

From Judgment to Curiosity

By Rev. Jane Bennett Smith, Channing Memorial Church, UU, Ellicott City, MD May 3, 2026

There was once a mother who wanted to teach her four sons a lesson about the harm of rushing to judgment. She sent each of them to observe a distant pear tree—one son in winter, one in spring, one in summer, and one in fall. At the end of the year, she gathered them to share what they had seen. The first son described a gnarled, lifeless tree, bare and stark against the landscape. The second strongly disagreed—he had seen a tree in spring, full of buds and the promise of new life. The third insisted they were both mistaken, having seen the tree in summer, covered in beautiful white blossoms. The fourth son then spoke, describing a tree in autumn, laden with sweet, fragrant pears. The sons were confused—how could they all be describing the same tree? Their mother explained that each of them was right, but each had only seen one season. To judge the tree based on a single moment was both incomplete and misleading. Only by seeing it through every season could its true nature be understood. So it is with each of us. To judge a tree in winter is to miss the promise of spring, the fullness of summer, and the sweetness of fall. The lesson is this: refuse to judge yourself, your life, or others based on a single season. Embrace the complexity of the whole.¹

Who among us has not felt the sting of another’s judgment? We carry questions that shape how we present ourselves: How will they interpret my anxiety, my gender expression, my age? And who among us has not, in turn, made quick, uninformed judgments of others—based on political affiliation, a moment of anger, a glimpse of someone’s parenting, or physical appearance? We receive judgment and we give it, and in both, we often cultivate deep and abiding harm.

Just as we learned in our wisdom tale, each life is imbued with a sacred complexity. Every individual embodies a web of identities, emotions, biases, knowledge, fears, and joys. Each person carries burdens—perhaps the responsibilities of being a single parent, as well as simple joys: a cup of coffee, a child’s smile. And each individual is holding something within that we

¹ “The Pear Tree and the Seasons of Life” by Donna Kersey

cannot see or intuit. What we encounter in any given moment can never be the full truth of the person before us. In lifting up the discrepancies and the complexities, I offer us a challenge: always assume the best. The poet Kathie Palaszewski offers the following prose: “Assuming the best in others will certainly burn us once in a while. Assuming the worst in others will certainly burn us all of the time.”² To always assume the best leads to an occasional disappointment or regret. To always assume the worst, in contrast, is to welcome profound cynicism and isolation.

So here is a question to consider: how can we meet someone not with judgment, but with curiosity? This is a meaningful distinction. Melanie Gamble suggests that we are called to ask questions before assuming—to invite a story rather than close an interaction with judgment or anger. Instead of relying on superficial assumptions, when we intentionally extend curiosity to ourselves, to others, and even to situations, we make space for empathy, learning, and connection. In contrast, judgment can bring harm in deeply personal ways. It can build impassable walls between us, limiting our growth in body, mind, and spirit. It narrows our understanding of diverse perspectives and keeps us from the kind of life-giving conversation that honors and acknowledges the plurality of identities among us.³

And this can be difficult and counterintuitive. “I am more equipped now,” offers Justine Nowicki Wogslund, “to stop myself and be curious about my thoughts and why they jumped straight to negativity and derision.” Wogslund reflects that we are often thrust into judgment, guided by what she describes as “demons that sabotage my better self.” Wogslund offers four such examples, of which I elaborate. The first is shame: there is something wrong with me, so there must be something wrong with them. The second is guilt: the ability to project our own discomfort onto others, shifting blame or criticism toward those around us. The third is fear: snap judgments that can cast others as threats or sources of discomfort, inviting suspicion. The fourth is ego: the impulse to elevate oneself by lowering the perceived value of others. How

² “This Hour, This Day.” By Kathie Palaszewski

³ Untitled post by Melanie Gamble

can we bless ourselves with abundant and diverse humanity if we allow these demons to dictate our actions?⁴

Curiosity invites questions that help us deepen our understanding of the world around us and our place within the web of humanity. How is my own bias shaping how I perceive another—whether through political affiliation, faith, culture, or upbringing? It seems at this moment in time that the most stark and abundant chasm between those in this country is inevitably political. We are in a country of growing and pronounced division. Furthermore, we may offer judgements on appearances and morality, sexuality and ability, moments of anger or disdain. We enter each situation, with opinions already held firmly within us. Only with genuine curiosity can we set them aside to hear—without judgment—the beliefs of another. We might ask further: how can I hold this person with dignity, even in disagreement? Disagreement does not require dichotomies of good versus bad, moral versus immoral, right versus wrong. Differences can still be met with an enduring sense of human dignity—of worth and respect. Furthermore, what response to another’s viewpoint would help rather than hinder? What would it look like to respond with kindness before assumption, and compassion before aggression? Our interactions are shaped when another is immediately put on the defensive - when someone feels instantly shunned or rejected. We inevitably elicit a response of defensiveness. Instead, we are called to meet each of these interactions with humility, promoting unity rather than division. We build bridges, not walls.

We can also turn curiosity inward, asking questions that help us understand ourselves more deeply. Have I ever needed to be offered grace? Each of us has brought our less-than-best selves into a situation— perhaps even our worst selves. By no fault of our own we are tired or overwhelmed or rushed. We spew angry words or offer sentiments of condemnation. We are not proud of it. Would I want to be judged solely on this single moment, or instead be offered grace by others who see me as a complex web of identities, experiences, and values?

⁴ “Escaping the Judgment Juggernaut” by Justine Nowicki Wogsland

Stories are one of the most meaningful ways to understand someone whose perspectives and experiences differ from our own. Perhaps a person comes from years of loneliness. Adverse childhood experiences. Poverty. Rejection. Isolation. Loss. Understanding these stories begins with offering questions that seek to gently and deeply explore the heart and spirit of another. Questions that are not threatening or judgmental—not “you are wrong, and this is why”—but rather compassionate and genuine, eliciting a deeper understanding. For example: “Was there an experience that shaped that view?” “What influenced that conclusion?” “What would you want an opponent to understand?” In this way, we invite true insight rather than defensiveness, fostering understanding that serves to unite rather than add bricks to the dividing wall we spoke of earlier. Stories allow us to hear the lived reality of others—their true narrative.

To withhold judgment is an intentional act of humility. It reflects inner values of compassion and empathy. It affirms and promotes another’s dignity. Compassion makes space for the possibility that there is more than meets the eye, layers and webs of values and beliefs, each crafted through a lifetime of stories. Judgment assumes that we know all of a person. Stories invite us to wonder what has shaped a person into who they are. There is always the compassionate question of “why?” Inviting wonder instead of judgment.

The character Atticus Finch from the novel *To Kill a Mockingbird* famously says to his young daughter, quote, “You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view... until you climb into his skin and walk around in it.”⁵ Empathy, understanding, and a deeply held compassion calls each of us to engage with a perceived enemy from the lens of their perspective, not our own, stepping into another’s shoes to experience life as they do. This is the only way to grasp a true understanding.

So, let us pause in a reflection offered by Andrea Gibson. More often than not, people are trying their best. The agitated patient at the doctor’s office. The impatient driver at a red light beeping as if it would make a difference. The customer who offers rude words at a restaurant.

⁵ *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee

The parent who lost their patience with a child. All trying their best – under a veil of anxiety, overwhelm, and frustration. How would our interactions change if we knew the good intent – or the best attempt – behind each action that serves to frustrate and aggravate us? This acceptance in and of itself could serve to make a more, quote, “just, loving, and peaceful world.” So breathe, pause, and be.⁶

While judgment and condemnation may be our immediate responses, we are not bound by these human tendencies. We get unjustifiably angry or defensive, but we can learn and grow—engaging in a deeper, more intentional practice of compassion and curiosity. The first step is a sacred pause—a breath. A moment to notice a judgmental thought. A simple awareness of the mind – this is what is. Allowing space for what arises, without immediately reacting. Second, we invite a gentle shift toward compassion and curiosity, towards true empathy, releasing this judgment and condemnation as we settle more deeply into true ourselves. Finally, we extend outward what we have cultivated within, offering these insights to whomever we are engaging with in that particular moment. Through this pause, we create space to bring forward our fullest, most authentic selves to each experience— inviting an enduring compassion. As attributed to Mother Teresa, “If you judge people, you have no time to love them.”⁷ May our judgments never override our capacity to love.

So may we invite this into the spiritual realm. Unitarianism teaches that we are not called to judge, criticize, or condemn one another, but to honor the inherent dignity and worthiness of every blessed person. Each individual carries this worthiness within, and as such we are called to engage with one another through gentle, affirming curiosity and empathy. Even beneath expressions of hate or bigotry, there remains a deeper complexity—one that calls not for condemnation, but for understanding. Our Universalist roots remind us that all people are capable of redemption, and that no one is defined solely by their inevitable transgressions. We are not asked to measure a person through their worst moments, but to recognize their capacity for growth and transformation. In this way, we shift our focus from one of

⁶ “What Does It Mean to Be a Good Person?” by Andrea Gibson

⁷ Unknown source

condemnation to one of accountability. We respond to harm not with exclusion, but with a call toward responsibility and repair. May we remember that compassion is a more faithful response than condemnation. We are not our worst moments. When we are led by understanding and empathy, we strengthen our web of humanity. May we lift the veil of anger and animosity that judgment so readily casts over us, and instead hold true to our commitment to love, compassion, and faith.

So may we remember the pear tree. Gnarled and barren in winter, budding with green shoots in spring, in full bloom during the warmth of summer, and laden with sweet fruit in the fall. No one could grasp the complexity of the tree based on their limited observation. So it is with us. So may we always search for the whole, knowing the limitations offered in judging moments solely of anger and derision. There is, instead, a complicated and whole person – fully good and fully worthy – beneath each complex exterior. So may we see the world through the lens of faith, inviting compassion and curiosity into each moment of our fleeting, finite lives.

May it be so, and Amen.