

Dr. Laura

Contributed by Karen Condon
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I'm a liberal. I am pro-choice and anti death-penalty. I oppose the Iraq war, I voted for John Kerry, I recycle, and I've believed in global warming from the start. I listen to NPR between seven and nine in the morning. Then, between nine and noon, I switch to AM and listen to Dr. Laura Schlesinger.

I know. She's pro-life, pro-war, pro-military, pro-Bush, anti-feminist, and I bet she doesn't listen to NPR. She and I cancel each other out. Yet I listen with rapt attention as she dispenses her bitter advice, her voice snapping with sarcasm. It's as bracing as a strong cup of coffee.

Admittedly, my fascination with her show is partly voyeuristic. I enjoy hearing about the personal problems of strangers. Infidelity, porn-watching husbands, relatives in prison, meddling mother-in-laws, recalcitrant teenagers, deadbeat exes. Dr. Laura is merciless with them all.

It both pains and entertains me when I just know that a particularly clueless caller is about to be torn to shreds. "Wait a minute," she'll interrupt. "You're telling me you're shacking up with him?" or, "You mean you're leaving your child to be raised by a stranger so you can buy more stuff." "Uh-ohhh…" I'll say. "You're in for it now." It takes my breath away every time she tears into somebody, and leaves me waiting anxiously for the next caller.

Dr. Laura is rude, snide, arrogant, and sarcastic. I hate her politics. She is anti everything I am pro, pro everything I am anti. But I listen to her. Or maybe I should say "and I listen to her," because for me, these statements don't contradict each other. Occasionally I shut her off, like the time she told a female caller, "I'll pay to have you sterilized." That time I was stunned, and went up for air, switching to Public Radio International.

But here's the thing: sometimes she gives really good advice. A man once called to complain about how his mother had let him down. Dr. Laura asked him, "Is that the first time she's ever let you down?" No, she'd been doing that all his life. She told him to imagine an antique chair. It's your favorite chair, and you've had it all your life, but whenever you try to sit in it, it falls over. You know it won't support your weight. Will you keep sitting on it, or will you find another chair? The man made a surprised sound - it registered on the air as a puff of static - and then answered, "I guess I'd find another chair."

At Christmas, I was sitting at the table with my family, feeling as prickly as Dr. Laura, just waiting for someone to bring up a political view that offended my liberal sensibilities. And then I thought, "But I don't have to sit in that chair." So when someone said, "But there were weapons of mass destruction," I inhaled, exhaled, and told myself, "Just don't sit there." I spent the day feeling restless, like someone who can't admit she's lost at musical chairs, but in general was more at peace with myself and my family.

I suppose I can only stretch the chair metaphor so far, but it has stuck with me and served me well in a number of situations. I now have a number of rickety chairs I avoid sitting in. The cranky chair, the road rage chair, the but-I don't-feel-like-it chair, among others. I also don't want to sit in the chair Dr. Laura offers me - it's too hard, and sometimes she puts tacks on it. And at times, the liberal chair is too soft. But from listening to Dr. Laura, my ideological enemy, I've found one that's just right, and I think I'll keep it, because from this chair, you get to listen to everything.