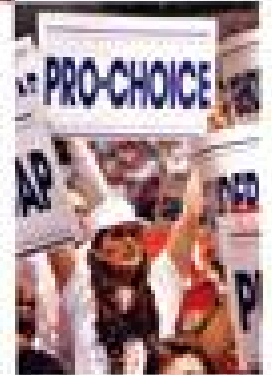
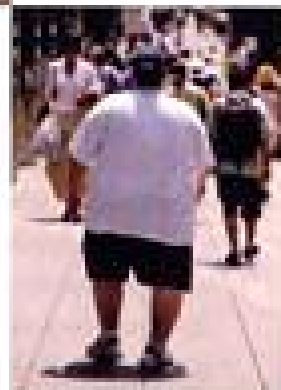
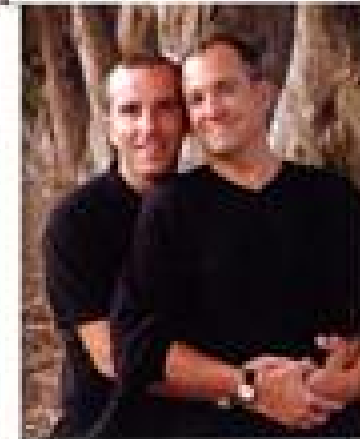
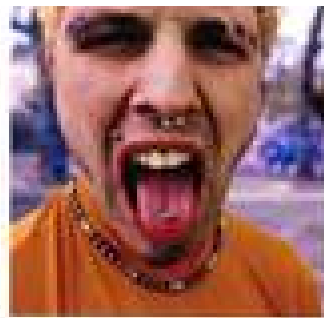


# Spirituality & Health

THE SOUL/BODY CONNECTION



# US vs. Them

BY RAPHAEL CUSHNIR

*Some people push our buttons by what they do or even who they are. These seven steps lead away from criticizing and rejecting, and toward the healing power of forgiving and forgetting.*

**People bug me. All kinds of people.** Like the guy who takes up two parking spaces for his SUV. Or the kids who toss beer cans along my favorite hiking trail.

Okay, let me be more honest. I actually feel hateful toward these people. When I think about them, my stomach clenches and my eyes narrow and I feel an ugly surge of, well, hate. It doesn't last that long, and I don't identify with it, yet still, for that one moment when I'm awash in hate's fury, I just want to wring their necks.

Why does this matter? Because I'm a "spiritual teacher." After a successful career as a Hollywood screenwriter and filmmaker, my life fell apart, my heart broke wide open, and now I write books on happiness and love and travel around the country giving talks on how to achieve them. Does that make me a hypocrite?



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turn out to be the most judgmental of all.**

I'll let you decide. But one thing is certain – it makes me a human being.

Human beings love to hate. Even more, they love to judge. While hate is a feeling, judgment is its rationale. We allow ourselves the perverse pleasure of our hatred when we decide that those who elicit it are evil, or some kind of threat, or that they've wronged us. Even when we're not actually in the direct experience of hate, we still thrive on enumerating all the reasons that these people are different from us, less than us.

Of course I've exaggerated. Often, rather than full-blown hatred, it's just annoyance or irritation that accompanies our judgments. That's certainly the case with my personal examples above. But such low-grade judgments can actually be even more toxic than the hate-fueled variety. This is because they're able to proliferate beneath our radar. Not only can we be unaware that they exist, but we may even deny them outright. Sometimes, those of us who pride ourselves on personal growth, who think we're beyond judgment, turn out to be the most judgmental of all.

The Bible admonishes, "Judge not lest ye be judged." But in my experience it's impossible not to judge. We all do it, all the time. And it hurts us far more than those we judge. It isolates us, makes us small, and bars us from our spiritual essence.

None of this, however, is a problem. In fact it's a wonderful opportunity. Recognizing our judgments, and working with them skillfully, is how we cultivate compassion. And cultivating compassion is the key to well being.

### **An Open and Shut Case**

Think of someone you love. Choose a person whose very name brings about an automatic inner smile. Next, invite all the emotions and sensations associated with this person to fill you up completely. Then turn your attention to your body and notice what you feel.

Chances are you feel open, flowing, a little more connected to yourself and the world around you. This state of being, which we'll refer to as Expansion, is what allows us to be fully present in any moment or situation. It's also the pathway to our greatest wisdom and creativity.

Now think of someone truly reprehensible.

Whether part of your own life or a public figure, make sure this is a person whom you judge harshly. Next, invite all that judgment to fill you up completely. Then turn your attention to your body and notice what you feel.

Chances are you feel crunched up, shut down, a little less connected to yourself and the world around you. This state of being, which we'll refer to as Contraction, is what limits our presence in any moment or situation. In a contracted state, we're unable to gain access to the breadth and depth of our perspective, or to cultivate peace of mind.

Most of the time, we exist somewhere between the opposing poles of expansion and contraction. But taken together, these two simple exercises point toward an important principle – judgment makes us feel bad. And when we feel bad, it's much harder to be our best.

### **Caveman Logic**

Even if this principle were well understood, however, it wouldn't be enough to make us surrender our most closely held judgments. That's because there's an instinctive part of our brains that functions in a strictly binary fashion. All it knows is yes/no, good/bad, us/them. Psychologists refer to this aspect of thought as primitive splitting. When we're expanded, such primitive splitting easily gives way to a more nuanced outlook. But when we're contracted, primitive splitting takes hold of us like a hypnotic trance.

The first key in breaking this trance is awareness. Once we realize the impact of primitive splitting, it becomes natural to regard virtually every judgment with suspicion.

I experienced this firsthand in my early thirties. It was at Thanksgiving dinner, where I became furious with both my parents. In my mind they weren't just bad; they were all bad. This was nothing new, but with a recent understanding of primitive splitting, I was no longer willing to indulge myself. It just didn't feel right anymore to stay up late, nibbling leftovers, dissecting my parents' shortcomings with equally disdainful siblings.

But I couldn't let go of my judgments just by force of will. For that I needed the help of my

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fiancée. Both of us had spent time in the film industry, so I put it to her this way: "When I watch characters in a movie, no matter how despicable their actions I can always see them as whole. I can appreciate the personal histories that led them to their transgressions. But I just can't seem to do that with Mom and Dad. So help me, describe them for me as if they were totally fictional."

This worked like magic. The trance broke. By imagining them cinematically, I was able to view my parents with sudden expansion. They still had flaws, of course, just like me and everyone else. But no longer were they mind-made monsters.

### **There Is No Them**

Once we're aware of primitive splitting, it's easier to look more closely at two related fallacies of the judgmental mind. The first is our tendency to group people we disagree with into an opposing camp. This creates the "them" in us vs. them. It may include those of a different religion, political view, gender, sexual preference, aesthetic, subculture, personality type, class, ethnicity, culture, location, lifestyle or even just a single opinion or trait that veers from ours.

The main result, when we group people in this way, is that we feel better than them. It may be a temporary salve, but underneath this illusion of superiority is a sense of separation. Separation always leads to contraction, which is at the heart of why judgment feels so bad. (Plus, even if we actually were "better" than those we judge on some ultimate moral scale, the very act of our judging, ironically, would serve to erase that distinction once and for all.)

One example of how this works is when someone cuts us off in traffic. Usually, even if we don't like to admit it, our initial fit of pique leads to an automatic mental tirade such as Those damn [fill in ethnic group]! Or fat people. Or rich people. Or tourists. After such an outburst, whether shouted silently or at full volume, there may be a momentary satisfaction. The results of such condemnation, however, far outweigh any benefit.

Another example can be found in an exercise that I routinely include at workshops. This exercise comes after a couple days of bonding and mutual

support that brings everyone very close together. At this point I ask participants to look around the room and imagine that every person they see holds a viewpoint on abortion that's vehemently opposed to their own. Then I ask them to notice if just this imaginary division of opinion creates a sense of superiority, separation and contraction. Uniformly, the answer is yes.

But this exercise, helpful as it is, carries within it the second and related fallacy of the judgmental mind. Whenever we lump people into a "them" of any variety, there's an assumption that all those in the group are basically the same. We may call them Palestinians, or lawyers, or tree huggers, or fundamentalists. Though it's necessary to use such labels to communicate, at the same time they're always false. Only from a distance do any two individuals seem alike. While they may share certain key characteristics, there are also millions of distinctions – inherited, learned, chosen – that make them absolutely unique.

Therefore, at best, labeling any type of "them" is a dangerous convenience. In addition to perpetuating contraction, it dulls our wisdom and distorts our interactions. This is true at every level of society, from governments to organizations to families to the secret corners of our own minds.

### **There Is No Us**

At this point, you may be thinking that the readers of Spirituality and Health probably need to hear this message far less than most people. You may conclude, as the saying goes, that I'm preaching to the choir. But as someone who travels extensively to churches all across the country, I can tell you with certainty that there is no choir.

By that I mean the following – just as it's a fallacy to think of any opposing group as a uniform "them," it's also a fallacy to think of any of our own communities as a unified "us." This idea can be hard to swallow, because we want so badly for there to be an us. In the core of our being we need to belong. We gain strength in numbers, even when those numbers add up to a small minority. It feels so reaffirming to hear a sermon or stump speech from someone who powerfully puts forth our view, the right view.

And yet, every alliance is temporary. Every coalition is provisional. Every group, no matter how seemingly stable, is in constant flux. It's no surprise that the most successful and dynamic churches I visit are also the ones most in turmoil. Powerful groups are comprised of powerful personalities, and sooner or later cohesion will give way to discord. Sub-groups and splinter groups are always just around the bend. That's why there are Blue Dog Democrats and Log Cabin Republicans, Reform Jews and Liberation Theologists. That's why your diehard group of college friends may not be so tight anymore, and why a reading group that bonds over the shared love of one book may break apart in dissension over another.

Once we're able to embrace that there is no fixed "us," it's no longer as necessary to identify with our judgments, to base our sense of self on

### **The More Aware You Are of Your Judgments, the Easier it Gets to Relax Them.**

who and what we include, exclude, champion or deride. And that's when the real work can begin, when we're finally ready to use our judgments as tools for growth and healing.

#### **Step 1 – Judge Away**

You've already done this earlier, in the contraction exercise. As you reprise it now, by focusing on someone or something that you find reprehensible, stay with the process until you can easily locate the resulting contraction in your body. Make sure it's palpable, discernibly unpleasant.

#### **Step 2 – Melt the Armor**

Take your attention off the subject of your judgment and place it fully upon the contraction. Don't try to understand it, change it, or make it go away. Instead, simply keep your attention focused on the sensation of the contraction as it appears in your body. If your mind wanders, gently bring it back. See if you can approach the contraction with a sense of openness, genuine interest and caring.

When you do this, a contraction always releases. It may take a just a moment or a few minutes, but sooner than you imagine the dissolving contraction brings you face to face with the emotion it's been trying to protect you from.

#### **Step 3 – Feel Your Way Open**

Notice what you're feeling right now – in your body. Is it anger? Frustration? Powerlessness? Hurt? Where do you feel it? In the same place as the contraction, or elsewhere? Is it warm or cool? Sharp or diffuse? Is it possible to keep your attention on the emotion with the same openness, interest and caring that you brought to the contraction?

If you're able to do this, even for a short while, the emotion will take your cue and begin to flow freely. At this point a number of things may happen. For a time it may become more intense. Or it may disappear. Or it may yield to a more primary emotion. If you began feeling angry, for example, that anger may become hurt, or grief, or humiliation.

No matter what happens in this particular instance, it will arise within a state of expansion. Even if the emotions are difficult to experience, the expanded state in which they occur, as we've seen, is preferable to remaining shut down.

#### **Step 4 – Revisit the Villain**

After the most intense emotions have passed, and you feel a resulting calm, bring your attention back to the subject of your previous judgment. Are you able to do so without re-experiencing the same intense contraction? If so, you've given yourself a great gift. You've come to know, firsthand, that what often fuels our biggest judgments is a well-spring of unfelt emotion. Once those emotions are felt, the judgment no longer has the same power to cut us off from life.

That's why our judgments of others can be so valuable for growth – they're like flashing neon signs pointing directly to our own stuck places.

If revisiting the "villain" makes you just as contracted as before, don't despair. You may just have a substantial backlog of unfelt emotion and need to repeat steps one through three. Since letting go of judgments can't be rushed, it's important to be patient, and to avoid judging yourself for the amount of time it naturally takes. In addition, the remaining three steps may also help you get unstuck.

Before describing them, however, I'd like to spend a moment discussing a prevalent idea regarding judgment. You may often hear that your judgments of others are projections, and that they reflect some kind of similar transgression in yourself. If you're particularly contracted by people

who are cruel, for example, there may be ways that you are unconsciously cruel. Or, perhaps, you have a hidden cruel streak just dying to get out.

Sometimes, just recognizing such a connection can be liberating, and can take the rebounding sting out of our judgments. In my experience, however, we're not usually able to experience the full benefit of such reflection as long as a reservoir of unfelt emotion still exists. Emotion is the key. That's why feeling it, which for many of us is a lost art, is the most direct route to a more expansive life.

#### **Step 5 – Face Off**

If one or more of your judgments continues to linger, imagine that the offending party is right in front of you. Without any distance for either of you to hide behind, speak your complete truth about the situation. Scream your words if necessary, paying no mind to civility or political correctness. Keep coming back to your own feelings – I'm so furious! I feel betrayed! My heart is breaking! – so that rather than staying mired in the accusations, instead you're able to release your own pain.

#### **Step 6 – See the Child**

To further encourage your expansion, picture the offending party as a newborn, as a toddler, as a student on the first day of school. Did he or she deserve your judgment then? What traumas would have been necessary to lead from childhood innocence to such depravity? Even if you believe in pure evil, that monsters are born rather than made, what must it be like to bear such a curse?

Most of the people we judge are clearly not monsters, and in fact are much like us. But whatever we hold against them usually stems from some experience or circumstance out of their original control. They're not so much acting in response to the present situation as re-acting to what happened long ago. Recognizing this doesn't make them less responsible, but it may make us a little more likely to soften.

#### **Step 7 – Trade Places**

Finally, if you still need a little more help, step into the shoes of the person you judge. For just a minute or two, pretend that you are that person,

and try to experience the situation from his or her perspective. It's not the person's beliefs or justifications that matter, but how it really feels to live that particular life.

If suddenly you're awash in a painful emotion such as hatred, negativity or bitterness, see if you can touch the awful wounds that gave rise to it. If you encounter a complete lack of feeling, attempt to grasp whole stretches of time so frozen and vacant.

#### **Discernment**

As we've explored, the greatest barrier to compassion is judgment. Yet some people in the world seem to have earned our judgment. Rapists, abusers, murderers, terrorists – no matter how wounded they may be, their misdeeds can be so heinous that it seems wrong to regard them with compassion.

But the one of the best ways to understand compassion is as loving care. It doesn't mean that the recipients of our compassion haven't done wrong to themselves and others. Nor does it deny that they may have committed hideous crimes, deserve serious punishment, and even death according to some. In other words, it's possible to condemn people's actions and still feel compassion toward them.

When that happens, your judgment becomes discernment. What's the difference? With discernment, you're able to remain in a fully expanded state while still possessing a specific opinion, belief or value. Your point of view is no longer hurtful to you. In the expansiveness that follows, you're able to see the offending party, and indeed the whole world, with much greater clarity.

Imagine – I disagree with President Clinton's actions but still love him like any other person.

Imagine – I take issue with President Bush's policies but still value him as a sacred human being.

Whoever you've judged, whether as distant as a president or as close as your immediate family, imagine being able to wish them all healing, peace, and a heart as open as your own.

Doesn't it feel good? ❖

Raphael Cushnir is the author of *Unconditional Bliss* and *Setting Your Heart on Fire*.

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