*.

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I have advocated for years that we become our own best friend. For example, when I was in the motivational business I learned that we often allow "junk" that we wouldn't allow on the carpet in our living room to be put into our mind and emotions. Part of being our own best friend is to protect our mind and our emotions from input that works against what is best for our lives. I don't mean refuse to be challenged in things we believe to be true and close our minds to those things. What I mean is to disallow stuff that from the outset has no value to us intellectually or emotionally.

As an example, I never have watched a "horror" movie. What could we possibly benefit intellectually or emotionally from such fare that makes us more informed or more emotionally healthy? I've asked this question many times and never have had anyone come up with a good response, even by their own evaluation.

One of the ways I have seen over the years that a person isn't his or her own best friend has to do with what I refer to as labeling. That is, allowing others to do you harm by placing labels on you that are often negative and then you buying into the label. I say that even positive labeling can be harmful when it is nothing more than "flattering" you and causes you to get off base by thinking of yourself as more than you are. Giving you a "big" head, as we have often heard. How many times do we hear this happen and quite often, buy into it? For example, someone says, "You are always late." Well, to begin with, we know that no one is "always" late. Thus, we know this isn't an accurate label. The problem is that once a person has been "labeled," it is quite typical that the person lives up to the label.

When my wife and I started dating I learned that her family had labeled her as "always late." I said to her that her family, obviously without thinking of it, had done her a disservice. Plus, the fact was that she wasn't "always" late. So I started telling her family that I didn't find it to be true that she was always late, even though I did notice that when it came to her family she was more often late than otherwise. Why? She was labeled and this gave her a reason to be late. She intuitively knew that being on time wouldn't change

the "label;" it would simply be looked upon as an anomaly. We have been married five years and now I never hear her family put that "always late" label on her. Guess what she has as a new label. She is generally "on time." It isn't unusual that people conform to the labels that others place on them.

One of the "biggies" here is labeling yourself negatively. Here's a prime example. I have a golfing buddy who always refuses to drive the golf cart, explaining that he "drives people crazy" that ride with him. How did he know this? Because he had been told this over and over again. Now in this case, it most probably was an appropriate label. So I challenged my friend, asking if he understood why it was that he drove people crazy that rode with him. In other words, did he know what it was about his driving that caused this reaction from those that rode with him? He said he did. I then challenged him to consider working on improving his driving skills and see if he couldn't change his "label," preferably to one that didn't contain the words "drives crazy." He was intrigued and said he would. I also explained that when he began working to improve his driving, that he would find that it would not only would serve him well in how he drove a golf cart, but that he would find that when he went to work to improve one area of his life that it would automatically cause him to develop in other areas. It will!!!! This conversation occurred only recently, so the ending to my friend's story is not yet known.

Sometimes we hear a spouse label the other spouse by saying, "You don't care what happens to me." This we know, in most marriages, even those wherein this is said, that it isn't most likely true. Right? But, it's negative labeling of a spouse and this type of thing will lead to a destruction of a marriage. On the other hand, if a spouse, while upset, says, "I sometimes feel like you don't care what happens to me." That IS NOT labeling. It is simply stating a feeling, which we are all entitled to, right? It doesn't mean we are right if we say that; it just means that "right now" that is how I feel. See the difference? If you have read my article on "Absolutes," you know that my position is that there are FEW absolutes. Maybe 1% of the absolutes that are stated are actually absolutes.

Now, on the other side, there are times that someone labels you with an absolute and it is such that it causes you to pause and realize that even though it isn't an absolute (such as "You are always late"), you can see how someone might think that since you are late so often. When that happens it is time for us to "take stock" and go to work doing something about that, and

the best way to see that person's label of you change is to respond by saying, "You know, I can see why you might say that and I am going to go to work on changing that in hopes that you may no longer see me that way." Then pose the question, "Will you show me some grace as I work on this?" The point is, don't fight against what you know someone truly believes to be the case based on their experience with you, particularly if it is a friend, spouse, or someone else that you know has your best interest at heart. This brings real growth. Honesty with yourself and others is the best route to take when trying to build relationships or to keep relationships.

On occasion we are around someone that is labeled negatively by someone else and instantly the person being labeled negatively joins in with the labeling. For example, someone says to another, "You are stupid," and the person to whom this is said replies, "You are right; I am stupid." Again, this is different than telling someone, "What you just did was stupid." This comment is not considered to be labeling. This is about this one thing. Big difference. We all sometimes do something stupid, but that is a far cry from meaning that we ARE stupid.

One of the saddest things we see is when parents wrongfully label their children. Guess what. That will be a beginning of that child becoming what they have been labeled. It just works that way. Not always, but why even take the risk that it could? Makes no sense, agree? I think also, when talking about children, that we can see how labeling in a positive way that is not merited can mislead a child and cause him or her to either believe it and start acting it out, or cause the child to try to become what he or she was labeled and lose touch with who they really are. Many of us have watched what happens to a lot of young girls that get into beauty pageants. Many of them are "pushed" into the pageants because the Mother is trying to live out her life through her daughter. It often can become very frustrating to the daughter and often get a young girl off base with who she really is. I could say an awful lot about this subject since my wife and I once owned a state beauty pageant franchise. We saw the results of a lot of unmerited labeling during the years we had the pageants.

Bottom line: NEVER accept a negative label that someone is trying to put on you unless you have serious thoughts that they may have a basis for thinking such, and then respond as I have said in this article. NEVER negatively label yourself unless there is a basis for it, such as my friend and his driving his passengers crazy who rode with him in a golf cart. Then set

out to do something about it. Be very careful about even accepting "positive" labels as they can cause us to work at being something we aren't and often don't even want to be, other than trying to live up to the label so as not to disappoint the one doing the labeling. There is a Scripture right on point with much of this. It says, "Flattery is a form of hate." Think about it.

Remember, the best route to take is not to be guilty of negatively labeling others, be they friend or foe. It most often is more about us than it is about them when we do. It speaks volumes.

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