

Unlocking a Biased Heart

One of my biggest faults is my tendency to make judgments quickly and stubbornly cling to them. My chronic impatience and the anxiety I feel about change seem to have combined to create this regrettable hybrid of a habit that is now terribly ingrained in my personality. I am frequently blinded by first impressions, and it takes a great deal of time and effort to alter that often-unfounded belief.

Usually, this character flaw is mildly troubling without causing too much damage. Upon first seeing a new food, I may instantly assume that because the color is a bit odd and the texture unusual, the taste will be repulsive. At that point, anticipating an unpleasant experience, nothing will convince me to take a bite. From then on, I am likely to avoid that dish at all costs, making it nearly-impossible for me to adjust my opinion. I may well be missing the opportunity to discover a new favorite food, which is unfortunate to be sure, but not catastrophic by any means. I have been content until now to restrict my life in this fashion, assuring myself that someday I'll grow out of it.

During my SSLP, if I had let it, this involuntary process could have inhibited my interactions with the people I served. Many of CASA's clients have or have had drug addictions, mental problems, criminal histories, pasts as abusers, and more. In other words, people who are easy targets for criticism from someone without experience in any of those situations, like me. I struggled to fight my inclinations from the beginning, but knowing intellectually that a person should not have to be defined by their mistakes is much easier than actually keeping an open mind and only coming to conclusions based on a personal acquaintance.

When I acted as a facilitator for visiting time in CASA's Supervised Exchanges and Parenting Time (SEPT) program, I was given the chance to observe and interact with our clients

rather than just hear about their cases. However, before visits begin, each facilitator is given a packet in which to take notes, and in these packets we can see comments about each family. The notes typically describe why the family needs supervised visitations and warns us of any special needs or prior attempts to break rules. So, before Mr. Smith comes in for his visit with Cory, I would already know that he had a meth addiction, Cory is lactose-intolerant, and Mr. Smith has tried to use his cell phone during visits before. I found that this is just enough information to form a negative opinion without truly understanding a family's situation. It would have been simple for me to dismiss these parents as bad people, to think that they don't deserve to see their children at all, and do them a disservice by considering myself superior.

How much I would have missed had I thought that way! Coming to that kind of conclusion right away would have clouded my vision so that I could not see how loving these parents are, and how much effort they put into improving their relationships with their children. They are people trying their best to mend bonds that have been broken and get themselves out of an unfortunate situation. How they got there should not matter when it is clear that they are striving to move past their mistakes. My purpose was to support them by helping to make it possible for them to see their children, and to sneer at their pasts—even if only inwardly—would have affected my willingness to help and colored the way I treated them. The last thing anyone needs is to feel condescension from a stranger, especially not in a situation meant to be joyful, like playing with a child. In our SSLP readings, many authors discuss the need for an open heart when deciding to serve, especially in the face of all the prejudices that exist in our society, and I learned firsthand how essential that is.

A man who abused his wife and children, a mother who battled a heroin addiction, a father who suffered a mental breakdown and lost custody of his child: all these people could

easily find themselves in the SEPT program. When they come to the SEPT site, what they seek—what they need—is a peaceful place where they can come and see their child. During that time, they deserve to feel respected and at ease, otherwise concentrating on having quality time becomes unnecessarily difficult.

In fact, if the belief is strong enough, holding a negative opinion from the start can be even more damaging than merely discomfiting the parent. We facilitators take notes of any concerns we feel while observing visitations. These notes are then entered into a database and given to the courts, so what we write is directly seen by the judge who decides what kind of relationship that parent will be allowed to have with their child in the future. What we write is, of course, just our opinion of what is worrisome about the parent-child interaction, and that can vary depending on how facilitators view the parent. Say it is recorded that a parent has a history of sexual abuse, and at their first visit, parent and child share a long hug. If a facilitator is blinded by the recorded comment, then every hug, every fond touch, would be taken as a warning sign that the child is being groomed for sexual purposes, when without that notation, that kind of loving contact between parent and child would have seemed sweet. Another facilitator who knows that the parent has not seen their child in over a year would be more likely to see this as the kind of affection that is typical between parents and children who have not been able to see each other for a long period of time.

Patricia Killen and John DeBeer call this type of stubbornly-fixed perspective the standpoint of self-assurance in *The Art of Theological Reflection*. Giving an example of a taxi driver who is convinced that betting on horses is a better way to escape poverty than going to college, Killen and DeBeer say that people caught in the standpoint of self-assurance “do not notice distortions or inaccuracies in [their] perspectives on life” (Course packet 25). Rather, they

only use new information to nourish and defend their pre-existing beliefs. This pattern can easily become an endless cycle, where the person becomes more and more certain that their belief is the only correct one since everything they experience seems to corroborate what they already hold true.

Getting caught in this kind of feedback loop is all too easy when facilitating visits. If I am convinced that a former drug addict cannot be a good parent, then I will smugly take every time that their child seems unhappy or displeased as evidence to support this. This kind of narrow-mindedness is highly inappropriate for someone volunteering the way I did, but sadly, it is all too common in our general society. Discrimination of this nature is not as easy to call wrong as racism or sexism, but in my opinion it is just as offensive. Margaret Pfeil writes that in theological terms, social sin is defined as “systemic manifestations of sin that are not readily attributable to a particular moral agent” (111). That definition would rule out the discrimination of a batterer as a social sin, but I don’t think it should. Yes, abusing another person is morally wrong, and I would not argue that point. However, continuing to judge the batterer after they have begun taking steps to address whatever issues underlie their violence seems to me like an example of social sin even though there is a lingering moral component.

Just as racist assumptions can reduce an African American person’s opportunities, so too can the assumption that a man who has beaten his wife can no longer be trusted to control himself around other people. I realize that because a person of color has no choice about their skin tone, while we assign blame to batterers, the two examples are not precisely equal. Nevertheless, after that man accepts responsibility for his actions, admitting wrongdoing and endeavoring to prevent that kind of violence from reoccurring, to continue seeing him in an unfavorable light feels like it should be considered a social sin. This kind of judgment is

widespread enough to be a societal structure. People's attitudes shift when they find out that a person is a recovering drug addict, and someone with a history of criminal charges will have more difficulty finding a job than someone with a clean record, even if their qualifications are the same. These types of reactions are common, and accepted, enough to be considered a piece of our society's foundational framework, even if they are not as obviously sinful as judging a person based on race.

The problem may lie in our society's vision of justice. America is known as a country that is obsessed with lawsuits and meting out punishments, with a focus on what Howard Zehr calls criminal justice in *The Little Book of Restorative Justice*. Zehr describes crime as both a cause and effect of damaged relationships (193), and restorative justice as an attempt to heal those broken relationships. Criminal justice, however, is primarily focused on finding the offender guilty and causing them pain as retribution for their wrongdoing.

Since the foundational beliefs of American society tend to follow guidelines of criminal justice, of course it would seem acceptable to shun someone with a past of lawbreaking. They made the choice to commit a crime, and now they must face the consequences. If we were to adopt a stance of restorative justice, we as a society would no longer react with condemnation and reproach when we face an offender. Instead, when that person recognizes wrongdoing and shows a willingness to repair whatever damage may have been done, we would accept that acknowledgement of responsibility and welcome them back into our social order without censure.

Zehr points out that "restorative justice is ultimately concerned about the restoration and reintegration of both victims and offenders" (198), which I think is a philosophy the SEPT program has adopted. In a case with domestic violence and suspected child abuse, the offender is

usually the visiting parent—the parent without custody of the child. Both the bringing parent and the child can be seen as the victims. What is beautiful about the SEPT program is that not only does it give the visiting parent a chance to begin repairing their relationship with the child directly by being able to play in a safe environment, it also allows the visiting parent to make amends with the other parent. In many of these cases, the relationship between the two parties is too volatile for direct contact. But, by showing consistent care for the child and respect for the bringing parent’s wishes, the visiting parent can, in small ways, start to rebuild the trust that was broken.

In order to be able to see these visitations in this kind of light, I needed to move beyond my initial desire to denounce these visiting parents as wrongdoers who deserved punishment. As Clemens Sedmak advises, I had to *wake up*. He describes waking up as “learning how to listen, learning how to see, learning how to discover, learning how to speak” (18). Basically, waking up is to reject complacency and intolerance in favor of an open heart and mind, because only then can new experiences and people be fully appreciated. Sedmak directs us to question why the world is the way it is, allowing us to see the underlying causes of our realities. In my case, instead of simply thinking that because a person is mandated to use the SEPT program to see their child, they must be a bad parent or have a flawed moral character, I needed to question how and why they had gotten in that kind of situation. To do that, I had to abandon my patronizing stance and realize that these parents may have made mistakes, but they were determined not to be defined by their pasts. Their efforts to move ahead inspired a deep respect, and I admire the dedication and love leading them to do whatever they can to see their children.

When I began the SSLP, I knew on an intellectual level that the clients I would be working for would not have had the same experiences as the people I am surrounded by in my

suburban neighborhood at home and in Notre Dame's community. The people I know who are divorced or have parents who are divorced have experienced little turmoil in those separations; for the most part, they were as amicable as a divorce can be. I am not familiar with domestic violence, as I grew up with loving parents and as far as I know, all of my friends did as well. Drug abuse is something I've received warnings about in school, and I've heard some horrible stories, but I myself am not close with anyone who has struggled with an addiction to drugs. Many of the difficulties that CASA's clients experience are unfamiliar to me, and so I was quick to judge the parents I saw as blameworthy and somehow lesser than I and the other law-abiding facilitators were.

I have come to realize how reprehensible that line of thinking is, and how it conflicts with the spirit of service. To serve a group of people demands first that we are willing to give of ourselves without bias, and that we respect those whom we are helping. Deciding to participate in a program like the SSLP without first resolving to keep an open heart would be the worst kind of hypocrisy, and I am grateful that I grasped how narrow-minded I was being early on. I know how destructive concealed—maybe even unconscious—prejudices can be, and I hope that SEPT's clients, and people like them, feel that they can forge a rewarding new existence despite society's strictures. I, for one, am determined that my mind will stay open and I will stop seeking to assign blame. I trust that someday, that will be true of the entire world.