

Words with Baggage: Unpacking “Judgment”

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I dropped out of graduate school four years into it, having completed most of my coursework and one of my three area exams. The reasons are not that important, but at the time it seemed like the right thing to do. I went back to non-profit work and didn't think about pursuing my doctorate for several years.

Then I met and got together with Phoebe, who was working on her doctorate at Harvard at the time. She was patient with my graduate school situation, but after some time she asked me whether getting my doctorate might open up all sorts of job opportunities. She also said I should work on my doctorate because, and I hope she meant this as a joke, “Misery loves company.”

I had a big decision to make. On the one hand, at that point living in Boston it looked like I would easily find non-profit or other jobs whenever I needed one. On the other hand, I thought she was probably right. Not about the “misery loves company” part, but that having the degree would give me access to work I could not otherwise expect to find, and might even lead to a real career. And I was drifting a bit; completing grad school would add a layer of purpose that might enrich my life. After weighing the situation I went back to grad school, completed my doctorate, and promptly found all sorts of job opportunities opening up, one of which did indeed lead to the career I have now. And this happened because I was able to make a useful and productive judgment through a process of discernment about my life.

Some kinds of judgment seem just fine to us. And yet we Unitarian Universalists tend to have a strong negative reaction to the idea of judgment in general. We don't believe people should judge each other, since our paths are different and we are mostly doing the best we can. We associate the word judgment with smugness and moralism, and reject the idea that anyone should get to sit in judgment on someone else. We might find ourselves resorting to some version of that old phrase, “Who made you the judge of me?” And we like the anti-judging idea that, when you point a finger at someone you point three fingers back at yourself because it seems to show people who judge as the hypocrites they are.

But that's not all. We don't like the idea of judgment because somewhere inside us, if we are brutally honest, we may feel that we don't measure up and being judged simply confirms this. There's a widespread phenomenon of people who have not traditionally been academics, such as women, people of color, and poor people, feeling like frauds when they become professors no matter how well they teach and no matter how good their research is. They feel like any day they will be caught out, found out, and the ugly truth will emerge: people are right to judge them. They deserve it. Feeling like that would not inspire fond feelings toward the process of judgment.

People are not the only judges, and maybe not even the most important ones. In a religious context, and given the religious background of most UUs, God does the judging and God is indeed a stern and righteous judge, hard to please and easily inspired to send people to hell where they will be tortured for all eternity. This is an unacceptable and, indeed, unbelievable prospect

for liberal religionists including UUs. We don't believe in hell, at least not after death, and plenty of us don't believe in God, or at least we don't believe in *that* God. But what we assent to intellectually doesn't matter all that much at the end of the day. If we have been damaged by hellish religion, the idea of religious judgment may well set us off, opening old wounds and triggering old responses of fear and resentment.

And there's more. If we are sociologically minded we are aware that judgment is not merely an interpersonal or religious phenomenon but also one with social underpinnings. It seems to turn out more often than not that people with money, power, and social privilege get to judge people without or with less. Poor people get judged way more often than rich people, sexual minorities way more often than heterosexuals, women way more often than men, and people of color way more often than whites. And one place we see the poor and nonwhite get judged in particularly harsh and morally troubling ways is in the criminal justice system where, in case you did not already know this, poor people and people of color are more likely to be policed, stopped, searched, arrested, and convicted than rich people and whites, and, once convicted, are more likely to receive longer sentences for the same crime and way more likely to receive the death penalty. If this is judgment, who wants it?

Finally, we may recall the words attributed to Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 7:1-5): Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. For with the judgment you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get. Why do you see the speck in your neighbor's eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? Or how can you say to your neighbor, "Let me take the speck out of your eye", while the log is in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor's eye. Even Jesus said it: don't judge. No judgement.

So, apart from the kind of judgment I made to go back to graduate school, judgment is a pretty bad scene. The evidence is clear. Time to jettison judgment for love, tolerance, and acceptance. Right?

Well, unfortunately, no. Because there are some things we believe in that require being willing to judge. In order to build strong moral lives, we need to be willing to judge whether a given act is morally good or bad, since such judgments help us determine how to act in the world. And in order to feel any sense of call to work for social justice, we need to be willing to judge whether a given social situation is just or not. So the notion of judgment is not in fact so easily escaped.

Consider Martin Luther King Jr.'s claim that there are things in our social system to which all of us ought to be maladjusted, including violence, discrimination, and the other actions that tear away at our worth and dignity. I suspect we all agree with King on this matter. But why do we agree with him? Because, having affirmed that supporting the inherent worth and dignity of all people is an important ethical and political matter, we have judged such actions as violence and discrimination to be damaging to people who ought not to be damaged. Moral living and social justice work are judgmental matters. They can't not be.

Or consider our closing hymn today, the powerful "Wake Now My Senses." This hymn invites us to hear the cry of the voices of suffering and to work to end the suffering of all people. It

invites us to pay close attention to the fact that some people have their rights denied, and to join with them in seeking their rights. It invites us to develop a clear ministry in the world in which we transform our sick planet back to health. Great values. We share these values. But in the absence of judgment, how would we know when suffering is simply an inevitable part of life and when suffering is unnecessary and can be mitigated, for example by working against racism or sexism? In the absence of judgment, how can we determine whose rights are being denied? When Evangelical Christians claim that forcing them to sell to gay people denies their religious rights and gay people claim that Evangelical Christians refusing to sell to them denies their civil rights, how would we know whose rights need supporting? In the absence of judgment, how can we determine which natural phenomena are simply that and which are symptoms of a sick planet? We need judgment.

Or what about the business of measuring up? Maybe the problem there is that we are too quick to judge people for who they are and not what they do. Maybe our real task is to build a society where no one shames anyone else and no one feels ashamed. And if people feel they don't measure up because they've been taught, for example, that being a professor is something only rich white men do well, maybe our real task is to work to end classism, racism, and sexism in society. The issue isn't necessarily the presence of judgment here; it's how judgment intersects with a lot of morally problematic social patterns.

Which brings us back to judgment and inequality. Yes, poor people get judged a hell of a lot more than rich people but the problem is less the judgment than the unfairness of who gets judged and why. Same for race, gender, and sexuality. It's a problem of inequality, which we certainly see when we turn to the criminal justice system. I suspect that, if pushed, most of us would like some kind of criminal justice system in place, maybe one built on restorative justice but in any case one built on justice. And justice requires judgment.

If you know the gospels well, you know that the same Jesus who tells us not to judge does plenty of judging himself. In the same gospel according to Matthew, Jesus has some choice words for the Pharisees. Now, this may well be a later interpolation of the early church. Nonetheless, it is striking how judgmental Jesus is allowed to be eight chapters after he instructs his followers not to judge. Jesus calls the Pharisees and some others hypocrites, blind guides, and blind fools. He accuses them of not practicing what they teach and of laying burdens on others' shoulders without being willing to lift a finger to help. He further accuses them of being a little too satisfied with their place of honor and the respectful greetings they receive. Woe to you, hypocrites, he goes on, claiming the Pharisees lock people out of the kingdom of heaven and make their converts children of hell. They tithe mint, dill, and cumin while neglecting the weightier matters of the law, namely justice and mercy and faith. In one of my favorite metaphors ever, Jesus accuses the Pharisees of straining out a gnat but swallowing a camel. So, the old judge-not-lest-you-yourself-be judged Jesus? We don't see him in this series of exchanges, no, we see a judgmental Jesus. And we probably agree that if the Pharisees were guilty of all this stuff they don't look too good. In other words, we are reasonably likely to judge right along with Jesus here, not least since he is accusing the Pharisees of being judgmental hypocrites. Judgmental Pharisees? Bad. Judgmental Jesus? Maybe not so bad.

But, finally, how can we tolerate the idea of judgment when the worst thing about our religious childhoods was a hyper-judgmental God? That's a hard one, I'll admit. But if we are willing to think of judgment as reasonable in some contexts and problematic in others, we may simply have to do whatever emotional and spiritual work will help us release that bad judgmental God from our souls so we can revisit the idea of judgment without being buried in the sludge of hellishness.

So, having unpacked the idea of judgment, how can we make it useful to us? Here's a proposal that takes us back to my useful decision to return to graduate school: let's reimagine judgment as a process of discernment rather than a project of shaming and blaming. The difference between the two ways of seeing judgment is enormous.

Shaming and blaming originates in a negative view of people, one that says we are basically bad and are more likely than not to do the wrong thing, so we need to be controlled through shame-and-blame judgment. Discerning right and wrong in our private lives and public institutions acknowledges us as complicated people with the capacity to do good or evil, both singly and collectively, and as people with the capacity to decide to do good even when it is difficult.

Shaming and blaming is all about smugness and moralism, about the idea that I get to judge you because I am better than you. Discerning right and wrong is about acknowledging with humility that none of us is better than anyone else precisely because each of us has the capacity to do good or evil as well as the invitation to figure out what is good and what is not. It's hard to be smug and moralistic if I am honest about the bad choices I've made in my life. And this is really where Jesus's "judge not" wisdom is so very wise. Before I get all haughty on you for having a speck in your eye I'd better deal with the log in my own. And even if my log is really just a speck, I still don't get to judge you for your speck. That would make me a hypocrite, Jesus' favorite insult for the Pharisees and clearly not a morally good way to behave.

Shaming and blaming is about unequal power. Only someone with more power than someone else can successfully use shame-and-blame judgment to control another person. And this need not be an individual. It can be a society, or a powerful group in a society. When we talk about whites judging people of color, men judging women, and so on, this is what we're really talking about. The use of so-called slut-shaming to control women's sexuality is a perfect example. Discerning right and wrong is about rejecting social inequality, precisely because it is morally wrong, and therefore rejecting all practices and values that support social inequality, slut-shaming being a great example of such a morally wrong practice.

Finally, shaming and blaming harms people – their spirits, their emotions, sometimes their bodies, thus leading to suffering. Discerning right and wrong in our private lives and public institutions helps us make decisions that minimize suffering, whether personally or politically.

Clearly, there are two quite different ways to think about judgment and which approach we choose will impact how we live in the world as well as the effect we have on it. Consider today's chalice lighting, drawn from a version of the Passover Haggadah: "May the light we now kindle inspire us to use our powers to heal and not to harm, to help and not to hinder, to bless and not to curse, to serve you, Spirit of freedom." This prayer acknowledges that we have power and that we can use it for good or ill. We can heal others; is that not amazing when you stop to think

about it? And yet how easily we can cause harm, all sorts of harm, harm because we are angry or thoughtless or privileged or vengeful. How do we know whether we are acting to heal or to harm? Through the judgment of discernment. We can help others, can deeply enrich their lives, yet our power can also keep them from flourishing. How do we know whether our actions help others or hinder them? Through the judgment of discernment. Our words, our actions, our entire lives can bless other individuals and indeed the world. But we can also curse others with our words, with our actions, with our lives. How do we know when a word, an action, a way of being in the world offers blessings or curses? Through the judgment of discernment.

So, my friends, do not be too afraid of the idea of judgment. It can be used to increase human thriving and the well-being of the planet and it can be used to cause hard, grinding suffering. But it is our choice how we judge, what and when we judge, and the outcome of our judging. Let us judge wisely and well, such that our judgements improve our own lives and make the world a better place for everyone. Amen and blessed be.