

My day in court: Grace and gratitude

by [Barbara Brown Taylor](#) in the [May 22, 2002](#) issue

I was judged last week. I had been dreading my 3:00 p.m. appointment at the City of Atlanta Traffic Court ever since the policeman handed me the yellow citation a month and a half earlier. In a sudden slowdown on the downtown expressway, I rear-ended a Toyota van loaded with a full-sized refrigerator. One second later a Ford truck rear-ended me, and my beloved 1987 Saab became the mashed filling in a three-car sandwich.

As we all got out of our cars to survey the damage, I met the two men who would be my companions for the afternoon: Garfield, the African-American man who owned the van, and Miguel, the Mexican-American man who had just bought the truck. No one was hurt and we all had insurance, so after a brief round of negotiations we agreed to stay put. Seven police cars passed us by, giving us plenty of time to learn about each other's jobs, families, weekend plans and life aspirations. Garfield's pastor even spotted our odd trinity leaning against the guardrail and pulled over to offer a prayer.

When the young white policeman showed up 90 minutes later, it was clear who was happiest to see him. I greeted him first, we all told him the same story and 20 minutes later we were on our ways, Miguel and I with citations for following too closely. Six weeks later I approached the courthouse steps, worried that I would not recognize him.

I had not been there in 30 years, but I had heard the stories: crowded courtrooms, belligerent defendants, cranky judges and whopping fines. I do not suppose that any preacher approaches a bench without Matthew's sheep and goats bawling in her ears. That extra baggage, plus my conviction that in any given situation it is I who have done something wrong, made my heart rate top 100 as I walked through the door. While other people may suffer from original sin, I suffer chiefly from original guilt.

Miguel leapt up to greet me when I cleared the metal detector. The calendar clerk had assigned us to two different courtrooms and had mixed up Miguel's two

surnames as well. This meant that by the time we made it to the right place, the judge was already seated and the deputy was halfway through explaining what we were supposed to do. Miguel and I scrambled for plea sheets, shared a pen and were trying to figure out whether “no contest” was our best bet when the clerk barked that there would be no talking in court. I wrote “Nolo” on my sheet and slid it toward Miguel. He wrote the same thing on his, and we sat there with our hands folded in our laps ready to go to the gallows together.

The judge was a white man with a really great haircut and an old southern name. He looked more like a prep school principal than a judge. The first case involved a charge of failure to yield against an old man with scoliosis who walked with a cane. “I didn’t mean to get in anyone’s way, your honor,” the old man said, “but that old car of mine stalled and I couldn’t move.”

“You still caused an accident,” the judge said, “but I’m suspending your fine. Now get that car looked at, OK?” Miguel and I widened our eyes at one another. The next case involved two women, each of whom insisted that the other had run a light. One wore extra large surgical scrubs, the other a set of casual coordinates. Both stood with their hands on their hips, breaking stance only to clarify the other’s offense by crashing the toy cars provided by the court.

“Are there any witnesses in the courtroom?” the judge asked. When no one answered, he turned to the furious women and said, “I’m dismissing your case for lack of evidence, but if you want your insurance companies to fix your cars, then I suggest that you get together and sort this thing out.”

Whatever I had feared for the past six weeks, this judge was not it. He was immune to high emotions, but quick to set the frightened at ease. He let everyone have his or her say, even when the lies were obvious, and he did not blame people for trying to justify themselves. He simply asked the right questions, and when he did the situation generally became clear. If it did not, then he dismissed the case. If it did, then he delivered a judgment that sounded less like punishment than a return to reality.

As I watched him work, I relaxed. Whatever he said to Miguel and me, it would be true. Whatever he fined us, it would be fair. Where had I gotten the idea that judgment was a blind fist coming down? On earth as in heaven, the quality of the judgment depends on the judge. Put the right one on the bench and the true source

of fear becomes clear. It is not the judge we fear, but what the judge will see when he looks at us with eyes that have seen it all.

When our turn came, Miguel and I stood before the judge shoulder to shoulder.

The deputy lost Miguel's citation and the clerk said he had never turned it in, but the judge would not join them in their pique. He asked Miguel a couple of questions in Spanish, Miguel answered them, and the deputy found the citation. Then the judge told us to sit down and called the next case. While we were still trying to figure out what had happened, the clerk came over and whispered in our ears. "Your fines have been suspended," she said. "You are free to go."

I was judged last week, by someone who accepted my plea. I was a goat, no contest, but instead of sending me into outer darkness he sent me back into the world, with a suspended fine and a sense of gratitude so deep that I drove like an angel all the way home.