

The Judge  
May 1, 2016  
UUMSB  
Rev. Carol Allman-Morton

Today we are going to talk about judgment, and I can't imagine talking about judgment without talking about school and social politics. In the town where I grew up, just north of Boston, students who were athletes were given social power and authority, as is often the case in American schools. However, at my high school, the music and drama department was big enough that students who participated made up at least  $\frac{1}{4}$  of the school. The marching band itself was  $\frac{1}{8}$  of the student body and roughly three times the size of the football team. If we are enmeshed in a system, like a school, or community, or nation, with people who have more social, economic or cultural power and privilege than us, we can be judged by those with power, which impacts our lives, access to resources and experience. In the example of a school community, those in different groups may be judged by others in unhelpful ways, and it is not necessarily tied to aspects of identity that are part of a cultural identity. In my school those who the most powerful students judged as "other" had some terrible experiences. *And*, though many of those judged as "other" were of the "band geek" variety, we had a large supportive community, and safety in numbers. We also judged the powerful athletes. We judged them as stupid, which wasn't true, and as all being dangerous, which also wasn't true, but in our hurt, it felt better. By my senior year of high school something magical happened in my class. The year before the captain of the football team was in the spring musical, and soon after, silos of students gathered in ways they never had before. I remember a silly teen movie moment at this enormous party, open to everyone, when the class president, someone with a lot of social capital, said something like, 'I don't know why we didn't all get together like this all along.' I remember thinking at the time, 'well, because you would never have invited us before,' which while true, was not very generous of me. Looking back, I think that key leaders in that social structure had some early maturity in understanding that bigger and more diverse social systems are stronger than those that are narrow and siloed, though they probably wouldn't have said it that way. What that translated to in teenage experience was with a more diverse pool of party locations and attendees, we ended up with better parties. That class president did go on to be in town politics and we were all very proud of him.

Judgment is one of those terms that is not inherently good or bad. That is why in English, you can have good or bad judgment, or even pre-judgment—prejudice. Judgment can be how we look at a situation and assess the best way forward. But that's not the facet of judgment that I want to talk about today, I want to explore when someone puts themselves in the position of evaluating the choices and worth of themselves or another person. How many of us went to a junior high school or middle school? How many had a good time there? How many of us counted down the days to high school like a prisoner with chalk marks on the wall? There is something about that particular time in our development that lends itself to people treating each other badly, and using judgment as a weapon. Perhaps it is because students at that age are starting to build a society and trying on the roles of stratifying and figuring out who will end up where in a hierarchical structure. I am sure you can all think of examples of adults who never matured past a junior high school understanding of how to build relationships and who still use

judgment like a weapon. Proceeding from a place of judgment reinforces hierarchies and the power of the status quo, and so it is perpetuated in a hierarchical structure. To break through judgment, we have to interrupt power dynamics. The Tao te Ching is helpful in framing this in a more spiritual context in Chapter 52:

In the beginning was the Tao.  
All things issue from it;  
all things return to it.

To find the origin,  
trace back the manifestations.  
When you recognize the children  
and find the mother,  
you will be free of sorrow.

If you close your mind in judgements  
and traffic with desires,  
your heart will be troubled.  
If you keep your mind from judging  
and aren't led by the senses,  
your heart will find peace.

Seeing into darkness is clarity.  
Knowing how to yield is strength.  
Use your own light  
and return to the source of light.  
This is called practicing eternity.<sup>1</sup>

\*\*\*

If you close your mind in judgements  
and traffic with desires,  
your heart will be troubled.  
If you keep your mind from judging  
and aren't led by the senses,  
your heart will find peace.

Judgment can close us off from deepening relationships, and relationships are deeply, vitally, important to our spiritual development. If we are a part of an interdependent web, and we close ourselves off from connection, we can't find ourselves in the web, we can't repair where it is broken, and we can't feel that interconnection.

Because we need to judge our environment in order to make choices and understand what is safe and not safe, the issue isn't judgment itself, but how we use it. I look at the world and

---

1 translated by Stephen Mitchell (1988)

people around me and I make judgments—some of them are healthy. Can I tell if a pan is hot by looking at it? Does the driver of that other car see me at this intersection? But, I know that I am as guilty as anyone of making judgments about myself and others that close my mind, rather than opening it. Sometimes it takes us years to realize that we have been judging someone or someones because of assumptions we have made, or because of things that have nothing to do with them as individual human beings, which we can shorthand, as prejudice. I try and catch myself in the moment, but I often don't. I continue to work at untangling the emotional soup in my head that leads to judgment. When we practice opening our hearts and letting judgments go, we are able to grow and deepen our interconnections. Change will not happen without practice.

When I was in seminary my mom gave me a book of meditations by Elizabeth Tarbox. Elizabeth was a Unitarian Universalist minister, born in England, who graduated from seminary in 1990 and served congregations in Middleborough and Cohasset, Massachusetts until her death in 1999 from cancer at only 55 years old. She wrote two meditation manuals and they are really lovely. You may have heard me read the meditation we heard earlier in the service about judgment and the ocean before. Every time I read it, one part or the other soothes or challenges me. As I prepared for today, I held these lines close:

I pray that some benevolent spirit has listened to my heart's despair and judged me not.  
At the edge of the clouds a rim of cream appears. Night creeps away with my guilt  
beneath its cloak. Dawn sprinkles absolution, the earth has kept its promise. Forgiveness  
is at hand.

I don't know about you, but I have stood at that edge of the ocean, both real and metaphorical, and felt that power of absolution. I have felt an opening in my heart, naming my fears, my despair, my judgments of myself and others, and felt it be washed away. Judgment is always going to creep back in, but when we practice letting it go, when we recognize and dismantle our own prejudices, we are able to let judgment roll out with the tide. We are imperfect and we are forgiven.

I invite you to think back to a time that you judged another person. How did it feel? Was your heart open or closed? In reflecting back on that moment, can you untangle what triggered that judgment? Sometimes in the untangling, we find a web of judgments—judgments of ourselves that transfer to others, wishes unfulfilled, old prejudices we didn't even realize were in our subconscious. Untangling all of this can be spiritual and healing work. Our judgments do not help to repair what is broken—our actions, our words, our intentions, our compassion are what make change for the better.

To close our sermon time together today, I wanted to offer a spiritual tool for helping us to remain open and connected to relationships. There is a setting of a Buddhist meditation in our teal hymnal, "Filled with Loving Kindness that I invite you to sing with me, and as we do, I will lead the words, but if you would feel more comfortable, you are welcome to open your hymnal to number 1031. In the meditation, we first focus on the self, then the other, then we, together, just by changing one word. Before we begin, let's take a few moments to breathe together.

The words of the first verse are:

May I be filled with loving kindness. May I be well.  
May I be filled with loving kindness. May I be well.

May I be peaceful and at ease. May I be whole.

Let's sing together:

May I be filled with loving kindness. May I be well.

May I be filled with loving kindness. May I be well.

May I be peaceful and at ease. May I be whole.

May you be filled with loving kindness. May you be well.

May you be filled with loving kindness. May you be well.

May you be peaceful and at ease. May you be whole.

May we be filled with loving kindness. May we be well.

May we be filled with loving kindness. May we be well.

May we be peaceful and at ease. May we be whole.

So may it be.