

32963 Faith Column, 4-4-11
By Rev. Drs. Casey and Bob Baggott
Community Church of Vero Beach

Persistence With a Purpose

What's the difference between persistence and stubbornness? Sometimes we'd like to think that our unwillingness to change our minds, hearts, attitudes, actions, direction, or decisions is a sign of firmness of character or an admirable steadfastness. But maybe it's just plain old stubbornness. How can we tell the difference? Are you persistent? Or are you stubborn?

Maybe the difference between persistence (which we usually view positively) and stubbornness (which gets a far less generous assessment) has relatively little to do with how we approach a matter. After all, both persistence and stubbornness are marked by strong determination. Maybe the distinction we make between persistence and stubbornness is actually based on the value of the goal that's being so doggedly pursued. When valuable goals are pursued, we sanction persistence. When insignificant matters are the subject of endless attention and effort, that's stubbornness.

Interestingly, stubbornness rarely converts anyone to a new perspective. While persistence in a noble or admirable goal wins hearts and minds every time. Consider the often told story of Mother Teresa and renowned Washington criminal lawyer, Edward Bennett Williams. Williams was a powerful and wealthy man, and Mother Teresa had requested a visit with him to explain her mission in India and to ask for funds for her AIDS hospice. Anticipating the visit, Williams had told a friend that he was receiving her visit out of respect, but he didn't want to give to her cause. He had decided to be polite, hear her out, and say no.

Initially, the visit went as Williams expected. After Mother Teresa explained the reason for her visit and made her appeal, Williams thanked her for coming but told her he was not going to be giving her funds. Mother Teresa said, "Let us pray." They both bowed their heads and she prayed. After Mother Teresa said, "amen," she offered the exact same appeal for the hospice all over again. Again Williams declined to give. Again Mother Teresa said, "Let us pray." This sequence repeated itself several more times until finally Edward Bennett Williams, exasperated and bemused by what he was experiencing from this diminutive little saint, looked up at the ceiling and said, "All right, all right, get me my darn checkbook!"

Mother Teresa's resolve was irresistible. Why? We think it was because even the most determined skeptic could see the compelling goodness at the heart of her insistence. She wasn't stubborn: irritatingly unshakeable. She was persistent: graciously, faithfully, lovingly, consistently pursuing a highly significant matter.

Are you stubborn or are you persistent? We hope you are persistent – because persistence accomplishes wonders!