

"Stay Out of It!"

Allan Pole



Theme: Be careful where you poke your nose.

Text: Proverbs 26:17

Here's a thought: A Polish proverb counsels, "Not my circus, not my monkeys."

Watch "Pink Panther - Peter Sellers as Clouseau, 'Does your dog bite?'" video clip at www.youtube.com/watch?v=ui442IDw16o. "The Pink Panther Strikes Again" (1976) stars Peter Sellers as Inspector Clouseau. This memorable question, "Does your dog bite?" provides a valuable lesson. If you, like I, have ever been bitten by a dog you know how attempts to be friendly with what you think is a harmless animal can result in being treated like a chew toy. I have not only been bitten by a dog, but I have been bitten by *people* that I have tried to befriend and help.

It appears that King Solomon had been bitten, or at least observed someone else being bitten, before he wrote Proverbs 26:17, "Like one who seizes a dog by the ears is a passer-by who meddles in a quarrel not his own." NIV

The New Living Translation expresses Proverbs 26:17 as "Yanking a dog's ears is as foolish as interfering in someone else's argument."

Before you get involved consider:

The Definition of Meddling

The Dangers of Meddling

The Definition of Meddling

Excuse me,
here's your
nose.

I found it in
my business.

Solomon uses a powerful word picture here in Proverbs 26:17: imagine a man walking along, passing by a door where two people are quarrelling, bursting through the door and trying to stop the fight. Instead of calming things down, however, the flames get hotter and the anger turns on him. Such a person is like one that takes a dog by the ears; which are short, and difficult to be held, and tender; and therefore cannot bear to be held by them, especially to be pulled and lugged by them, and which is very provoking; and as such a man has work enough to do to hold him, so he is in danger of being bitten by him, at least when he is forced to let go his hold (from Gill's Exposition of the Entire Bible). The Greek Septuagint renders it, "As he who lays hold of a dog's tail, so is he who sets himself forth as champion in another's cause." (from The Pulpit Commentary, Electronic Database. Copyright © 2001, 2003, 2005, 2006 by Biblsoft, Inc. All rights reserved.)

The Merriam-Webster Dictionary (www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/meddle) defines "meddle" as "to become involved in the activities and concerns of other people when your involvement is not wanted." It comes from a Latin word that means "to mix". Maybe you've heard someone say, "I'm not getting mixed up in that."

The Bermuda Triangle, also known as the Devil's Triangle, is a loosely-defined region in the western part of the North Atlantic Ocean, where a number of aircraft and ships are said to have disappeared under mysterious circumstances (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bermuda_Triangle). Similarly, there is a Devil's Triangle in relationships. "Triangulation" can be defined as indirect communication where one person acts as messenger between two others, often times altering or fabricating the message to suit the tale bearer's objective. In the psychology of dysfunctional families, triangulation may take two forms: "[It] is most commonly used to express a situation in which one family member will not communicate directly with another family member, but will communicate with a third family member, forcing the third family member to then be part of the triangle." (From <http://narcissistschild.blogspot.ca/2012/04/triangulationthe-narcissists-secret.html>)

Steer clear of The Devil's Triangle! The Apostle Paul teaches in 1 Thessalonians 4:11-12:

11 Make it your ambition to lead a quiet life, to mind your own business and to work with your hands, just as we told you, 12 so that your daily life may win the respect of outsiders and so that you will not be dependent on anybody. NIV

We are to mind our own business. We can use this exhortation to justify our lack of concern for others. The Good Samaritan in Luke 10:25-37 was not meddling when he came across the man who had been beaten and robbed. To mind our own business is to focus on our own responsibilities and not to

preoccupy ourselves with the responsibilities of others. When Peter was asked by Jesus to follow Him in John 21:19-23, Peter pointed to John and asked, "What about him?" Jesus did not call these two into a meeting to talk things through. Instead, He simply corrected Peter with, "If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you?" This was a matter between Jesus and John but Peter was meddling in their business.

Jesus promises in Matthew 5:9, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God." NIV

What is the difference between peacemaking and meddling? Jeanie Miley observes (<http://archive.gosanangelo.com/lifestyle/columnists/jeanie-miley-its-a-fine-line-between-peacemaking-and-meddling-ep-439073236-356038551.html>):

My mother warned me not to get caught between two siblings who were in a fight. "They may be mad at each other right now," she told me, "but they will make up and then they will turn on you for taking sides."

My mother was right, and later she reminded me that spouses might do the same thing. I couldn't have been more than 10 when I learned that hard lesson, and I've had to have a few refresher courses through the years. It's a dangerous thing to interfere with other people's conflicts!

We humans walk delicate lines, negotiating the boundaries that define what is one's own business, and what is not, and some people seem to be better at respecting and keeping boundaries than other people.

Sometimes, "helping" another person is more about meddling in their business than it is really caring about giving aid to them.

Now and then, "peacemaking" looks more like trying to impose one's own ideas and patterns on another person's behaviour. "I'm just doing this for your own good!" is often the wail of the self-appointed rescuer.

So it is that I have learned how important it is to keep awake and alert to my own motivations, my feelings, my intentions and my behaviour. I need to know when it is I am contributing to the uneasy peace or the outright conflict, and I need to do my part to keep my actions toward others clean and clear of manipulation and negative energy.

For the most part, I cannot repair what other people have broken, but when I rush in to try to do that, I may prevent the responsible parties from doing what they need to do.

What should we do if we come across someone who is beating on someone else? We should do what we can to protect the vulnerable one. This might

mean stepping in physically or calling the police, if necessary. Beware of assuming the intentions of the party that has not asked for your help. The one who asks for your help might actually be trying to get you to take their side in an unholy war.

Every time you feel yourself being pulled into other people's drama, remember the advice of a Polish proverb, "Not my circus, not my monkeys." The Poles are pretty wise, are they not?

Perhaps meddling is a demonstration of pride - thinking more highly of ourselves and our mediating skills than we ought to think. Even well-meaning peacemaking efforts can be misunderstood when they are not invited. Moses learned this the hard way in Exodus 2:13-15:

13 The next day he went out and saw two Hebrews fighting. He asked the one in the wrong, "Why are you hitting your fellow Hebrew?" 14 The man said, "Who made you ruler and judge over us? Are you thinking of killing me as you killed the Egyptian?" Then Moses was afraid and thought, "What I did must have become known." 15 When Pharaoh heard of this, he tried to kill Moses, but Moses fled from Pharaoh and went to live in Midian, where he sat down by a well. NIV

Once bitten, twice shy. Maybe Moses' mind flashed back to this experience when the Lord called him from the burning bush to lead the nation of Israel out of Egypt (Exodus 3). Perhaps Moses thought, "Oh no, I'm not going back there. I already tried to help those people and they didn't want my help!"

Have you tried to help solve a dispute between others? How did it go? Why did it turn out that way?

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I admit there have been times when the relationship referee should have blown the whistle on me and sent me to the penalty box for two minutes for interference. In ice hockey (from www.icehockeyrules.8m.com/offsigns/inter.html), "A minor penalty shall be imposed on a player who interferes with or impedes the progress of an

opponent who is not in possession of the puck.” Unfortunately, sometimes my efforts to help actually have hindered someone’s growth.

Jesus was asked by a man to settle an argument in Luke 12:13-15:

13 Someone in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me." 14 Jesus replied, "Man, who appointed me a judge or an arbiter between you?" 15 Then he said to them, "Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions." NIV

People often called upon rabbis to settle legal disputes. The eldest son would always receive double what any of the other sons would receive. The proportion of inheritance was thus fixed, and the plaintiff in this case has every legal right to receive his share of the inheritance (from IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament by Craig S. Keener Copyright © 1993 by Craig S. Keener. Published by InterVarsity Press. All rights reserved.).

A man in the crowd interrupted Jesus and asked Him to solve a family problem. Rabbis were expected to help settle legal matters, but Jesus refused to get involved. Why? Because He knew that no answer He gave would solve the real problem, which was covetousness in the hearts of the two brothers. As long as both men were greedy, no settlement would be satisfactory. Their greatest need was to have their hearts changed. Like too many people today, they wanted Jesus to serve them but not to save them. (from The Bible Exposition Commentary. Copyright © 1989 by Chariot Victor Publishing, and imprint of Cook Communication Ministries. All rights reserved. Used by permission.) There is a time and place to rebuke and confront - and this was one of those. Rather than wading into this family feud, Jesus challenges this man to focus not on changing his brother but on changing his own attitudes.

Someone has advised, “You don’t have to attend every argument you are invited to.”

I have been asked to counsel couples who were not getting along. However, I have concluded these efforts are fruitless unless *both* parties ask me to get involved, accept responsibility for their part in the tension and are motivated to work it out. There is a judge before which we will all appear before one day. I can neither right every wrong nor should I try.

Jesus did not come to teach rules, regulations, policies or even principles. He knows that such a preoccupation does not hit the core issue and just leads to distractions. He could have sat down with these two and won the battle but lost the war. Avoiding the quagmire of settling this dispute between brothers, Jesus addresses the core issue – the heart.

Domestic violence has been found to constitute the single largest category of police calls in some cities. When police officers respond, they know the situation can be volatile for both them and the abuser's victim. That's because the killer in almost one third of female homicides is an intimate partner, and 22 percent of officer "line of duty" deaths in recent years occurred while responding to domestic violence calls (www.domesticshelters.org/domestic-violence-articles-information/how-police-are-trained-to-respond-to-domestic-violence#.WJJKybEZNuU).

Offended people will sniff out those who are willing to help carry their offenses. They will soon discover they can treat you disrespectfully by dumping their garbage on your front yard without being challenged to do something with it. Interfering in someone else's conflict can be as subtle as carrying someone else's offense. When we allow people to dump their negative views of others on us we can begin to accumulate emotional loads we were never called to carry.

There is a time and place to rebuke and confront – and sometimes *we* are not the ones to do it. We must encourage offended people not to come to us but to go to the offender as Jesus teaches in Matthew 18:15-17:

15 If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. 16 But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that "every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses." 17 If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector. NIV

Yes, we might serve as a witness in a dispute to verify facts, but unless we are invited to mediate our influence is limited. While we can certainly encourage each party to work it out, sometimes the best we can do is take a step back and pray for them.

The father was telling at the table of a fight between two men in which he had interfered. One had swung a shovel aloft, shouting, "I'll knock your brains out!"

"It was at this moment," the head of the family explained, "that I stepped in between them."

Little Johnny had been listening, round-eyed with excitement. Then he blurted out, "I guess he couldn't knock any brains out of you, could he, Pa?"

Will you commit to being a peacemaker rather than a meddler? Will you ask the Lord to show you when to step in and when to step back when people aren't getting along?

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