

Judgement vs. Judgmentalism

Crow's Caws



By Crow Cohen

A woman you work with goes shopping for two hours every day around lunch. You wonder if you should mention it to her supervisor. A friend of yours took \$10 out of the treasury of the gay rights group you belong to so he could treat himself to a good dinner after that event you both sponsored. Should you bring it up to him? You're sitting on a bench downtown, and you notice one of your acquaintances who works for a social service agency is walking arm in arm with one of his clients. Is that really none of your business? President Bush decides to bomb Kuwait again. Do you just figure he must have his reasons? Do you say, "I don't

Muddy Waters in Burlington, Vermont. But what if I'm sitting at that same café and mention "Sally" just put the make on "Irene's" fifteen-year-old sister. Or let slip that "Roy" supports himself by dealing drugs. Or that "Peter" cheated on his exam so he could pass the semester, which means he can still play basketball. If I bring up all this "personal stuff" am I gossiping? Being judgmental?

Let me pause here to offer my own personal definition of "judgmental" since I couldn't find it in my dictionary this morning. Judgmentalism is getting up into people's faces and badgering them about your opinion of their opinion. It's

knows that. It's courageous, as a matter of fact.

Without judgment there would be no politics, no capacity to learn from past mistakes, no wisdom to pass onto others. People often slip into accusations of judgmentalism when they believe "to each his own," all truth is relative – that they can only share their experience and have no right to make connections between their experiences and others' even if the dynamics are similar. They feel obligated to regard their experiences as unique. This pitfall breeds isolation.

So the next time I see you at Muddy Waters, I want you to lean over to your buddies and tell them a "secret" about your-

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know what's going on in the Middle-East anyway. I don't follow the news?"

When is it appropriate to make judgements, express our opinions or keep our mouths shut because we have no right to impinge on people's private lives? Everyone makes mistakes. Aren't we being judgmental when we presume to know what's best for someone else? I tried to look up "judgmental" in my old pocket dictionary. It wasn't there. I suspect that's because the idea that it's presumptuous of spiritually evolved human beings to judge one another's behavior is a "new age" concept. Morals, ethics, political correctness all have an old-fashioned ring. Pardon me while I make a judgement. *Avoiding judgments is a major copout!* If we can not count on one another to set each other straight now and then, then we are perpetuating a shallow, hedonistic, mindless, chaotic culture. (So what else is new?)

Somehow it's a lot easier to judge people when they're working in Washington, D.C. or just appeared on the Oprah Winfrey Show. Opinions about remote, public personalities are considered harmless because they won't talk back to us directly. It's a cinch to call Newt Gingrich a Neanderthal. No one's going to accuse me of being judgmental, especially at

being attached to the outcome of someone's misguided behavior. Judgmentalism is believing you're above and beyond human frailty. It's unwillingness to examine motives, acknowledge nuances. Judgmentalism is judgment without compassion.

But I believe it is our responsibility to judge one another. If forming judgments involves using the rational parts of our thinking to analyze, detect patterns, name syndromes, strategize, then we shouldn't be reserving these skills just to advance technology. Our ability to scrutinize human behavior, which can be downright slippery, comes in handy when trying to develop character. (Or is "character" also out of style?)

I suggest that we need judgment to build viable communities. I'm not suggesting we try and orchestrate each other's moves or even necessarily call the cops on your schoolmate's love of pornography. But it's not judgmental to tell him once that you find his tastes in movies offensive. It's not judgmental to mention to your workmate that taking two-hour lunch breaks is bad for office morale. Is there a problem with the job you can help her resolve? It's not judgmental to tell your neighbor that screaming at her kids is not good for them even though she already

self or somebody else that's been bothering you. Ask their opinions. Discuss this issue from various angles. Even strategize a plan of action to confront the person you think is tangled up in her own underwear. How else are we going to build ethical communities if we insist on not making judgements?

Crow Cohen is a lesbian feminist from Winooski.

All names except those of public figures are fictional and do not represent actual people known to the columnist.

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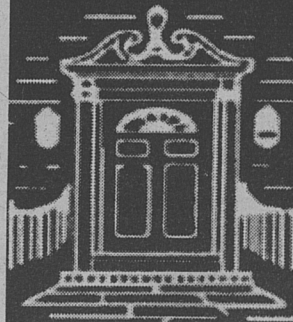


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