

These past few weeks we've been thinking about the various sources of wisdom. We had observed that religions tend only to look to their own particular book or prophet for wisdom, but that there are many wise people and books outside our traditions that might have something to teach us. This appreciation for other traditions is part of our Quaker history. The American Quaker, John Woolman, went to live for a while with Native American, wanting, he wrote, "to feel and understand their life and the spirit they live in, if happily I might receive some instruction from them."

A few weeks ago, I mentioned a book called *The Four Agreements* written by Don Miguel Ruiz. *The Four Agreements* are four principles Ruiz believes will help us have fuller and happier lives. Last week, we talked about the first agreement, be impeccable with your word, and noted its similarity with Jesus' counsel to let our *Yes!* mean *yes* and our *No!* mean *no*. This week I want to talk about another principle in Ruiz's book—do not make assumptions.

This past Tuesday evening, Sam and I went to the Boat, Sport, and Travel Show. While there, we spent some time with Frank Gladden and his known associates, trying to keep them on the straight and narrow and failing miserably. Then they left for home, so Sam and I nosed around, looking at the boats and campers. We go to the Show every year, and every year, just before we leave, Sam wants to play this game where the participants shoot clay pigeons using lasers. So we did that.

There were two brothers there, waiting to play. Their father was sitting on a bench watching his sons. I sat down beside the man and said hello, but he didn't respond. I thought perhaps he hadn't heard me. I noticed he was wearing an Indiana State University, so I said in a louder voice, "Did you go to Indiana State? My wife went there." Once again he ignored me. Other people had heard me and had noticed the man hadn't responded. Though I was smiling, I found myself feeling very self-conscious and even resentful, wondering why this man wouldn't engage me in conversation. I began thinking bad things about him, that he was rude or perhaps even mean, and was enjoying my discomfort.

I decided I wouldn't make any further effort to engage him, so I just sat there, not saying a word, not even smiling at him when he eventually turned in my direction and smiled at me.

After a few minutes, one of his sons turned toward him and began speaking, using American Sign Language. The man hadn't been ignoring me. He wasn't rude or mean. He was deaf. I had thought ill of him for no good reason.

This is the problem with making assumptions. We don't usually assume the best of someone, but the worst, imagining hurt, malice, or rejection when none was intended. Consequently, we become resentful and distance ourselves from other people, believing they think ill of us, or might hurt us, when that might not be the case at all.

Think of a relationship you have with someone that is not what you want it to be. Or think of someone with whom you might be upset, and look honestly at that relationship and ask yourself, "Did I make an assumption about them that might not be true? Could I have wrongly assumed they were upset with me or angry at me, and should I give them the benefit of the doubt and work to restore our relationship?"

Sometimes we assume people feel a certain way about us, and they don't feel that way at all. And sometimes we assume a situation is a certain way, and it is not that way at all.

I remember quite a few years ago, I was invited to speak at a wealthy church in another state. I was feeling self-righteous and decided I need to hold their feet to the flame and tell them they weren't doing enough to help the poor. So I prepared this really hard message, and was looking forward to getting them right with the Lord. But I got the time wrong, arrived early, and was invited to attend a Sunday school class, where I met this poor man the church had befriended and taken in and helped. I had assumed this church was full of rich, self-absorbed people who didn't care, and instead this man told me story after story about how they were incredibly generous people who had transformed countless other lives in addition to his. Unfortunately, I'm not really good at thinking on my feet, so I gave the message anyway and they were such nice people that afterward they thanked me and even invited me back. But it was me who had the problem, not them. I had assumed a situation was a certain way, and it wasn't that way at all.

But more than that, I had assumed the worst about them, not the best.

This past Friday afternoon, I was walking home from town and saw a cat cross the road in front of me. It jumped onto a stone wall and was watching me as I approached it. I made a little detour to pet it, thinking it would probably run away before I could reach it.

To my surprise, the cat stayed put. It was a very gentle, trusting animal, so I stood there awhile petting it, talking with it about things I thought might be of interest to cats, then continued my walk. I thought how other people must have been kind to the animal, because it assumed people were generally good and trustworthy, so it didn't run away. It assumed kindness.

What if we assumed the best from people, not the worst?

People say, "Well, that's naïve. You're overestimating the kindness of people." Well, perhaps I am. But perhaps we underestimate the power of positive expectation. For I have found that when we assume the best of someone, they have a way of living up to that expectation.

Don Miguel Ruiz says, "Don't make assumptions."

But I wish to take that one step further and say, "Assume the best of others and see if they'd don't rise to the occasion and begin to live more kindly and love more deeply."