

Non-Judgment and Healing
Unitarian Universalist Church of Vancouver
August 24, 2025

***Non-Judgment and Healing*© by Rev. Kathryn A. Bert**

I first preached a sermon in July of 2019 called *No Judgment Zone* and was surprised by the overwhelmingly positive response. It seemed to have hit a nerve within the congregation. I preached it again in March of 2020, and then... well, other events transpired, and I'd pretty much forgotten about that sermon until recently.

It was my cousin who taught me the term, "no judgement zone." I think it came with her invitation for us to live with them when we first moved here and didn't have a home. She said we could live with her and her family as long as we left behind all judgments about how they live and raise their children. I don't know about your experience, but in my experience families can be a bit judgmental – we care about one another and want the best for each other and can judge our own and each other's actions harshly, especially if we judge their actions to produce ill effects. So I really took to the concept – you're welcome here as long as you know that I don't need your judgment.

It's a spiritual practice, to suspend judgment. It's human nature to judge – to make distinctions, to delineate, to draw boundaries between this and that, good and bad, yin and yang, cat people and dog people. Our brains are hard-wired to conceptualize in that manner. And the categories we create are not the things themselves. Sometimes, in the day to day motion of our lives, we forget that. We confuse the *word* for the *thing* the word is pointing to.

Which brings me to the Tao Te Ching. Lao Tzu. "The name you can say isn't the real name" translates Ursula Le Guin. I used to prefer the Stephen Mitchell translation because he altered his chapters with feminine and masculine pronouns. The Master would use a *he* pronoun in one chapter and the *she* pronoun in the next, and it was just so refreshing after English translations that used exclusively the male pronoun to discuss mastery. Le Guin's translation, which is more than twenty years old, but I only came across it since her death, avoids the use of personal pronouns altogether. In English, this solves a lot of problems. When you're working in texts written in languages other than what you're reading them in, it really does bring home the point that the name you can say isn't the real name. My very limited understanding of classical Chinese is that the pronouns don't indicate gender at all, and so all the male mastery language which bothered me in English is just a translation problem and not a problem with the original. Le Guin's translation that avoids personal pronouns completely satisfies in a way that other translations to English don't, for me.

Pronouns are just one way our language and society is changing. The rise of awareness of a gender binary which excludes many who don't consider themselves *he* or *she* is a sign of the ways in which human understanding is changing. The world is changing. Sometimes it feels like it is changing wicked fast. Especially as we get into the extreme polarities which exist in our global political systems at the moment. Whether it's the change or the reaction to the change, we feel pulled to the extremes with no zone of no judgment possible anywhere. I do believe that 'no judgment zones' are key to our healing,

because as long as we stay trapped in cycles of action, judgment, reaction – we perpetuate the harm that was done to us in the first place, and unable to break free from the cycle of trauma.

I think one reason this sermon resonated for many is that we are short on the “unconditional positive regard” we each need to grow and mature. We know that ‘unconditional positive regard’ heals. That’s a psychological term generally used for the therapeutic relationship between a counselor and client, but it’s also what parents need to provide their children for them to mature, and what we can provide one another to heal. The unconditional part is the ‘no judgement’ part– you are held in high regard, whether or not I understand or approve of your actions. We don’t have to understand each other, to accept one another. You don’t need to understand why I prefer to be called Kathryn over Kate or Kathy or any nickname out there. You don’t need to understand my choice to honor my choice. Or my choice of pronouns or my choice of partner or my choice of food. We can accept one another unconditionally.

That said, obviously, there are boundaries to our acceptance of behaviors, especially in a community such as this one. We can’t accept behavior that causes harm, and that’s sometimes hard to discern or untangle or determine.

That’s the work. And it’s hard work. And it seems to be the work our traumatized world continues to need. With a man in the office of the presidency who rejects inclusion, exploits differences and dehumanizes others, it’s hard not to react. My ‘no judgment zone’ does not include elected leaders by the way – they have a responsibility to their constituents, and we have a responsibility to judge them by their actions and elect better leaders. But it so important that we not put ourselves in the position of overwhelm and fatalism and defeat. With the military takeover of American cities, it can feel like we have no control, but it is better to make our small choices rather than give up entirely.

So, how do we enact a no-judgment zone so that we as a species can evolve, make better choices, and save the planet? We do the work, beginning with ourselves. And then, with trusted others, do the work. From time to time, in your family or a small group at church, articulate a no judgment zone and enact it. Notice when you are judging others, step back and let it go, point out when others are judging others – perhaps gently as our JETPIG did this morning.

And then, change. Evolve. Learn a different way of being. Be better. Create a better you, not by judging yourself harshly, not because there is anything wrong with the way you are right now, but because life is growth. We are either growing or dying. I recommend growing. And the planet and its inhabitants need us to grow into better people.

“Judgment clouds our sight; it's like looking at a view through a dirty window. This technique gets us comfortable with just looking at things without judgment, allowing us to be present with what is.” Says Pragito Dove, as she explained the first spiritual practice in our readings. “Try just looking at a flower or some other small thing for a few minutes. Don't say ‘beautiful’ or ‘ugly.’ Don't say anything. Don't bring in words. Simply look. The mind will feel uncomfortable; it would like you to say something. Try to just ride through this feeling. Try to just look.”

“The Tao that can be told is not the eternal Tao. The name that can be named is not the eternal Name. The unnamable is the eternally real. Naming is the origin of all particular things.” I’m using the Stephen Mitchell translation now. “Free from desire, you realize the mystery. Caught in desire, you see only the manifestation.”

Free from desire – free from judgment, the desire to be taller or shorter, or better or worse, hot or cold, free from that desire, you realize the mystery. The unnamable is the eternally real. Naming is the origin of all particular things. You take the mystery out of it when you categorize it and name it and put it in a box.

And so the spiritual practice of not judging helps us notice things that we missed while we were naming them and categorizing them and assessing them.

When we pass judgment, we control our experience of it, define it, and shape it. If we give up that control, we can actually have a different experience.

In fact, a lot of our judging of other people, as one of the readings suggests, is about defining ourselves as “not that.” If we judge someone else as racist, for example, then surely that means I am not racist. Thus the practice, to add “just like me.”

He is so lazy, just like me.

She is arrogant, just like me.

They are incompetent,

She is unreliable,

He is angry,

Just like me.

It interrupts that habit and makes one consider the implication of the judgment on another.

I have learned over the years, that those who judge others harshly, are often hardest on themselves... thus, Arjuna Ardagh (R-Jew-nah Ar-dah) has us practice the very hard statement of “the Dali Lama is so very wise, just like me.” You might take a moment to consider which statement is harder for you?

They are incompetent just like me, or she is so beautiful just like me.

What if I am neither incompetent nor beautiful, but just am what I am. *I am what I am, I am my own special creation.* You know that song, from La Cage Aux Folles, made famous by Gloria Gaynor? The show’s Act One finale, has become known as a “gay anthem” for the celebration of one of the first Broadway musicals centered on a gay relationship. Or you may know the movie, the *Birdcage*. La cage aux folles means “the cage of mad women” but of course, folles is a slang term also for queens. And the cage – well, the cage is those ways in which we box ourselves in by terms such as incompetent or beautiful, straight or gay, liberal or conservative, male or female, republican or democratic socialist.... We can fail to see what is really there if we’ve already categorized it *a priori*.

And so letting go of that judgment, setting it aside, and learning to see a thing for what it really is, not what we’ve judged it to be, is a serious spiritual practice, with dramatic rewards. We notice things we’d never seen before and learn things we didn’t know we didn’t know.

I am convinced that the only way out of our present human predicament – the climate crisis, the political crisis, the human rights crisis– I am convinced that all these intense difficulties and dangers – can only be solved by our own evolution. Our own improved functioning as human beings, our ability to not react instinctively, but to make conscious choices, to make hard choices, to focus on the things we have power to change and not let that which we cannot control overwhelm us.

This is basically why I am a minister. It forces me to grow spiritually as I ask others to do the same. It's not because I have the answers, I'm sorry to say, for I guess it would be nice to have the answers... Only I'm not convinced there are answers. There is only growth and evolution and improvement, and that's what we seek – just a little better every day.

Not judging and not controlling are, I admit, counter-intuitive strategies....

It's not easy for us. This seems to be one of the characteristics of white supremacy culture in which the U.S. and our UU churches are saturated. Culture being powerful as it is all around us and hard to identify. *When the world is sick, can't no one be well...* So if you have a hard time not controlling and not judging, it is not just you. Our culture celebrates clinging and hanging on and not letting go. And there is some benefit to perseverance, but not when it is in the service of control and power. We always accomplish more when we share power and relinquish control. "Free from desire, you realize the mystery. Caught in desire, you see only the manifestation."

One thing I learned serving in the Peace Corps, is that we are mutually dependent and our job is to work ourselves out of a job – that is, to make sure others can do what it is we've learned to do and that we learn from others their important contribution so we can carry it on after they have gone. We are not individuals which begin and end with our lives, but organic, living, breathing communities, connected in ways we both recognize and miss.

It is particular to the Peace Corps that we must work ourselves out of a job, as we go into countries on short term assignments – being there 2 or 3 years at most. And we are there explicitly to share skills and teach others to carry on our projects after we leave.

But isn't it also true that our lives are all short-term assignments? For this world existed before your birth and it is our greatest hope that it will continue after our deaths. We had no control of our birth and have little control of our death, so why would we all of a sudden expect to control our lives to the extent many of us have been taught?

When we withhold judgment, we allow ourselves to be present to *what is*. This "unconditional positive regard" begins to resemble love. That transformative power of love that allows us to be who we are and become even more. It is through love that we are changed, and change is what we need.