

The Danger of Judging Others

By [Harrison Barnes](#)

When I was growing up in Grosse Pointe, a suburb outside of Detroit, I lived on a street where all of the other families were married, and my mother was the only single mother on the street. At some point it became clear to me that the other families in the neighborhood did not approve of the fact that my mother was single. Our next-door neighbors, for example, did not particularly like living next door to a single woman.

One time I was doing some work on my mother's front lawn and the father of the family next door was fixing a flagpole, which was on the side of the house. His wife was standing there handing him screws and so forth while he was on a small stepladder. I frequently did yard work around my mother's house because I wanted it to look as nice as the neighbors' houses. I did this all on my own and, since I did not know what I was doing, I frequently did more harm than good. While many kids are forced to do yard work, I actually did it of my own volition. A few hours after I had started the yard work on this particular day, the couple fixing the flag pole looked over at me and frowned in disapproval as I was in the middle of screwing up some task. A few moments later, I heard the man say the most amazing thing to his wife:

"The reason we are so happy and have such good kids is because we are moral. We do not believe in things like divorce. Our kids will always do better than that sort of kid and always be much happier because we set such a good example."

For a 12-year-old boy from a divorced family standing in the front yard of his mother's house doing "voluntary yard work," this was not an easy thing to hear. It was a sign that I was being excluded by people in the neighborhood and being looked down upon simply because my mother was single.



We had originally lived in another part of Grosse Pointe, in a house that my mother had purchased for around \$30,000 in 1975. While we had been living there, she remarried, and her second husband, John, became very sick and died of cancer in the late 1970s. After he died, my mother received an insurance settlement of around \$100,000 and decided that she wanted to use the money to move to a nicer neighborhood than we were living in at the time. The \$30,000 house was in a white [blue-collar, working-class](#) neighborhood where our neighbors put on overalls to go to work in factories each day. The \$120,000 house my mother later purchased was in a [white-collar](#) neighborhood where our neighbors put on suits to go to work each day. That \$120,000 was probably the equivalent of around \$500,000 back in the early 1980s.

One of my mother's sorority sisters from college, Diane, lived a few doors down from our house. Her sorority sister apparently also did not feel comfortable having a single woman on the street; my mother learned of this from other sorority sisters of hers, whom she still saw around Detroit. These other sorority sisters also shared with my mother various insights of our neighbors and other acquaintances, which they had learned about from Diane. Although Diane did not tell us what she thought, and most of our neighbors never said anything about what they thought, my mother's other sorority sisters were more than happy to pass on to my mother what everyone was saying about her. Pretty soon, my mother learned that our next-door neighbors, along with all the other "picture perfect" families around our neighborhood disapproved of the fact that there was a single mother living on the street. This was very hurtful for my mother to hear.

My mother acted as if this did not upset her, but I knew that it did. For her, purchasing a \$120,000 house in a decent suburb of Detroit was one of the most significant things she had ever done--a lifetime achievement. She was very proud of this and wanted nothing more than to be accepted by our neighbors.

My mother also learned that certain parents in the neighborhood did not want their children coming over to our house because they thought it would be bad for their children to see a single mother. In my mother's defense, she had never had a lot of boyfriends and so forth; in fact, she dated fewer than ten men over my lifetime that I know of, including my father. Nevertheless, our neighbors seemed to think there was something wrong with a woman being single and did not want this influence rubbing off on their children.

To their credit, many of our neighbors were right on, and as it turned out, going over to our house could have been a bad thing

in many respects. My mother rarely got babysitters and I was home alone after school from the age of 10 or so. Moreover, because my mother worked all the time, she was tired at night, so even when she did come home from work, there was little supervision. Finally, my mother went out many evenings with friends and left me home alone. With no supervision, I got into trouble from time to time, doing things that young kids do, and, were I a parent, in retrospect I might not have wanted my children over at my house either. Nevertheless, this was something that hurt my feelings as well as my mother's.

One evening when my mother was out, a woman across the street came over to my house and invited my younger sister and me over for dinner. I was excited, and when I showed up at her house for dinner with my sister, she gladly welcomed us inside. I was no more than 12 or 13 at the time and my sister was around 5. We were inside only a few minutes when the woman looked me up and down with disapproval and told me that if I wanted to stay for dinner at her house, I would need to go home and take a shower and change clothes. I was hurt by this, but I decided to run across the street, where I quickly showered and changed clothes. When I finally sat down at the dinner table with the woman, her husband, and two children, the woman told me to put my napkin in my lap. As I started eating she told me I was not holding my fork properly. She told me to wipe my mouth with my napkin. Finally, she said something I will never forget:

"If you do not wipe your mouth off when you get food on it, we will never invite you over to eat again."

For the rest of the meal I sat there in silence and in fear. I was never invited over to her house again and whenever I saw the woman, she would look at me with disapproval. She made her disapproval of me known to her children: One time I remember her little boy was playing on our street and he said something like: "My mom says not to talk to you because you are trash! Ha-ha!"

We lived on a street that branched into two streets, and people used to drive by and throw liquor bottles and so forth at a large grassy triangular divider that separated the streets. It was not a frequent occurrence, but after three or four months, there would always be a collection of a few beer bottles on the divider and some broken ones in the street.

There was another woman down the street with a son and daughter who used to come by with a broom and dustpan to clean up the mess. Even though I had nothing to do with those bottles that had been thrown, I always knew that the woman thought I was responsible. In fact, she told my mother about it and was even angry at her. I had not even drunk liquor at that point in my life. This woman also had a son who was my age. He was very clean-cut but used drugs, which of course his mother did not know. One day, the son and a few of his friends were on drugs and they grabbed a skateboard off of my front lawn and took it over to his house, where they smashed it into pieces with a sledgehammer.

He and his druggie friends thought it was funny, but several of them told me about what had happened and who was to blame. I called the boy's parents and demanded they give me the money for the skateboard (it was expensive) and they refused. I told them that several other kids had seen the boy do this. They told me they did not believe me, and I told them they could call any one of the kids who had seen what their son had done. They did call, and all the kids that were questioned told the parents that their son had been responsible for destroying my skateboard. The boy still denied to his parents that he did it. When the boy's father called me up to tell me he would not be paying for the skateboard, I could not believe it:

"My son says he did not do it and, even though the other kids say he did, we believe our son. We are not going to pay for it."

Living with a single mother meant that, at the age of 13, I often had to fight these battles on my own. However, even at such a young age I knew there was something very wrong about this. It just did not make any sense whatsoever that a parent would completely avoid taking responsibility in these kinds of situations, and would be so willing to look the other way.

When I was around 14 years old, I looked out my window and in the house directly next door to me I could see the daughter, around 17 at the time, having sex with her boyfriend behind a couch. Seeing this became a regular occurrence, as I witnessed it more than a few times. Within a year or so, we found out that the girl was not only pregnant but planning on having the child. She was not married and it was a real scandal of sorts. She lived at home and raised the child in her parents' home--and she still lives with her parents. This was the same family that had judged my mother and told all of the other families in the neighborhood that they did not like living next to a single woman. Incredibly, this was the same family that was so vocal about how bad it was living next to a single woman.

A year or so later, the 18-year-old daughter of the woman who always cleaned up the intersection--who blamed me for the mess and whose son had ruined my skateboard--became pregnant. She too decided to have the baby while still in high school. In this extremely conservative (mostly Christian) area, this was almost unheard of.

The girl who was pregnant, her boyfriend, and the entire family were in the room when the baby was born. When the baby came out, to the astonishment of the white mother, the white boyfriend, and the white parents, the baby was obviously of African American decent. This was one of the largest scandals I ever heard of growing up.

To give you some background, Grosse Pointe, where I grew up, did not have a single black family, as far as I know, in the mid-1980s. Despite having more than 25,000 residents and being right next door to Detroit, which was more than 80% black at the time, Grosse Pointe was 100% white. It was really a unique place from the standpoint of racial uniformity. Furthermore, most of the residents in the city only associated with other white people. The city was so white that when our mail carrier changed one year and we got a black mail carrier, upon seeing a black man, our tame dog suddenly became ferocious because it had never seen someone with dark skin in its entire life. This was a very homogeneous group of people.

When I was in college, I heard that the daughter of my mother's sorority sister a few doors down had gotten divorced and moved in with her parents, and had been living there for years. This was another real shocker. This particular family had been very devout Catholic and had even been somewhat discriminatory toward people who were not devout Catholics, or who did not follow all of their same rituals.

Then, when I was in [law school](#), I was watching the television show *20/20* one evening and I saw a story about how the little boy who had called me "trash" when I was growing up, was in prison for raping some girls when he was in high school and living at home with his mother. The mother had long since been divorced. The story was about how his acceptance to the University of Michigan had been rescinded after they learned of the rape. I could hardly believe that the little boy who had been prohibited from even talking to me when I was growing up, was now in prison, and had destroyed his own life. I could also not believe that here was a mother who would not let her children even talk to me because I did not wipe my mouth properly while eating, and she now had a child in prison for rape.

What does all of this mean? For me, it is really unusual that in every case where the people were extremely judgmental of our family, the same things that they judged and excluded us for, came back to give them the very same sorts of identities in their own lives. Is this simply a coincidence? I am not sure if it is coincidence or if there is a deeper message to all of this.

The message to me seems to be that if we judge others and exclude others due to these judgments, then these judgments may turn around and come back on us as well. It is also a sign that people are often hypocritical--nobody is perfect, no matter how hard they may pretend to be.

In *The Great Gatsby*, Gatsby buys a house in a prominent area of Long Island in the hope that he can get the girl of his dreams, Daisy. Gatsby had had an affair with the married Daisy five years previously, before going into the army. Following the affair, Gatsby fantasizes about Daisy and wants nothing more than to be with her. Because Daisy is in a world of extreme wealth, Gatsby believes that the only way he can win her is by being very wealthy. He does not confront her with his feelings; instead he tries to win her simply by showing her how wealthy he is. The message is that Gatsby believes that wealth and money are more important than the power of love.

In order to become wealthy, Gatsby engages in bootlegging. Across the bay from where Gatsby buys his house, live Daisy and her husband. Gatsby can see the green light of Daisy's house from his window. He decides to throw numerous parties at his house, in the hope that Daisy will come by. Many people come to his parties, but Gatsby is not really friends with any of them, and they are just using him for his wealth and hospitality. Despite his wealth, Gatsby is never really accepted by the society in which he is trying to fit in.

One of the morals of the story is that love and happiness cannot be purchased, no matter how much money someone may have. In the story, all of the characters are controlled by money. For example, both Tom and Daisy are married and have a child; nevertheless, they both commit adultery. Daisy commits adultery with Gatsby and Tom with a woman named Myrtle. Both people try to find happiness with lovers and, despite doing so, they refuse to leave their spouses because of the risk of jeopardizing their wealthy lifestyles. While not being happy with their spouses, they also could not allow themselves to be happy with their lovers. The message is that happiness is not something one can buy.

Daisy eventually loses her respect for Gatsby, when she finds out that he is a bootlegger. Similarly, Tom, after having an affair himself, is angry when he learns that Daisy has had an affair. The characters in *The Great Gatsby* are all very hypocritical. *The Great Gatsby* is an incredible novel and, for me, it has always struck me as making three very important points: (1) that acceptance cannot be bought, (2) that people cling to status and in the process ignore the world around them, and (3) that people are often very hypocritical.

In my experience in growing up on that street in Grosse Pointe, I learned that acceptance cannot be bought; however, I also learned that people often cling to status while ignoring the world around them, and that people are often hypocritical. The fact that those people who shunned my family and me due to forces largely beyond our control, ultimately experienced the same issues in their own lives--this was something that was very instructive for me to see. *The more we judge others for their circumstances, the more we are likely to suffer from those same circumstances.*

THE LESSON

Do not judge or blame others for the way they live, things they say, or the manner in which they act; they are usually behaving in whatever manner they are because of their circumstances. Nobody has the right to establish parameters of acceptable behavior for others. Understand that nobody is perfect, and learn to accept others' imperfections in a kind, considerate manner.