

How to Avoid Becoming a Self-Righteous Virtue Signaler

Here is an online proponent for gun control, a man ignorant of the difference between a shotgun and a .22 rifle, decrying millions of gun owners as Nazis. There sits the woman who makes a point of telling her dinner companions, some of whom are eating the café's steak special, that she's a vegan. At the YMCA another woman throws scornful glances at the obese man working out beside her. Next up is the politician who flies by private jet to lecture his audiences about global warming. In the pews is the Christian who weekly hears sermons on mercy and forgiveness, yet plays God, deciding who among his family and acquaintances deserve heaven or hell.

Condemnation by the self-righteous—what some call virtue signaling—is rampant these days. Many among us jump to conclusions before we have any evidence, eager to show we embrace a just cause or stand on some high moral plateau. We point accusatory fingers, insult those we disagree with, impugn our opponents with motives and deeds that have no basis in reality.

Occasionally, though, if we are lucky or blessed, life can make plain the beam in our eye.

That beam can become apparent when we think highly of ourselves, and then royally mess up. That judge's bench from which we have condemned others is kicked from beneath us, and we crash to the floor. We see our sins, the beam in our eye, and become sick with the revelation of what we have done or failed to do.

With luck, we learn a hard lesson from this crash: *We learn to withhold judgment.* With our flaws and wrongs apparent to us, we realize we scarcely know our own hearts, much less the hearts of our neighbors. We realize it is possible to judge actions, given some strong evidence, but not motives—not without a great deal more information. In this toughest of

classrooms, we may even learn real tolerance, not to be confused with our present ideas of acceptance and compassion, not to be coupled with the mawkish virtue signaling that takes place everywhere these days.

We learn to give others the benefit of the doubt.

Let me offer a trivial example.

Two men are using the restroom at the public library. Both emerge from the stalls about the same time. One man washes his hand at the sink; the other goes straight to the door and departs. The man at the sink shakes his head, disgusted by the other's failure to observe the customary rules of hygiene.

Yet the man washing his hands knows absolutely nothing of the other man. Perhaps that man's doctor has told him that his itching fingers are the result of dry skin, and to avoid soap and water. Perhaps his daughter died two weeks earlier, and the man's a walking zombie, scarcely aware of where he is or what he is doing. Perhaps he is wondering how on his salary as a custodian he's going to pay for his wife's surgery for her cancer. Perhaps he simply forgot to wash his hands.

When we give way to self-righteousness, when we believe we are floating above the common herd, when we condemn others without giving an ear to all sides of an argument, we embarrass ourselves.

In his book *12 Rules For Life*, Jordan Peterson writes "Set your own house in perfect order before you criticize the world." I doubt I will ever be capable of setting my house in "perfect" order, but I can stop blaming my misfortunes on others, and I am certain many of us could do with some of the humility Peterson advocates in his book.

As some of you have already detected, an irony is at work in this short essay. I have condemned the self-righteous, perhaps self-righteously.

Maybe.

But so did the Teacher who spoke of motes and beams.

"Judge not, that you may not be judged. For with what judgment you judge, you shall be judged: and with what measure you mete, it shall be measured to you again. And why seest thou

the mote that is in thy brother's eye; and seest not the beam that is in thy own eye?" – Matthew 7:1-3

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