

The Myth of Nonjudgmentalness

BY MICHAEL JOSEPHSON

As a product of the '60s, I graduated college with one strong moral conviction: "It's wrong to be judgmental." After all, in a world where some cultures eat dogs, others eat snails and still others eat their enemies, who am I to judge? I was an ethical relativist, convinced that ideas of ethics and morality simply reflect social conventions or personal opinions.

Of course, this was pretty convenient. Relativism made no demands on me, and it instructed me to refrain from making demands on others. It's what Ayn Rand called an exchange of moral blank checks: "I won't judge you, if you don't judge me."

All this changed when I became a father. If I allowed my moral agnosticism to make me so unsure about ethical values that I couldn't say that some things are right and some things are wrong, what guidance could I give my children on matters like lying, cheating, violence and racism?

I came to realize nonjudgmentalness is a myth. Refusing to judge is itself the result of the judgment that there are no valid criteria for right and wrong. On reflection, it seemed clear to me that my firm conviction that Mahatma Gandhi led a better, more worthy life than Adolf Hitler was more than just personal opinion.

I'm still put off by the image of a self-righteous finger-wagging moralist imposing all his personal values on others. But the other extreme can be just as bad. In the end, it's simply irresponsible to treat kindness and cruelty, altruism and selfishness, justice and injustice as moral equivalents. Now I believe that there are a handful of enduring, universal moral truths and I think they're embodied in what I call the "Six Pillars of Character"—trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring and good citizenship. ■

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