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Accountability and Mercy
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It has been quite a week. Many of us are reeling from the news and other events of the past year. There is a lot of talk about what constitutes mercy and accountability.

Let's begin with some light heartedness:

A man who smelled like alcohol sat down on a subway seat next to a priest.

The man's tie was stained, he was disheveled and a half empty bottle of gin was sticking out of his torn coat pocket. He opened his newspaper and began to read. After a few minutes the man turned to the priest and asked 'Say Father, what causes arthritis?' The priest replies 'My son, it's caused by loose living, too much alcohol and contempt for your fellow man' 'Well I'll be darned' the man muttered, returning to his newspaper.

The priest thinking about what he said, nudged the man and apologized. 'I'm sorry to come on so strong. How long have you had arthritis?'

'I don't have it, Father. I was just reading here that the Pope does.'

Sometimes in our need to judge and condemn, we move too quickly. And we all need to judge and condemn, it helps us know where we are in the world, what we stand for and who is on our team and we all do too much of it. But does this mean that it does not need sometimes to be done?

This is tricky terrain.

So many great people tell us that when and how we judge others tells us more about ourselves than about any other; that our need to judge others keeps us small, outside of our own compassion for ourselves and others and outside of the ability to experience the moment, which they tell us, is where peace resides. Indeed, the great teachers say, when we judge others, we participate in violence against them and ourselves.

I recently watched a youtube video that told us that how we approach the world, with which judgments, narratives and reactions, changes what we perceive and that what we perceive, they theory goes, changes what we experience.

We all know this philosophy on some level. And yet, if what we experienced in the past was abuse and domination, was traumatic, is changing our judgments and our narrative about it sufficient to change our experience of it? Is rewriting it all that is needed to come to terms with what occurred, to heal, to go on in our lives with some level of wellness? Is there also a need to ask those involved to be accountable? What level of accountability is needed for mercy to come into play? What are the limits of accountability and mercy?

These last few weeks brought us quite a display of these concepts on the national arena with Bret Kavanaugh and Dr. Ford's testimony about his sexual assault of her when he was 17 years old. The division in our nation has widened ever more. Sadly, we have remained split on party lines, the left sure that Kavanaugh should at least not be a supreme court justice, the right feeling this is a democratic conspiracy to keep conservative, and some feel Christian values, from the supreme court.

Unitarian Universalist, Rev. Dr. Sharon Welch, professor of Religion and Society at Meadville Lombard Theological School in her essay, "Return to Laughter" writes, "We learn how to be moral not from God, not from a "being beyond being" - but from the experiences, teaching, and guidance conveyed to us by other human beings."

What morality are we learning now?

I took an online course with this same Rev. Dr. Sharon Welch called, "Nonviolent Resistance." She asked us to read a paper she wrote called, *The Persistence of the Prophetic*.¹

In her paper, Welch talks about the work of social psychologist, Dr. Albert Bandura names 7 practices of what he calls "moral disengagement"² – ways that human beings commit and justify behaviors that they would otherwise recognize as morally repugnant.

Someone recently asked me, If Bret Kavanaugh were a democrat and was pro-choice, supported sane gun legislation and believed in climate change and would work to support EPA standards etc and Dr. Ford came forward with the very same testimony, and he responded in the very same way, would you still support his nomination?

I have asked other democrats this question. Many have said they would continue to support him as a nominee; they would have to. Too much is at stake. Some said they hoped they would not support him, but they were not sure. Others said, they would feel the same way they do now and would not support him, could not support him.

What would you do?

We root for the team we support and are often blinded by the faults of that team or person because of our alliances. We morally disengage, Albert Bandura wrote, long enough to get our needs met.

We know this. It happens in a baseball game when a call is made of foul ball. If it is our team and it was a close call, we yell: that was in! If it is not our team, we yell: good call!

¹ Sharon Welch, "The Persistence of the Prophetic: Honoring and Engaging the Work of Marc Ellis," *Academy of Religion*, San Francisco, CA, Nov. 21, 2011.

² Welch, 3.

We like our team to win. We like our experience of the world to match our beliefs about what is right and just. Anything else puts us in disarray.

And our country is in moral and mental disarray. We do not agree about what is true anymore. We do not agree what is just or necessary or real or even who has the right to decide.

At one protest recently of the Kavanaugh confirmation, a freshman from a liberal arts college said her faith played a role in her support for Kavanaugh, whom she had hoped Trump would pick. She went on, "A lot of the morals I have because I'm a Christian, and a lot of the beliefs I have because I'm a Christian, are definitely in line with Kavanaugh."³

For this young woman, Kavanaugh confirms enough her views of the world to see him as the right candidate, to ignore not only his rageful display when questioned but testimony given that was very convincing about behavior that would disqualify any candidate as judge of another's character. For others at this rally, this of course was not the case.

I have heard some good people ask: Can we ruin a man's life based on something that happened when he was a young man? My question is this: Can we continue to ask women whose lives have been ruined by these actions for so many years, to remain silent? Does mercy not require accountability in order to be made possible and does accountability not require some acceptance of complicity?

If Kavanaugh had said, I do not remember that event but I did drink too much during that time and I have long been in recovery and if this occurred, I ask for your forgiveness- would this change your views of him?

To go on in this world together, and we must, do we not all have to reimagine one another, no matter what team we are on, man or woman, democrat or republican, documented or undocumented, white or black, liberal or conservative? Must we not all revision one another with more room for an equal humanity among us?

Paul Lederach in his book, [The Moral Imagination: The Art and Soul of Peace Building](#) states the problem of peace across great divides in this way: "How do we transcend the cycles of violence that bewitch our human community while still living in them?"⁴ The answer he proposes is this: "Transcending violence is forged by the capacity to generate, mobilize, and build the moral imagination."⁵

³ <https://religionnews.com/2018/09/28/on-capitol-hill-faith-groups-protesters-duel-over-kavanaugh-confirmation/>

⁴ John Paul Lederach, [The Moral Imagination: The Art and Soul of Building Peace](#) (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 5.

⁵ Ibid.

He calls the defining characteristic of the moral imagination “the capacity to give birth to something new that in its very birthing changes our world and the way we see things.”⁶

Should teenage sexual assault be the standard for judging the fitness of character? Is this a democratic conspiracy as Kavanaugh accused? Or is this a time when woman whose lives have been irrevocably altered by teenage sexual assault have decided that they can no longer remain silent, even in the face of great power, especially in the face of great power? Dr. Ford has received so many death threats that she has had to go into hiding.

In which context, at which time do we begin to forge a new moral imagination if not here and now? Change begins to happens when people are held accountable for their actions.

Lederach defines the moral imagination of peace building as having 4 key components he calls disciples. The first is the capacity to imagine ourselves as embedded in a web of relationships. This of course is our 7th principle, Respect for the interdependent web of existence of which we are a part.

Lederach pushes us further though and as he tells us that patterns of violence are broken when the moral imagination can recognize that we are entwined in a web of relationships with all people: that we have co-created each other in a complex dance of human history and as such, must find the way to undo the cycles of violence we are in as one people who have co-authored these multi narratives.

All of us here and that young woman at the rally supporting Kavanaugh, and Kavanaugh too, are part of the same web. We have co-created one another and in order to continue to have influence in one another lives, we must maintain the capacity to speak to and hear one another.

The young woman at the Kavanaugh confirmation rally mentioned her Christian values. Could we engage together on the subject of Christian values? Share what parts of our practices are similar, talk about where our beliefs come from, ask who she believes Jesus to be and how she thinks Jesus would judge Dr. Ford’s testimony? Could we not ask her, even though she has a lot to lose, as the economist Justin Wolfers [asked on Twitter](#), “Would you appoint someone to the Supreme Court if you think there were a 25 percent chance they’ve done bad things? A 10 percent chance? A 5 percent chance? A 1 percent chance?”⁷

Lederach writes about how violence can only occur when a web of relationships is denied; violence can only occur when a web of relationships is denied. *How well victims of violence know this*. He goes on, “Breaking violence requires that people embrace a more fundamental truth: who we have been, are and will be emerges and shapes itself in a context of relational interdependency. Such vision requires humility and self-recognition.

⁶ Ibid, 27.

⁷ <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2018/09/the-wrong-question-for-brett-kavanaugh/570697/>

People don't just take notice of the web. They situate and recognize themselves as part of the pattern."⁸ In other words, we become accountable to one another.

We must recognize ourselves in what we find as our current reality and then imagine ourselves together into a world that does not require violence, or denied relationships, as its primary strategy. Peacebuilding, moral imagination, requires an understanding of mutuality and relationship.

Part of what recognizing our interdependency, of being vulnerable together too, is considering what we as a culture offer our boys and men as identities. We are all accountable for the behavior of our young men, that too many see attempted rape as horseplay, that too many see drinking to black out as experimenting, that too many accept the jokes about women's bodies as part of what it takes to be considered one of the club.

It is not only our young men we need to be living with in more mutuality. We know our young women better too. With both young men and women, we must speak more about and model what it looks like to show that excessive alcohol and drug use compromise one's ability to keep oneself safe, we much teach an understanding of the body as sacred, something that we make choices about. We must talk about how sex cannot be consensual when drug and alcohol impaired. We must begin the conversation about how the ways we participate in sex shapes us, our values, our reflections, our core relationship to self and soul.

Sex can be an experience of awakening and satisfaction and joy and it can be an instrument of violence. About all other things with so much power we insist on conversation. We must include this in our discourse with our children and grandchildren and all young people who look to us for care and guidance. Part of building a new moral imagination is expanding and questioning who we envision as part of our communities of care and who we leave out.

We are all sexual beings. We are all entwined in the politics of desire but in adolescent those boundaries and messages and morals get packaged through the media and video games and hormones. We need worthy guides.

Have we spoken to our children and grandchildren, male and female, about sexual assault, how it happens, why it happens, to whom it happens? Have we had conversations about how women's bodies in our culture get made into objects of fulfillment and desire that get separated from the humanity of the person inside the body?

We must begin. We must begin by listening when someone comes forward to tell us stories of assault and by educating one another so that those stories grow fewer.

⁸ Lederach, 27.

We must act within the interdependent web in which we live and recognize that more is at stake than our political viewpoints. What is at stake is human beings being treated with dignity and respect, as part of the web of interconnection, as fully in need of dignity and wholeness as every other human being.

What is the consequence of coming forward and telling the truth, let us stand and say, respectful consideration at the very least. How are mercy and accountability related? Mercy is the willingness to find shared humanity when accountability is offered. Mercy is the willingness to find shared humanity when accountability is offered.

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Paul Lederach calls the defining characteristic of the moral imagination “the capacity to give birth to something new that in its very birthing changes our world and the way we see things.”¹⁰

What new language do we need to learn to speak to change the moral imagination? What new voices do we need to hear, new poetry do we need to read, new stories do we need to be witnessing- until that which imagines within us can imagine all human beings as whole, as sanctified, as worthy of dignity?

Let’s learn that language my friends, one letter at a time, like all new alphabets are learned.

Here is the first sentence of my new language: I believe you. Come and talk with me. I will listen. Amen.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid, 27.