

# Box of Life:

## Your lens to the world

### Imagine

By Aleta Norris

that you have a box sitting in front of you.

This box is filled with everything you've ever experienced: childhood, education, previous jobs and bosses, challenges you've encountered and resolved, people you've met, things you've observed, places you've lived, hardships you've endured, and your season in life.

Furthermore, this box contains who you are inherently: strengths and talents, natural tendencies, inner drive, athletic ability, propensity toward risk (or not), sense of adventure, ego, and like (or dislike) for people. Also, this box contains the context for your current day-to-day life: you and your family's health, responsibilities you have for others (children, aging parents, a sick friend, the team you coach), your financial comfort or hardship, your car's reliability and the comfort of your home.

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## Let's start with a quiz.

The following is a short list of real-life scenarios. Read through the list. For each one, write down the one word that best describes your thoughts as you would observe this scenario.

1. You are on the freeway and the person in the lane next to you is driving erratically, veering side to side, speeding up, slowing down, and crossing lanes. As you observe, what word best describes your thoughts?
2. One of your co-workers misses details. This person seems to work to about 80 percent, and then stops. You happen to pride yourself on attention to detail. What word describes your thoughts?
3. One of your co-workers has recently become unpleasant and frustrating to work with. She arrives to work five to 10 minutes late, at least three days a week. She has become edgy, negative, short-tempered, and her work quality is suffering. What word best describes your thoughts?
4. You are at the grocery store, in line to pay for your groceries. Just ahead of you, there is a woman in line buying a large, expensive birthday cake. You think nothing of it until she pulls out a stack of food stamps to pay for the cake. What word best describes your thoughts?

As I have shared these scenarios in workshops, I hear negative, judgmental words on a regular basis. Here are some examples: idiot, drunk, "expletive," lazy, careless, apathetic, mad, frustrated, enough, reckless, irresponsible, stealing. Now, the good news is that I often hear other words that are more about acceptance, concern or curiosity.

# This is your “Box of Life.”

## Let me share what was going on in each of these situations:

1. Our erratic freeway driver was lapsing into a diabetic coma.

2. Details? It may be helpful to know that only 25 percent of the population has a naturally high attention to detail. For these 25 percent, all of the others will very seldom meet their expectations relative to details. The remaining 75 percent, because of their inherent genetic encoding, will have to make a conscious effort in this regard and often fall a bit short.

3. The unpleasant woman was actually approached by one of her co-workers who said, “We don’t know what your problem is, but it’s getting kind of old, and we’re all tired of it.” This woman replied, “I’ll tell you what my problem is: I come

to work every day for 10 hours, go home and feed my kids dinner, help them with their homework and get them to bed. Then, I drive to my parents’ house and help my dad take care of my mom who is dying of cancer. So I’m tired and not very happy right now. That’s what my problem is!”

4. Someone actually followed the “cake woman” out to the parking lot and said: “Ma’am, I just want you to know that buying that cake with food stamps was inappropriate.” She replied, “I understand your opinion, and here’s my situation: I have a 9-year-old daughter who’s terminally ill, and today is the last birthday she’ll ever have. I have saved food stamps for six months, because I want her to have a nice cake on her last birthday.”

## Here’s the thing:

We don’t really know where other people have come from or where they are today. Plus, because we see the world through the lens of our own Box of Life, it puts us at risk of being judgmental. Since we think about how we go through life — what we know, what we think, how swimmingly we get through our day, how healthy our children are, how much knowledge we’ve acquired throughout our career, how strong an inner drive we have — we think everyone’s life matches this. It doesn’t.

I encourage you to have a first response of curiosity and concern. We can notice things, and then we need to stop and wonder if there is something about this person that we may not know or understand. Or, we can stop and acknowledge that these people, simply, are not us.

What I’ve learned in life is that most people are really trying to do the best they can. And, even when it’s not good enough for us, it still may be their best. It is perfectly OK to continue to expect people to do well, to hold them accountable to do well and to want to help them do well. However, we can’t do this until we pause first to be concerned about where they are right now today. Be careful with your Box of Life. It’s very powerful.

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