

TO OWN YOUR INFORMATION IS TO OWN YOUR LIFE

By Wendy McElroy


People who would never click on a suspicious email link or fall for other phishing ploys think nothing of turning over intimate details about themselves and their family members to strangers who hand them official-looking forms, like bank clerks or doctors or almost anyone from the government. When you click on an e-mail link that collects personal data, you take the risk that the information will be used without your knowledge for purposes of which you may not approve or which may harm you. When you hand the same information to banks or hospitals or a government agency (e.g., the post office), it is a given that they will share it automatically or at the request of virtually any other government agency: child protective services, the IRS, the police If you do not wish any of those agencies to know certain personal data – e.g., your income level, do you own a gun, your religion, etc. – then do not tell any agency.

One of the main reasons people meekly provide invasive and potentially harmful information is embarrassment. People do not wish to cause a scene or make trouble. When you hand back a largely-blank form that everyone else has filled out or which you are assured is “routine,” many info-collectors will try to “shame” you into feeling ridiculous or obstructive. In short, they will use peer pressure against you, they will attack through your natural (in my opinion, healthy) desire to be liked and likable. The 19th-Century individualist feminist Gertrude Kelly considered peer pressure and ridicule to be the most powerful weapons in society’s arsenal. In a *Liberty* article entitled “A Woman’s Warning to Reformers,” Kelly declared, “Men...have always denied to women the opportunity to think; and, if some women have had courage enough to dare public opinion, and insist upon thinking for themselves, they have been so beaten by that most powerful weapon in society’s arsenal, ridicule, that it has effectively prevented the great majority from making any attempt to come out of slavery.”

Just as there is physical courage in the face of physical danger, there is also intellectual or social courage in the face of disapproval. The two traits are distinct. I have seen otherwise brave people crumble inwardly and be unwilling to speak out at a public meeting even when they burn with objection to what is being said. The same sort of cowardice – and I am sorry to use such a pejorative word – functions when we meekly provide invasive personal data even though we object. As government becomes more aggressive in attacking privacy rights, however,

the price of social cowardice becomes steeper. I understand how emotionally difficult it can be to say “no” even when the request seems small – e.g., filling in the “level of income” line on a school form. I also struggle to speak up in public venues; especially in family situations, I let many remarks go right by me. But the prospect of having personal information become permanently on-file with the government is too important to allow shyness (or cowardice) to dominate.

More people need to respond as did the blogger at *www.RenegadeParent.net* when she was asked to sign a parental consent form in order to receive a public service (akin to daycare) for her child; it was a service to which she was legally entitled. Renegade Parent writes, “Everyone else filled them in and handed them back but I felt uncomfortable with the amount of information requested. Names, addresses, telephone numbers, mobile numbers, email addresses. Do I consider myself to be a lone parent? Am I expecting a baby? If so, when is it due? What is my employment status? What are my children’s names? What gender are they? When were they born? What is their ethnicity? Etc. . . . I am assuming that my signing a consent form is exactly such a ‘legal basis,’ so it is a good job I remembered my resolutions and said no, thank you, rather politely but very firmly to the woman whose opinion of me does not matter one jot, the woman who could not quite believe that a mother had refused to hand over ‘evidence’ for The File. No, thank you, I do not want to sign this form, I said, as the room fell silent and my ears went a tiny bit red.”

Remember: the information is either being asked for a reason, such as sharing with other agencies, or there is no reason for the request. You are not only well within your rights to require a good reason for answering impertinent questions or, in its absence, you are justified in flatly saying “no.” The burden of justification is properly on whomever is demanding a glimpse into your personal life and/or finances. You would not show strangers a photo of yourself naked just because they asked; neither should you casually reveal personal data like your income or your beliefs. It is your life, your information and other people need to be reminded to mind their own business. 

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