

THE SET FREE LIFE

Holding Back the Twilight Zone

There's a fine line (well, some kind of line, anyway) between writing and speaking about what kind of behavior makes for the most productive relationships and simply railing against the poor behavior people exhibit. I'm sure I cross that line occasionally. I can be a scold. One wins no friends being a constant scold.

Most likely all of us have a memory of our parents or some close, older relative talking about "when I was a kid . . ." and giving us a lecture on how rude we youngsters were, telling us their fathers would have knocked them into next Tuesday if they spoke to their mothers the way we did ours. I hear myself in that sometimes, because the truth is I wish someone had instructed me early on in what it was to act like an adult. I wish someone who I believed "had it together," someone I respected, someone who looked good and exhibited confidence—someone who was everything I wanted to become—had taken an interest in me and taught me with patience and understanding how to become those things I wanted to be. I eventually figured out how to seek out those who could teach me and I've gathered what I needed. But I can't help but feel a deep sadness, a tremendous sense of loss, for what I know are quickly fading standards and practices in social interactions.

You may consider me picky—until you're reminded of the now-daily shameless misbehavior flung about the population. Lakeysha Beard talked on her cell phone as though she were all by herself on a 16-hour train ride from Oakland, California to Portland, Oregon, which might be no big deal, except she had seated herself in the quiet car. She was arrested for disorderly conduct by Oregon state troopers, but not before she'd received repeated warnings (and not after, either—all those hours, Amtrak employees kept warning but did nothing, compounding the insult). She complained of being "disrespected" by the officers. I was on a flight a couple of months ago where a young woman a few seats over had her iPod turned up so loud I could hear the music through her ear buds. She was asked twice by the people in front of her to turn the music down. The flight attendant told her emphatically that she was being rude and disturbing other passengers. With a sullen disregard, she turned down the volume but cranked it back up almost immediately. We all endured it for the 4-hour trip because we didn't want any trouble.

Merrill Markoe calls this "a renaissance of rudeness." We can offer our own tales of

the self-centered, unconscionable behavior we've encountered and feel our blood rise as we do, with "customer service" stories high on the list, in which we're treated as though we're interrupting someone's valuable time when it is we who provide the revenue that keeps a company going. Peggy Noonan noted, "We pay them to be rude to us," and doesn't that just instantly conjure up in your mind the last time you were treated poorly?

This oblivious, self-absorbed mindset is woven into our everyday lives, and it comes out in varying ways, like a garbage bag stuffed until it bulges and pops. This is why I sometimes look around and see people showcasing how much they hate themselves. Their appearance, like some psychic aura, broadcasts what they really think of who they are, and ultimately what they think of others. They'll sit next to you in the movies and talk to their companions as though they are sitting in their living rooms, and God forbid you should tell them to keep it down. They'll cut in front of you in the 10-items-or-fewer line in the grocery store with a basket full of stuff and practically dare you to protest, all the while looking like they slept in their clothes. They don't respect you because they don't respect themselves. They don't know how.

We did not used to be this way, not generally, not as a rule. It's the rule now. It's the new standard. Why care about anyone else? They don't care about me. Why control my passions when discussing difficult topics such as politics and religion, or just avoid discussing them to keep the peace? All that matters is that everyone knows my opinion. Why should a husband or wife consider the emotional tragedy of infidelity? "I need to do what's right for me." Why consider larger issues, such as respect for those who are riding in the train's quiet car because they want . . . um . . . *quiet*, when I can do what I want and be ready to fight with anyone who disrespects me?

Why control myself from writing some foul, vile comment on Facebook when I "have a right" to "speak out"?

It's some kind of weird, collective message: we're just animals. We can't control ourselves, nor should we. We have to do or say what we feel at any given moment, no matter what the



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Quick Links

"A Renaissance of Rudeness"

"We Pay Them to be Rude to Us"

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consequences might be, and if the consequences should be terrible, we can cry, "I didn't mean for that to happen!" Because after all, we were just doing what was best for us, what our instincts led us to do. How can that be wrong?

It feels sinister, this new standard of behavior, as though we've moved into a world once written about in science fiction novels. It's The Twilight Zone, and it's taking over the old spaces where no matter what we thought about an issue or about a person, we kept those thoughts to ourselves and acted graciously. No one needed to know our thoughts. Now we shout and ridicule and eviscerate and walk away in triumph. We all want to talk about how important it is to embrace diversity, show tolerance, accept differences, and love one another—but we talk about it with a knife held behind our backs, ready to sarcastically, snidely stab those who disagree. And if someone ventures to point out we need to be taught how to act, the reaction is to expose how hypocritical the critic is. Look, we need rules. It's not hypocrisy to clothe oneself with good behavior and acceptable attire. It's hypocrisy to believe that if we look good, we *are* good. No standard or guideline will ever cover up the human penchant for evil and stupidity, both low-level and high. The standards exist so we don't walk around assaulting everyone with what we think, what we want, how we feel, how we view ourselves and the world. We curtail our personal preferences so that we can interact without being social terrorists.

I keep hoping there will be a tsunami of voices that rise up, calling for change. We need a renaissance of good character. We need to teach the young how to act, because somewhere along the line they're not getting it from the traditional outlets. We need to be wisdom-givers as we show others what it means to be courteous, disciplined, self-regulatory, humble—and *why*. We need to put compassion into action: mercy that allows others to grow and recognizes that some folks are limited and will never learn, but fairness that demands that people act like adults because this is how societies thrive.

The thing is, I love people. I know that no one wants to be looked at as though they are worthless. No one wants to deliberately make others dislike them. We do that when we feel shut out and want to snarl at others before they snarl at us, when we are angry that we don't have the secret skills necessary to do well if we want to. I know the feeling of being an outsider misfit, not able to read the signals that others seemed to know from birth—and how did they know stuff? How did they know how to talk? How did they know how to fit in when it was necessary? How did they know how to conduct themselves in places like fancy restaurants and important meetings with smart people? Who showed them? No one had ever shown me. Here's one thing I've learned: knowing how to act, how to speak, how to dress, and how to relate to and respect others is the great equalizer. No one need see "poor" or "uneducated" or "from the wrong neighborhood" written across my face when I know how to move confidently in many different situations. This is why I will, from now until death, always offer to instruct and train others in what it means to act like mature, thoughtful, aware adults, rich in character strengths, choosing to act responsibly and helpfully, because it is real freedom. It expands opportunities. It allows people to focus not on themselves, not on only what they want, but on what makes interaction with them something pleasant, friendly, uplifting. How wonderful it can be to know that when people leave our presence, they feel good. Acknowledged. Respected.

It feels like a losing battle sometimes. I fear the Twilight Zone is winning. It takes a concerted effort for us to avoid

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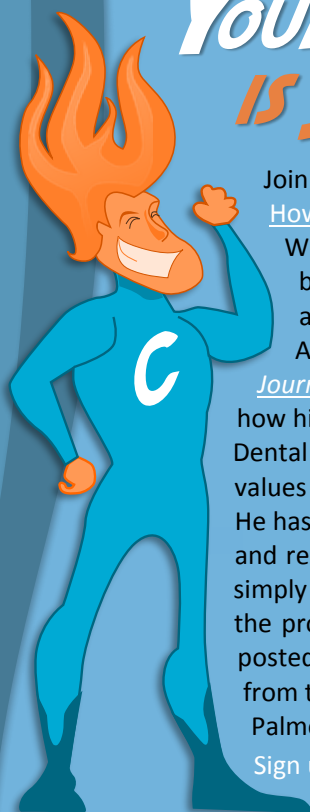
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retreating into an insulated, protective sphere where we don't have to deal with people unlike ourselves. The only way we can affect what's happening is by refusing to participate in the renaissance of rudeness, by acting with integrity and goodwill even when others do not. It's a decision, and I ask you to decide with me that it's worth it. And forgive me for scolding. ☹

YOUR CHARACTER IS SHOWING



Join me for my first tele-interview with Dr. Howard Giles, a successful dentist in Wilmington, Delaware, who also happens to be Arnold Palmer's dentist, and has authored a photorial of his observations of Arnie titled The King and I: An Unlikely Journey from Fan to Friend. I'll be asking him how his optimism and drive have acted to create Dental Associates of Delaware, and how his values play in the way he approaches business. He has taken the VIA Character Strengths Profile and received the full interpretive report (not simply the free results offered to any who takes the profile). The recording of the call will be posted on the web site. We will take questions from those of you who are interested in Arnold Palmer stories, too! ☹

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Quotable

One must keep one's character. Earn a character first if you can, and if you can't, then assume one.

Mark Twain

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