

Feeling judgmental? Try curiosity

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Spirit of Life

You don't have to search far to find evidence of the growing polarization of our society. In so many areas of our lives, we are asked to choose sides. Are we

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red or blue, conservative or liberal, spiritual or secular, for it or against it? It's not new, of course, this binary way we have of categorizing ourselves and one another. However, it seems to be getting worse, and it's seriously getting in the way of meaningful conversation and collaborative work for the common good.

One thing I notice is just how quickly people seem to jump to judgment when encountering something new or unfamiliar. Why do we find it so easy to disapprove of others who look, act or think differently than we do? Why is our initial reaction often accompanied by the furrowed brow, curled lip or critical sneer? For some, this may be rooted in discomfort or uncertainty — i.e. they do not understand and are thrown off balance by the unknown. Others have been explicitly trained to fear or loathe others based on some demographic detail or an amped-up form of



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fear akin to “stranger danger.” Still others may simply be having a bad day, and the judgment that comes across to others is merely an echo of their own internal disruption or pain. Either way, that kind of judgment (real or perceived) presents an obstacle to human unity, understanding and cooperative progress to benefit all; it also does great harm.

Why not try a different strategy? In my observation, curiosity is both a highly effective and a highly undervalued spiritual practice. When we are curious, we ask questions, we wonder, we make room for possibilities we had not previously considered. This is exactly the opposite of what happens when we rush to judgment. Whereas curiosity opens up possibilities for insight and connection, judgment shuts down dialogue and damages relationships. Curiosity requires of us a certain

amount of humility, while being judgmental leads straight to hubris (or flows from it).

It's no secret that there is a lot broken in our world, and most of the solutions are going to require the gifts, wisdom and cooperation of all of us. We desperately need to find new ways to come together and build one another up, rather than divide ourselves into intractable warring factions. Yes, this is an age-old problem, but its ubiquity shouldn't discourage us from trying again and again to address it directly and together. When we separate ourselves away from those with whom we think we have little in common, we decrease the chances that creative solutions to our common problems will emerge. In fact, when we feel ourselves getting judgment, that is the absolute best time to ask a question (and not a snarky one)!

Perhaps, if we consciously and intentionally choose curiosity over judgment, we could better understand, appreciate and heal ourselves and one another from all the damage caused by our divisiveness. As 16th-century Unitarian theologian Francis David aptly noted, “We need not think alike to love alike.”

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