

“Unjudge Someone”
Beacon UU Congregation
Rev. Robin Landerman Zucker
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Just earlier this week, I returned from a wonderful visit in Barcelona with my son, daughter-in-law and granddaughter, Ruby. Its such a gorgeous, walkable city and we meandered through many plazas, down ancient streets and along the seaside. On one of my outings, a sign caught my eye in front of one of Barcelona’s stunning building. It read: “Biblioteca Humana hoy dia”....Human Library Today.

Below the headline were photos of several individuals who would be the libros of the day. Human books that could be “checked” out by the folks who had signed up for the event. I remembered seeing a notice for a Human Library event in Sedona and reminded myself that I’d like to try it when I got back to Arizona.

The motto of the Human Library movement is “Unjudge Someone.” The organization, which is now International, began in Copenhagen in the Spring of 2000 by 4 colleagues. The original event was open 8 hours a day for four days and featured over 50 different “human” books. This broad selection provided readers with ample choice to challenge their stereotypes and unconscious biases.

More than 1000 “readers” checked out their “books” for safe one-on-one encounters, leaving the founders stunned, but gratified by the impact of their idea.

In the section of their website called “Books,” they ask: “Who Do You Think I Am?” The stories include (among others) a man with ADHD and one who is brain damaged, an alcoholic, a teen with autism, a woman who is bipolar, a guy who is “body mod extreme,” a convert, someone who is homeless and another who is HIV+ Another has been molested, one is polyamorous, and another is a refugee. There is a soldier, an unemployed man and a young mother.

Let’s watch a brief video that Human Library has provided on YouTube

It’s fascinating and humbling to face our own unconscious biases and stereotypes as we move through our daily lives and encounters. The pharmacy tech at CVS, the woman pushing her shopping cart down the street, the kids carrying skateboards under their arms downtown, the Native American man waiting in line at the Family Food Center. Whether it is intentional or not, we are sometimes guilty of further othering the other, out of fear or disdain, hubris or judgement.

Billy Collins admits as much in his poem, “Old Man Eating Alone in a Chinese Restaurant,” when he writes: “I would have gotten it all wrong, thinking, the poor bastard, not a friend in the world, And with only a book for a companion. He’ll probably pay the bill out of a change purse.”

Or consider the Rev. Gordon McKeeman's experience on the highway, when he discovered that the truck driver pulled over on the berm was not necessarily the burly master of profanity or rootless gypsy he imagined, but rather a lover of wildflowers, picking a handful by the side of the road. "Good-bye shattered image," he proclaims.

Our guest today, Professor Cathy Small, had some preconceived notions about Ross Moore, the Man in the dog park, too, before she began to know him as a human being and friend, rather than perceive him through what she calls, "the well-worn grooves of American narratives about homelessness." She'll share more with us herself a bit later in the service, but I was struck by this excerpt from the book

She writes: "There is something to be said about the purposeful effort to step outside of your own reality (or perhaps, to allow other realities into your own). Cathy tells us that this willingness has been life altering for her. She admits that when she first met Ross, it was with profound distrust and fear. And she astutely points out, she realized that she is part of a particular culture and would have been a stunningly remarkable person to respond otherwise.

The worlds we enter offer us a window into our own. As Cathy puts it: "Like others who cross cultures or the boundaries of our upbringing, we find in ourselves not only a greater responsiveness to the human condition, but also the delight of living in a world less alien, less hostile, less unloving than it felt before.

And that's why the Human Library movement is now a global phenomenon – it offers just this window into another person's identity beyond our embedded beliefs. It creates the chance to "unjudged" someone. What a gift. The 2022 Sedona dates for their human library events will be posted soon...I'm in. If you're interested, too, the website is sedonahumanlibrary.org

So, as I've explained "unjudging" is different from "judging." One could say that the judging precedes unjudging. Whether we realize it or not, we're always making assessments of others, aren't we? Why do we judge and how does judgement dim our own light?

In an article for Psychology Today, the therapist Dana Harron notes that hating or judging others is at odd with loving ourselves. She writes: "People judge others to avoid reckoning with potential feelings of inferiority or shame. But judging can never give people what they truly need – connection and self-love. Yet, they keep doing it – consciously or unconsciously."

Often (at least, here in America) , we're often programmed through family and broader culture, media and advertising to see the world in a rank order, hierarchical fashion. When two people encounter one another, one is better, and one is less. Any metric will do – wealth, status, body weight, beauty, height, intelligence, popularity. Who

do I think I am and who do I think you are, in relation to that? It's insidious, even if we are striving to be intentionally non-judgmental.

Real strength and self-esteem, Darron reminds us, is not about denigrating other people or putting them in boxes. It's about knowing who you are, what you value and how you want to live that truth. It's about knowing that you can afford to be generous because YOU are enough and there is plenty of care and affirmation to go around.

Being kind and unjudging others will never diminish you. We bake a bigger pie, and we all win...and who doesn't love pie? One could venture that most of the human books who volunteer to be "checked out" would savor a slice.

If we tune into our bodies and emotions, we know how lousy it feels to judge others. We're not in alignment with our highest selves and we're engaging in a cheap, dirty trick to protect ourselves in some way or bolster a shabby sense of worth. Darron brings it home, saying: "So, you'll have to judge yet another person, and another, and another, to keep this charade going. You'll have to find drug addicts, criminals, terrible mothers, homeless men, and fat people to keep your head above water with floaties instead of learning how to swim."

Continuing the metaphor here – Human Libraries are the swim classes that offer a path to breaking this cycle and learning how to unjudge in the first place. If you can't attend a Human Library event, you can certainly follow its principles. Self-interrogate about your unconscious biases, condescending stereotypes, and snap judgements. We all have them.

If we were to make a concerted effort to check in with ourselves throughout the day and see how often our minds are in judging mode (sometimes with an accompanying anger or self-righteous indignation), we might be shocked at how much space this is taking up. And if we're honest, we would have to admit that all this negative judgement of ourselves and others isn't adding to the quality of our lives.

It's quite likely that those of us gathered today as a congregation of humans have judged one another at some point, and judged me, too, as your minister...it's a common occupational hazard. While I was rifling around for resources for my sermon today, I came across a poem I saved years ago, read it again, and it caused me to both nod and chuckle. It's timeless and as fitting a place to end, as any, I reckon. The author is John Gifford Fowler, British cleric who lived from 1899 to 1975. The poem is entitled, "Judge Not the Preacher."

He laments:

If it was 20 minutes of pure loss,
If you can think of neither text nor gloss,
And have forgotten what the subject was,
Judge not the preacher!

If you came hoping even for a crumb
To ease your need, and departed with none,
If she might just well have been stone dumb,
Judge not the preacher!

Perhaps she prayed for light and no spark came,
Held out her candle and it took no flame,
Perhaps she sought your heart and missed her aim.
Judge not the preacher!

She is a person like you, so do not boast,
That both are dull today...she is, at most,
Occasional mouthpiece for the Holy Ghost,
Judge not the preacher!

So may it be for us all , blessed be, blessed we and Amen.

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