

How to refrain from judging others

1. SEE AND ACKNOWLEDGE ALL PRESUMPTION TO JUDGE

First, we notice when we presume to judge other people and when we presume to denounce their supposed faults to another third party. This is unskillful speech; our ethical principles are not something like a criminal code which we use to indict and convict others in felony court or in whispered gossip. The true use of our ethical principles is to awaken ourselves and all others to the fullest appreciation of life, to the deepest understanding of causes and conditions, and to the most kind and compassionate way of speaking and acting.

We can see that there are at least two grave problems with presuming to judge others and denounce their faults to a third party. The first problem is the presumption itself, when it comprises (as it usually does) an incomplete understanding of the situation and of its possible causes and conditions. For example, if we see a shopper exiting a retail shop without first paying for merchandise that she is carrying in her arms, we may presume that she is stealing (when a deeper examination of causes and conditions would reveal that she had earlier walked into this shop with the same merchandise after having purchased it at a different shop). The second problem is the act of verbal denunciation, when by denouncing others' presumed faults to a third party we may unjustifiably damage their reputation, which may cause further harm to them and to the greater community. For example, if we cry "Stop, thief!" and we call the authorities on the presumed thief, bystanders may also presume that she has stolen the merchandise. Then they may begin speaking of her presumed theft to others in the community, who may ostracize her and prevent her from participating in community activities or even prevent her from earning a livelihood. The potential harm is even greater if the fault we presume to denounce is more severe. But even if the fault we presume

to denounce is minor, the chain of gossip may distort and amplify the supposed fault into one that is more severe.

Presumption to judge is most extreme when we do not even consider that we could examine more deeply the causes and conditions that led to a certain situation, and when we do not even consider that others' perspectives on the situation may have any value to us — instead, we simply label the other as “crazy,” “stupid,” “incompetent,” “lazy,” or “evil,” while we absolve ourselves of any responsibility to help the other learn and to learn more about ourselves by learning more about others. In such cases we not only presume to judge others' actions; we presume to judge their essential attributes as well. These extreme cases of presumption to judge others may lead to “witch hunts” which combine extreme stigmatization of the other with assumption of guilt, a climate of fear, sham or simulated evidence, biased argumentation, reversal of the burden of proof of guilt, and use of the loaded question technique, which structures questions in a way that does not deepen our understanding of causes and conditions but instead inevitably confirms the questioner's presumptions (for example, “Did she steal that by herself or did someone help her steal it?” “Is she crazy or just stupid?”). When such behavior is combined with lying, it becomes slander: intentionally defamatory speech.

We may encounter situations when we would do well to act decisively and skillfully with a third party to try to help somebody refrain from causing harm. But this precept alerts us to more common situations when our own biased, distorted, or illusory mental activity generates an impulse to speak unskillfully about our experience of others. If we examine the causes and conditions of this impulse, we will discover that when we point a finger at others, the finger also points back at us.

2. TURN THE FINGER AROUND TO POINT WITHIN

Second, instead of pointing the finger of blame and judgment at others, we point the finger of compassionate awareness within ourselves. Turning the finger around to point within does not mean ignoring others, or giving ourselves the finger, or presuming to label ourselves as “crazy,” “stupid,” “incompetent,” “lazy,” or “evil.” It means recognizing that everything we experience is confined to our own limited perspective and filtered through our own internally coherent meaning.

For some people, it may be as tempting to judge themselves as it is to judge others. “There are also those who demand to be judged, if only to be recognized as guilty.” Presuming to judge our own essential attributes (such as “crazy,” “stupid,” or “incompetent”) is no more skillful than presuming to judge the attributes of others. There are at least two problems with presuming to judge the attributes of self or others: The first problem is that when we judge essential attributes, we freeze and solidify what is actually a warm and fluid life situation comprised of inconceivably vast causes and conditions. Our limited and internally coherent experience, which is continuously changing, is inseparable from the immensity of everything that we are experiencing, which is also continuously changing. This does not mean that nothing can be said about anything; it means that labeling essential attributes of self and others is never skillful speech. Skillful speech acknowledges continuous change in our own limited perspective — everything we say is relative and partial. The second problem is that when we presume to judge the attributes of self, we do not have access to others’ experience of us that might contradict our judgment of ourselves; inversely, when we presume to judge the attributes of others, we do not have access to others’ experience of themselves that might contradict our judgment of them.

“You can tell Alice she is very patient, but she knows her side of how patient she is being with you. If we characterize that is, judge people, even if we do so quite positively, we actually engage however unintentionally in the rather presumptuous activity of entitling ourselves to say who and how the other is. We entitle ourselves to confer upon people the sources of their worthiness. We say, ‘This is the shape of the person,’ or if we are direct, ‘This is your shape.’ We dress the person in a suit of psychological clothes. As much as they might appreciate the fancy quality of the cloth, they are likely to feel, ‘Well, it doesn’t exactly fit. You’d need to let it out a bit here, take it in a lot there.’ Ultimately, if we appreciate or admire by making attributions or characterizations of the person, we are doing something to her; we have pulled on her in one direction or another. Alternatively, if we limit such communications to express our own experience, we leave the other completely free, not pulled upon, not shaped up, not defined at all.” Turning the finger around to point within means liberating both self and others from any presumption to judge. When we speak about self or others, we speak not of essential attributes but of our relative and partial experience, which is always fresh and new, here and now. And then we invite others to speak of their own relative and partial experience. We listen, and again we share our relative and partial experience. In this way, we begin to have a friendly conversation with all others that liberates self and others from the presumption to judge.

3. PRACTICE THE LANGUAGE OF ONGOING REGARD

Third, having noticed the impulse to judge and denounce the faults of others, and having turned the finger around to point within to discover our own limited perspective, we abandon the language of praise and blame; instead we practice the language of ongoing regard.

The language of praise and blame is unskillful speech. First, it is indirect, delivered to a third party about the judged person. Second, it presumes to judge the essential attributes of self or others (whether those attributes are supposed faults such as “incompetent,” “lazy,” or “evil” or supposed merits such as “good,” “talented,” or “brilliant” . Third, it provides little or no opportunity for self or others to learn about each other or about the causes and conditions of the situation; or, it implies that self or others are fixed and incapable of learning something new.

Although it is more skillful, the language of ongoing regard is less smooth, less easy, more halting and unfinished than the language of praise and blame. It is more unpredictably improvised, compassionately crafted. First, it is direct, delivered face to face with the other, not to a third party. Second, it describes our own personal experience and our own request for more information instead of a presumptuous judgment (for example, “I felt a sense of dismay when I concluded that you lied to me about what you did, and then I wanted to ask you...” instead of “She’s a liar” or, “I felt amazed when I learned that you gave that person so much, and then I wanted to ask you...” instead of “He’s so generous” . Third, it opens a conversation about the precise causes and conditions that may have shaped each person’s experience of the situation; it explores the differences between perspectives and emphasizes what each person can learn from each other’s experience.

We can practice noticing all positive feelings that arise in us seemingly in response to the activity of other people. We explore the causes and conditions of those positive feelings, perhaps remembering times in the past when we engaged in the same activity that we have just seen others engage in. Then we communicate our positive experience of others directly to those others at the earliest appropriate opportunity.

When we notice a negative feeling arising in us seemingly in response to the activity of other people, we explore the causes and conditions of that feeling. We may remember times in the past when we engaged in the same activity that we have just seen others engage in, and we reflect on how others may have felt when we engaged in that same activity. We see and admit the same tendencies in ourselves that we have noticed in others. Then we communicate our negative experience of self directly to those others at the earliest opportunity.

The practice of ongoing regard is the antidote to the habit of praise and blame. The language of praise and blame may seem like skillful communication that can cause no harm, but when we examine the presumption to judge and we turn the finger around to point within, we realize that the habit of praise and blame starves us of the ability to learn from each other's experience. In contrast, the language of ongoing regard awakens us to greater intimacy with each other because we are revealing new and as yet unknown information about ourselves and requesting as yet unknown information from the other, instead of presuming that we can reveal already known information about the other.

The precept of not judging others is not about holding back our experience of others, positive or negative. It is about opening our experience to the light of all others, inviting all others to awaken us to our full potential as living beings.

SOURCES

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Rodmell Press, 2001; and by Robert Kegan and Lisa Lahey's book *How the Way We Talk Can Change the Way We Work: Seven Languages for Transformation*, San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 2001. The list of characteristics of witch hunts is adapted from Douglas Walton's article "The witch hunt as a structure of argumentation," in *Argumentation* 10, 1996. The words "There are also those who demand to be judged..." are from Gilles Deleuze and Claire Parnet's *Dialogues*, translated into English by Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam, New York: Columbia University Press, 1987. The words "You can tell Alice..." and the concept of "the language of ongoing regard" are from Kegan and Lahey's book.