

## THE PERILS OF JUDGMENT

I recently had a startling conversation with a friend I thought I knew and understood well, whom I thought knew and understood me well, too. I was shocked and dismayed to discover that the gap between our separate interpretations of something was not a small and easily traversed crack, but a vast and possibly unbridgeable chasm.

My first response was sadness over such a misunderstanding and the fact that it seemed likely to destroy a friendship. My second response was anger at the fact that two caring people could so completely misjudge each other's intentions and allow bad feelings to smother good will. My third and final response was gratitude for another life lesson learned again, more poignantly. We truly do live in totally separate and completely self-created worlds within our own minds. As much as we can tell ourselves we know another's heart and mind, we never really do. As soon as we allow ourselves to form judgments based on what one of us construes as the probable intention or direction of another's thinking, we will always lose the caring at the heart of relationships.

The kind of situation I'm describing between two people looks and feels like this:

"You did so and so and it meant such and such and I need to tell you I don't like it."

*"That's not what I did and not what I meant. How could you be so harsh? I did so and so and it meant such and such to me, and I need to tell you I resent your interpretation."*

"You're lying."

*"You're wrong. You're not trying to understand me at all."*

"Let me say again why you're wrong and you have done something unforgivable."

*"Let me say again why I am so hurt that you cannot see my point of view and my innocence and my obvious distress over your mistaken negative judgment."*

"Your point of view makes no sense to me at all. You just won't admit the truth."

*"Your accusation makes no sense to me at all and does not represent my truth!"*

"You're not listening to me."

*"You're not listening to me."*

"You don't respect me."

*"You don't respect me."*

These interactions happen every day between parents and children, between spouses, between friends, between co-workers, between colleagues. They happen every day between political groups, between governments, between tribes, between religions. We can be utterly seduced by our own thinking so that we can neither hear nor respect another's thinking. We can be righteously blind to how readily two people can arrive at entirely different conclusions from the same information. The closer we feel to someone, the better we think we know them, the more likely we will see them in terms of what we have come to think about them, rather than what is before us in the moment.

The first lesson of negative interactions is that they steer us into the clouds of our own opinions and interpretations and pull us away from clear and sunny good feelings and good will. We get into arguments about specifics that are irresolvable, and lose the wisdom to seek common ground in what really matters. If two people disagree whether a wall is chartreuse or lime, they can argue for hours about which color is which. If those people recognize that they agree the wall is green, they can then discuss the question of which green it is with ease. Standing firmly on what is most important – the solid ground of simple synergy – we can talk about different perspectives and never lose our bearings.

One time, I was meeting with management teams from two companies that had merged. The merger was supposed to bring all kinds of opportunities for saving and for expanding the business. But the two management teams immediately began to disagree about which computer system to use, which administrative functions to adopt, which policies to keep, whose technology would become the other's. It was a mess and the merger was costing more, rather than less, with none of the potential benefits achieved.

We went through an exercise together which demonstrates seeking synergy. All it takes is setting aside the arguments, and looking for common ground. Suppose, I posited, Group A loved football and Group B loved baseball, and they argued constantly about which was the more sportsmanlike event. I went through the possible points each would make, then said, "Now, your life depends on getting past this argument. Otherwise one group must perish. On what could you agree?"

The two groups took only a few moments to recognize that they could agree that both enjoyed watching team sports and the competition arising from collaborative play.

"Now," I said, "Group A likes watching team sports and Group B only enjoys individual sports. So Group A defends football and baseball. Group B says there is no requirement for maximizing individual skills in those sports, and will only watch track and field events, triathlons, golf, individual gymnastics." Again, with their existence depending upon getting past this argument, they could find agreement. In this case, the agreement was that sports of all kinds develop athleticism, although to varying degrees, and it is enjoyable to see athletes in action.

The third tier of disagreement was: "Group A thinks all people should engage in sports as a means of developing their potential, and Group B thinks that this is an unfair demand since there are people who have handicaps, such as paraplegia or disorders that preclude their participation in sports and such people should not be excluded from developing their potential." Once more, the groups found agreement. The agreement was that all people are able to develop their potential, regardless of how they do it.

When the groups got to level 3, their experience of the discussion changed and their tone was dramatically different. They went from bad will and intellectual compromise to good will based on a fundamental truth that was self-evident to all. They recognized that all the disagreements about what and how something could be accomplished looked different from the common ground that the impetus to accomplishment was the point. After a few moments of quiet, they began to discuss their business again. This time, they realized that economy, efficiency and expansion were what mattered equally to all of them, and how they achieved those was more dependent on looking to see what made sense to them in their new situation, than on arguing from each side's previously held opinions about what they already knew best. Their discussion shifted from negative, argumentative and hopeless to positive, constructive and promising.

Bad will is the byproduct of thinking the worst of someone or something and hanging onto those thoughts. That creates judgment based on one person's ideas about another, rather than wonder based on curiosity about how each of us think so differently and change our minds so quickly. If we hang on to bad will for a little while, we have misunderstanding and upset. If we hang on for a long time, we have anger and grudges. If we hang on indefinitely, we have long-standing negativity and distress that corrode our entire life experience.

Bad will and the uncomfortable feelings that accompany it contain the hope for renewed and deeper connections as much as they contain the possibility of shattered relationships. People do not enjoy bad will and those uncomfortable feelings. No one would choose to remain in that state for long. Nonetheless, people do remain in that state when they are unaware that bad will comes from their thinking about a person or situation, not from the person or situation. People do remain in that state when they are unaware they can relax their thinking, unable to see how to relax their thinking, or unforgiving to the point they would rather suffer their thinking than acknowledge their own capacity to quiet down and listen and look beyond their thinking.

What changes interactions so that they lead to unconditional caring, rather than judgment? Looking back to the exchange between people, what if it had begun with a question, rather than a statement. "When you did so and so, what did it mean to you?" What if both parties understood the trap of preconceptions and making up ideas about each other's intentions? What if both understood that the only ideas we can truly know are our own; we cannot know what is on another's mind unless we ask rather than postulate, and then listen deeply, with open hearts and minds? What if the intent of every interaction was to find synergy, rather than cast blame or make judgments?

Those questions suggest an ideally harmonious world, an impossibility because we cannot help but think our own thoughts all the time and our thinking immediately appears right to us. When our thinking is judgmental and self-absorbed, it still appears right to us.

Our only clue to misdirection is bad feelings. When we lose our tolerance for bad feelings for each other, we recover more quickly and turn more readily to forgiveness and love.

Those questions actually describe a desirable direction, the hope for widening the circle of good will and caring among friends and the possibility of friendship blossoming along every highway of life.

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