

Judging Others' Intentions

Pretend a friend commits to call on Friday to discuss a very important issue with you. Friday rolls around and she doesn't call. You call her house, but there is no answer. You start contemplating why she didn't respond. You wonder if she is upset with you. Did something happen?

Most of us are unaware of how much time we spend trying to figure out others' motives, essentially what they are "really up to." We consciously and unconsciously take in every subtle cue available from words, facial expressions, gestures and body posture to create theories about why people act as they do. We test our theories by asking calculated questions. We play back conversations like court transcripts in our heads. We check new information against previous conversations and evidence we've heard from other sources. Once we have a relatively complete theory, we draw in friends to discuss our assumptions. These conversations could last hours or days, involving more and more people. Finally, after all this investigative work, we decide we have the answer. Whether we are right or not, we will treat the person as if we know her motivation. Rather than accepting the moment as it is, we spend enormous amounts of time and energy trying to determine others' motivations in efforts to plan a response that protects us from possible attack, humiliation, appearing ungrateful, etc.

Most of us believe we can assess others' intentions accurately. In fact, research involving infants and toddlers proves that we do innately possess this ability. As we age, however, our CD-Roms provide automatic filters through which we interpret events. Our adult judgments are based on these filters created from our past, not the present moment or the person's actual intentions. The Power of Love encourages us to see past our CD-Rom filters and the falseness of our judgments, come to the present moment, and choose to see the best in others. It is only through faith in the goodness of others that we can create the life of kindness we desire.

Children (and adults) will attempt to meet their needs through whatever skills they've been taught. A college student of mine named Ginger had a grade school teacher who taught the class to put their heads down on their desks when they were bad. This practice remained dormant in her unconscious until one day in high school she and her friends were talking during the teacher's lecture. The teacher stopped the lesson to chastise the girls for being inconsiderate. Ginger immediately put her head down as bad feelings cycled through her body. The teacher shouted, "Well, Miss Ginger, if you don't find my words interesting or worth staying awake for, you can march yourself down to the principal's office. I don't tolerate students who are disrespectful." In Ginger's mind, putting her head down was a way to show respect and regret for her actions. The teacher, however, judged Ginger's head-down position as a sign of disrespect.

Years ago a boy and his dog, a black Labrador, got lost in Florida's Ocala National Forest. Fortunately, both were found the next day. Reporters announced that the dog had stayed with the boy to keep him warm. I wondered, "Who interviewed that dog?" Soon after, sales of Labrador puppies in Florida soared as parents bought dogs to protect their children. If we are going to attribute intentions to others, why not attribute noble ones? If an entire state can see the best in a dog's actions, let's do the same for each other, ourselves and students like Ginger!

Many children learn inappropriate ways of expressing emotion and getting their needs met, either through direct teaching of strategies (like Ginger's experience) or through modeling of negative behavior from adults. Screaming when angry, hitting when frustrated, manipulating when wanting something, and lying or appeasing others to avoid conflict are all common strategies. We can judge the motives behind these actions as disrespectful or hateful and label