

How To Be Nice
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Niceness has a bad rap. Nice guys finish last, after all. Rightly or wrongly, many women prefer the bad boys. Niceness apparently just isn't that interesting or attractive. Maybe not enough drama. There's the quote attributed to Alice Roosevelt Longworth, "If you don't have anything nice to say, come sit here by me." Tell me all the spicy details, in other words. Scandals at least won't put us to sleep. Most folks agree that it's nice to be a little naughty, nice to add a dash of bitters to that Old Fashioned to offset the sugar in it. Nobody likes a goody-two-shoes.

Yet when I was just starting out in ministry and wet behind the ears, over forty years ago, an older and wiser colleague told me that ninety percent of being a pastor just meant being nice to other people. Imagine if I'd had that advice before I enrolled at the Harvard Divinity School. I could have saved three years and fifteen thousand dollars. And as it turned out, I didn't have that many opportunities to use my New Testament exegesis or systematic theology in my first church, but that admonition to be nice was tremendously useful and has stuck with me over all these decades.

I suppose the opposite of being nice is being mean, and it seems like there's way too much gratuitous meanness floating around. Violence and threats of violence, people trading insults, name-calling, raised voices everywhere, shouting matches at school board meetings, neighbors filing frivolous lawsuits just because they can. There's a woman down where we live who's infamous for suing other residents in her homeowner's association for having chickens, or solar panels, or water barrels that are the wrong color or can be seen from the road. She's a pain in the neck and clearly relishes that role. Mean people enjoy gumming up the works and making other folks miserable. There's a word for it, *schadenfreude*, which is German for taking pleasure in other people's misfortune.

Nice people, on the other hand, are cooperative, try to be helpful, extend the benefit of the doubt. They tend to be courteous, say please and thank you and, above all, "I beg your pardon." Nice people are team players. They can overlook a lot. They like to grease the wheels rather than gum up the works. And yet ordinary social relations make it difficult to be nice, because human beings, while occasionally charming, tend so often to be cranky, petty, spiteful, insensitive, insecure, intemperate and irascible. Let's face it. People are just hard to get along with. (Not you, of course. I mean those other people!)

In this, it seems to me that life is a lot like literature. To write a good novel, you need conflict. If everyone consistently behaved well, there wouldn't be much of a plot, and if all the characters were just plain rotten, that wouldn't be a page-turner either. Instead you've got a few characters who are pretty darn good, but afflicted with some fairly serious flaws, and others who are kind of creepy but still have a redeeming feature or two. And good novels reflect life. Because there just aren't that many completely bad actors around. Psychiatrists say that around one or two percent of the population could be labeled as sociopaths or no-goodniks. They have no moral instincts. They're just stinkers. But the other ninety-eight or ninety-nine percent are at least redeemable and have some desire to get along. We in that vast majority just keep plugging away, struggling with how to play well together, given human nature.

Churches have always been full of conflict, full of the push-and-pull of clashing personalities and agendas. The earliest records we have of the Christian church are the letters of Paul, who lived contemporaneously with James and Peter and Mary Magdalene and the original disciples of Jesus. Even though Paul never actually met the man he considered to be the messiah, he became a kind of traveling missionary, corresponding with networks of Jesus people in Corinth and Ephesus and Galatia and Rome. And in all these letters he's addressing feuding and bickering within the congregations. To the Corinthians, he writes "I have been told, brothers, that there is quarreling among you." Indeed. And what are they jostling over? Virtually everything. Whether Christians should be circumcised. What kind of diet to follow. Gender roles and sexual ethics. Who gets to decide? There were apparently any number of hotheads and blowhards in the congregation. It was a rowdy scene.

And how did it get so contentious? In the Book of Acts, one famous passage suggests that the very first Christians shared a kind of kum-ba-ya socialist commune, where property was all in common and everyone's needs were met, where (we're told) "with one mind they kept up their daily attendance at the temple, and breaking bread in private houses, shared their meals with unaffected joy." Probably strumming guitars and wearing love beads, too. But while the Book of Acts precedes the letters of Paul in the scriptures, it was written significantly later, after Paul was long gone. In other words, it was never really like that. The notion that the early Christians were one big happy family was a nostalgic fantasy about the good-old-days that never actually existed.

These first century Jesus people were basically Jews after all. The New Testament hadn't been written yet, so their Bible was the Torah. And

according to one old proverb, where there are two Jews, you'll find three opinions. A rabbi friend of mine was once invited to speak to a black church. As the worshippers warmed to his message, he began to receive some hearty calls of "Amen" from the congregation. Afterward, he was asked if he often got Amens in his own synagogue. No, he responded, the chorus I hear is "You're wrong, Rabbi; I can't agree with you there!"

So conflict, disputation, disagreement are primordial to the human condition. Jew or Gentile, Greek or Roman, they've been with us since the beginning. The important question is not how to avoid fighting with each other, but how to be sure we're wrestling about the right stuff and doing it in a way where no one feels too badly hurt, so that it doesn't permanently injure our ability to sit around the same table.

Because they are filled with mostly nice but imperfect people, inevitably churches squabble. Just as families spar within themselves. Just like married couples frequently butt heads. But they all nevertheless remain in relationship ... unless and until they don't. The family and marriage therapist Dr. John Gottman is one of the most respected practitioners in his field. He's sort of legendary for being able to predict on the basis of just a brief interaction whether a couple will stay together or break up fifteen years down the road. And in his work with hundreds of married partners, he's found that committed relationships can withstand a great deal of friction and pressure: anger, jealousy, boredom, grief and other negative emotions. But the one emotion that no relationship can survive is contempt. As explained in one article from the Gottman Institute, contempt is something different than just saying "I hate you."

It's something much worse. Something insidious and gross. Contempt is "I'm better than you." If betrayal is a question of trust, contempt is a question of respect. Contempt says, "I don't respect you. In fact, I'm going to actively disrespect you."

Contempt aims to demean, to humiliate, to diminish the very personhood of the other. Sarcasm, mocking and belittling are all expressions of contempt. And closely related is a particular form of personal attack, "most often packaged in "you always" or "you never" statements. The implication is that the offending partner hasn't simply offended, but is actually offensive." Disgust is the driving emotion here. Hard to reconcile or make peace with someone who is incurably awful, who always gets it wrong, who can never measure up.

But hardly anyone is that bad. Very few people deserve our complete condemnation, need to be canceled or excommunicated or judged reprobate.

After all, as Unitarian Universalists, we affirm the inherent worth and dignity of every person, or say we do. We pledge to practice acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our faith communities. Here at the UU Congregation of Taos, we have a written covenant, a solemn pact governing how we treat each other, and "our covenant is to engage each other with respect, compassion and generosity in all our endeavours." But how do we put that into practice? How do we operationalize niceness?

Fortunately, here are some fairly simple rules of the road that keep minor fender benders from becoming demolition derbies. In any argument, of course, try to use "I" statements. Instead of criticizing with "you never do your share of the work," try saying "I need help." You'll find most criticisms are actually misplaced wishes or desires. Rather than placing all the blame on someone else, take some responsibility for yourself. Be the change you want to see. Keep in mind in the midst of conflict that while we can't all be right or have our own way, we can all be made to feel valued and important. Rightfully so, because we are all important. But feelings of self-esteem can be fragile and have to be handled with care. Remember that we all need affirmation more than we need correction or advice.

Even with your adversaries, assume good intentions. Talk directly to the people you have an issue with, face-to-face. That's the healthy way to handle conflict, and the most respectful and the most likely to iron out misunderstandings. If you're upset with someone, unlike the Apostle Paul, please don't write a letter. Look at how that worked out for him. Despite all those lengthy epistles, Christians have been skirmishing for the last two thousand years. So if you have to write a scolding note, don't send it, and above all don't send it by email,

Poor old Paul. Thank goodness he didn't have internet! What a pickle we'd be in. Like niceness, he often gets a bad rap. But despite that, Paul did have some wise counsel for his readers. Like Dr. John Gottman, who suggests that couples who have become contemptuous of their partners can reverse the downward slide by consciously cultivating feelings of admiration and mutual positive regard, by revisiting the reasons they first entered into their relationship, by reviving the affection which was the original source of their bond, Paul says that in our congregations, we can overcome the centrifugal forces that threaten to splinter and pull us apart by re-centering ourselves in love, not in the sense of a mere fleeting attachment or sentimental feeling but love as an unswerving dedication to seeing the best in ourselves and each other. Paul writes in his letter to the Romans:

"Let hope keep you joyful; in trouble stand firm; persist in prayer. Contribute to the needs of God's people, and practice hospitality. Call down

blessings on your persecutors—blessings, not curses. With the joyful be joyful, and mourn with the mourners. Care as much about each other as about yourselves, Do not be haughty, but go about with humble folk. Do not keep thinking how wise you are. Never pay back evil for evil. Let your aims be such as all men and women count honorable. If possible, so far as it lies with you, live at peace with all people.”

Very sound advice. And if that’s too much to absorb or remember, just try to be a little kinder. Be nice.