

When Making Nice is No Good  
Steven Epperson, Parish Minister  
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UCV

So there I was sitting on the #4 bus heading home, minding my own business, reading a book, when all of a sudden a young woman sitting across from me, broken down red sequined slippers on her feet, and a tattered levi jacket, suddenly erupted: "Oh Jesus! No! Damn! Jesus, Jesus, No, No!" she cried out. Keeling over, jumping up in the aisle, stamping her feet in a frenzied step, she rifled through her pockets for something precious and obviously not there. She pulled the cord to signal a stop, the doors swung open, and we left her there on the sidewalk in a world of misery and pain. "Oh Jesus, No," she cried as the bus pulled away from the curb. Stunned silence. Some nervous laughter. Then slowly, in the embarrassed, polite company of strangers, each of us descended back into ourselves, reabsorbed into private worlds, and our journeys homeward.

Haven't you felt extreme discomfort in the presence of someone acting out; when a person unconsciously or willfully breaches the prescribed etiquette a certain place or occasion seemingly demands, like on the bus, in a business meeting, at a wedding, or a funeral, in a public park? I have; and the extremity of the discomfort underlines just how powerfully the internalized rules of etiquette, restraint, and propriety have become second nature to us. They're so pervasive and ingrained, that it's difficult imagining a world without them.

Becoming adept as adults in the daily, "ritual exchange" of what we call civility, or polite behaviour, has been called one of "the most important single processes in...the whole dynamics of...civilization." It is the process of turning the crude into the refined, the parochial into the urbane; it's the knocking off of our rough edges, the curbing of impulses, the turning of the unselfconscious, the adolescent, the *tribal* into self-conscious, disciplined, globalized, modern adults. In a word, civility is politeness; a civil person has or shows good behaviour and manners in public. East or West, secular, Christianised or Confucian, the observance of civility, of politeness, enacts the unspoken, but well understood set of assumptions and ground rules that make social, political and juridical life possible. (see Cuddihy, *The Cult of Civility...*, 1975, pp. 3, 12)

I'm not up here today to trash politeness, or manners, or civility *per se*. Imagine what kind of world we'd be living in without them! Just look at the story of Odysseus and the Cyclops. That one-eyed behemoth lived in a world beyond manners, where hosts ate their guests. Or consider, in our own days, what happened to Maher Arar and to unknown hundreds who have disappeared into black sites, that domain beyond civility, manners, and the rule of law. Think of our stories ancient *and* pulled from today's headlines, and with good reason do we revere and cherish a constitution that enshrines "peace, order, and good government" as basic values and attributes of our commonwealth.

No, I am not up here today to bury politeness and manners in *authentic* social relations, politics and religious life; rather, I want us to consider an insidious subset of attitudes and practices sometimes mistaken for civility, but is, instead, I believe, one of its most implacable foes, and a danger to the kind of life in the company of others that we deeply value. I'm calling it "*making nice*;" and I want us to think about when "making nice," when the tyranny of niceness, is no good at all for any one involved.

About twenty years ago, I attended a big conference sponsored by the staff of a progressive, scholarly Mormon journal. These conferences are held annually; they are attended by a couple of thousand people, and serve as a haven for the unofficial, and quite liberal, Mormon community. One of the sessions featured a speech delivered by a person admired for his intelligence and principled dissidence to the reactionary

bone headedness of official Mormondom and its leaders. The session was packed. I knew a lot of the people there.

The presenter was well into his prepared remarks when he started saying things I knew to be factually incorrect, and even anti-semitic. I became very agitated. My mind and heart were racing. What was I going to do? The speech came to an end. There was some time left for questions and comments. I knew that I should stand up and correct what I believed were errors in his presentation, *and* call him out publicly for the damaging, biased statements he had made. I sat there looking around, heart pounding, frankly hoping that someone, perhaps more knowledgeable, more senior than I, would say something. No one did, and I remained silent. To this day, I don't know how many people walked away thinking what he said was right; or how many, like me, who knew the truth and yet said nothing.

For twenty years I've been kicking myself in the pants, ashamed for not saying and doing the right thing that day. Why did I sit there and not speak up? *I was afraid of making a scene*; of making those around me uncomfortable; afraid of being impolite or *perceived by others* as ill-mannered and disrespectful by publicly rebuking a person whose writing and example in other settings had inspired others. My behaviour that day crossed a line; I mistook being polite, for "making nice." I made nice, didn't make a scene, and thus acted hypocritically and inauthentically. For in that moment, I was estranged from my self and from the principles of truthfulness and tolerance I professed to respect. For all I know, because I knuckled under to niceness that day, some people walked away from that conference a little more ignorant and biased about something I professed to care deeply. And all because I didn't want others to disapprove of me; disapprove of my being rude and contentious, of disrupting the smooth flow of events; disapprove of me maybe even for "showing off" what I knew and making someone else look bad in the eyes of others. (It wouldn't have been the first time.)

As well, and perhaps this is even more damning I think; by making nice that day, my mistaken excess of politeness actually demonstrated that I really didn't trust the goodness, integrity, maturity, and intelligence of the other people in that room. I see that now as a grievous mistake; an excess, not of politeness, but of insecure arrogance on my part; an arrogance that assumed that *I could handle the truth* but that others, perhaps, could not; *what a presumption!* My fear of disapproval placed me beyond the possibility of being in right relationship with adult women and men who I thought, at that time, constituted an important affective, intelligent, and principled community to which I belonged. My behaviour that day—the withholding of truth-telling, the not sharing of trust—said something else quite different. Making nice that day was no good for anyone.

From whence comes this fear and restraint, this compelling voice from within to "make nice," that drags us beyond the bounds of responsible, authentic civility and relationships with others into the hell of hypocrisy? Why is making nice no good? Frankly, trying to answer this carries me beyond my competency. I am not a professional therapist. And I don't even have my act in order. Believe me, I'm not self-aware enough, nor am I consistent in my own head and behaviour to make unimpeachable pronouncements about this. I'm putting you all on notice; if I'm pointing some things out with one finger this morning, there are three pointing back at me. But Peter Henderson, you asked for this sermon, and paid for it; and I've been reading and thinking. I've learned something, and you, all of you, give me the gift of sharing my thoughts and feelings through the medium of a sermon; and I thank you for that.

Children are not born nice; they are noisy and demanding, they have to be in their early years in order to survive. But thrown, as we all are, into a profoundly social, inter-relational world, survival, as well, depends on learning attitudes and skills we call manners, at becoming expert in the ritual exchange of social gifts we call civility. But something else occurs in many homes where children are taught by their parents in word and deed *to be nice* as a way to get along with other people, as a way to win their approval, and thus, one assumes, to pave the way to succeed in life. It kind of makes sense until you pay attention to the way this

instruction can slide from the benign to the malignant. “Be nice, share your toys, take your turn, don’t interrupt, stop drawing so much attention to yourself, be seen and not heard, don’t cry, what will people think? How could you do that, look you’ve hurt your mother’s feelings!”

That kind of pedagogy, practiced in the home, and then backed up in schools, in religious institutions, in legal, medical and political systems, has as an outcome, more often than not, of a “subdued and acquiescent, if tightly wound society where people are accepted for the face they present to the world.” “In the interest of promoting *niceness* as a primary method of social interaction,” writes the Toronto-based psychologist Evelyn Sommers, “something [however] is lost, and that is the expression of honest and authentic thoughts and feelings.” (Evelyn Sommers, “The Tyranny of Niceness,” [www.psychotherapy.net/articles/Niceness](http://www.psychotherapy.net/articles/Niceness))

“Acceptance is a universal desire,” we’re taught or experience that words, even if honestly spoken, can chase people away; we fear the judgment, recrimination and rejection of others; we fear that we will alienate or chase others away, the very people we love and need, even those most dear to us, when we protest, disagree, correct, or say “no.”

These are powerful, inhibiting fears and realities that can drag us down into the purgatory of niceness; a place, according to Dr. Sommers, characterized by: “false altruism,” “rationalizations,” “submissiveness,” “over-or-under acceptance of responsibility,” and “self-disempowerment.” As a result, we suppress what we really think and feel so as to not hurt someone’s feelings; we convince ourselves that our opinions don’t really matter, or that someone else could say it better than I could have; we decide that it’s just easier to do it, agree, or accept what was proposed rather than protest or disagree openly, or to ask for something else; we do too much, or avoid what has to be done; or we convince ourselves that situation is good enough most of the time, so we’ll put up with the aggravation when it’s not all-that-bad. And in one case study after another, Sommers asserts that when these conditions obtain, and we submit to the tyranny of making nice, it degrades the quality of our inter-personal relationships and the quality of our lives as authentic, mature adults.

The outcome of all this, Sommers asserts, is that niceness:

“causes confusion in relationships because of the dishonesty implicit in suppressing one’s authentic thoughts and feelings. Being nice increases one’s sense of alienation from oneself...it detracts from the quality of life by contributing to health and addiction problems that are an outgrowth of stressful internal conflicts.... For some this will mean hiding true feelings from a partner, for others it may mean pleasing an employer beyond reasonable expectations, or it may mean shallow relationships with parents, siblings, colleagues and friends.”

The prescription, the road to authenticity, is not wanton rudeness; no, it’s *not OK* to eat your guests, even if you are a Cyclops. But I know, for example, that if I had only spoken up at that conference, that day twenty years ago, I wouldn’t still be haunted by the guilt of having said nothing.

I can think of many times and places in my life where I wasn’t honest in my relationships because of some stupid, deeply entrenched fear of judgment, rejection, or disapproval, or some mistaken notion of my own superiority, or some lack of trust that others couldn’t handle it if I was forthright. I think I grew up in an environment where I was taught, where a premium was placed, on “making nice.” And as result, I lost opportunities to hone the skills of honest, direct expression delivered in ways that are kind and respectful, truly respectful, of others and myself. What a shame!

Perhaps the one upside of being schooled in a regime of niceness is that I can sometimes see when civility slides into hypocrisy; when truths are set aside in order to get along and not make waves; when vital conflicts are avoided for appearances’ sake; in sum, when making nice is no good. I’ve seen it in this and

other Unitarian congregations. We're so conflict averse, our congregations are so full of "nice" people, that instead of honest, face-to-face expressions of disagreement, we get snarky, form disaffected cliques and factions, and talk smack about others on the side. It takes years, sometimes it never happens, to recover from those kinds of self-inflicted wounds.

Two more examples, two brief stories and I'll bring this to an end, for now.

Inter-religious dialogues, so-called, all-too-often wallow in superficial, harmonizing celebrations of niceness, of singing praises of all the nice things religions are and believe in common. This isn't dialogue; it's niceness therapy. And we learn precious little of one another, of where we differ, of what is non-negotiable, of what makes our communities distinct. By contrast, two decades ago, as a fellow at the Hartman Institute in Jerusalem, I participated in seminars where Jewish and Christian scholars sat down across the table from each other to read, discuss and wrangle over the most difficult and damning things these traditions have written and said about each other for two thousand years. In that setting, we confronted each other civilly, but in the spirit of a bracing, blistering commitment to honesty and candour that pushed us to really see ourselves and our traditions, at their best and worst, in the eyes of someone else. It was an unforgettable learning experience!

In 1988, 2000, and 2004, Democrats threw away chances to win the Presidency by mistaking making nice for civility. And what a price they, and the rest of us, have paid. But if any of you saw and heard Obama's speech last Thursday evening, you saw someone who, while being civil, is not going to make nice this time around. For the next couple of months down there, it is going to be very interesting! We should not recoil from the clamour and contention that result both there and here; it is the sound and spectacle of a healthy democracy.

Two brief stories. It can be a very dangerous thing to not make nice, to not go along with the crowd in a totalitarian society. My wife's grandfather, Hans Georg von Morgen, was a renowned mountaineer, a thinker, writer, and businessman. He came from a wealthy and respected family. As well, he had been an ace fighter pilot in the First World War. When the Nazis came to power, the regime put a lot of pressure on him to participate in the rebuilding of the German air force. He refused, and would have nothing to do with them. As a consequence, he and his three year old daughter were forced to flee Germany. They clandestinely made their way to Japan, whose artistic culture he deeply esteemed, and where his company had an East Asian office. When the war broke out, they were interned. Eventually, after the war, he and his daughter returned to a home country devastated by war. He returned only to discover—house, property, employment, resources—that he had lost everything he had owned, except what truly mattered: the enduring love of his daughter, my mother-in-law, and his personal integrity.

Unbeknownst, to von Morgen during those war years in Japan, there was another rather indomitable character who refused to "make nice," who did not mistake a deep commitment to authentic civility for the tyranny of niceness, and *this* is a society notorious for "hammering down the nail that sticks out." His name was Yukiteru Yamamoto, the 95<sup>th</sup> High Priest of the Tsubaki Grand Shrine that Diana and I visited last October during my sabbatical. His son, and successor, recalls how his father roamed the sacred mountains above the shrine, and delved deeply as a scholar into the ritual life, philosophy and history of Shintoism. He told his son that "human beings who are weak will become the victims of those who are strong," but that he "never imposed himself or his opinions on others." The pressures on him to enlist the shrine as a mouthpiece for government propaganda were enormous. But he disdained the military mentality, refused to take the physical exam required for conscription, and was fined and constantly harassed by the special police. (see Y. Yamamoto, *The Way of the Kami*, 1999, pp. 29-31)

Though for years the shrine was singled out for attack, was shunned, fell into a state of decay, and the Yamamoto family was reduced to penury, the High Priest and his shrine maintained their integrity. He was

the kind of person who would not go along, who would not mistake fawning politeness for authentic civility, honesty, and honour. Almost alone among all of Japan's nearly 100,000 shrines, the Tsubaki Shrine stood its ground. It has now become one of the most revered sites for spiritual renewal in Japan, and has established deep ties with the Unitarian Universalist movement.

The essence of niceness training is obedience to authority, and deference to our fears. Making nice can silence authenticity in personal relationships, in religious and political life, in school, at work, and in the troubled, blessed tangle of our own heart, soul and mind. I am under no illusion about how difficult it is to be truly, honestly civil. That takes courage. But for the sake of what we hold most dear, may we find the strength to stop making nice and thus achieve the essential candour of authentic acts and speech that will open the door to that internal calm that will assuredly follow like the night giving way to a new day.

“As a result of the training to be nice” and in the absence of training to express difficult thoughts and feelings, people suppress and endure, often with serious impact on their health and relationships. If they release the resulting pressure it is often away from the eyes of those with whom they feel most vulnerable

Some time ago, our own Peter Henderson made a successful bid for a sermon, to be delivered by me, on a topic of his choice. So Peter, this one's for you; and to begin, I want to share a vignette that appeared in the September 1964 issue of *Harper's Magazine*. The piece was called “Einstein: An Intimate Memoir;” it was written by Thomas Lee Bucky and consisted of memories of his extended stay in the home of the great physicist, Albert Einstein. Bucky relates that the only nonscientific reading he saw Einstein indulge in at home was the now-classic 1922 edition of the Emily Post's book on etiquette. Bucky writes: “[Einstein] read the book in his bedroom study in the evenings and his sharp laughter rattled throughout the house. Frequently, he came downstairs with the book in hand [a droll look on his face] and offered to read a particularly choice passage on the proper conduct of a *gentleman*.” Later on in the article, Bucky, knowing how “Einstein was tortured by formal occasions,” and in spite of being a good friend of the great man, writes that he didn't ask Einstein to attend his wedding at the Plaza Hotel in New York (Einstein showed up anyway without being invited). Einstein found the refinements and ritual of western social decorum and civility absolutely unfathomable, endlessly fascinating, and personally, an on-going torment.

What Einstein encountered as simultaneously hilarious, mystifying, fascinating, and torturous may be what the sociologist Kenneth Boulding has called one of “the most important single processes in...the whole dynamics of the age of [modern, Western] civilization.” It is the process of turning the crude into the refined, the parochial into the urbane; it's the knocking off of our rough edges, the curbing of impulses; the turning of the unselfconscious, the adolescent, the *ethnic* into self-conscious, disciplined, globalized, modern adults; adult women and men expertly adept in the presence of others at that “ritual exchange of gifts,” that we call *civility*. .” (for the story on Einstein, and the Boulding quote, and “ritual exchange” see John Murray Cuddihy, *The Ordeal of Civility...*, 1974, pp. 233-4, 12, 3.)

In a word, civility is politeness; a civil person has or shows good behaviour and manners in public. East or West, secular, Christianised or Confucian, the observance of civility, of politeness, enacts the unspoken, but thoroughly well understood set of assumptions and ground rules that make social life possible. If you're an outsider, like a child who has not yet internalized the rules, or an immigrant from an alien culture confronting a bewildering new set of manners and norms of behaviour, or an Einstein reading Emily Post's prescriptions for what makes a proper, modern North American *gentleman*, those rules and the conduct that flows from them can be mysterious, ridiculous, or oppressive. But for most of us, if you want to “pass” or get ahead in society, to thrive in what seems to be the normal world where a host culture has *already* laid down the rules for what constitutes polite or impolite behaviour, believe me, and don't we know (!), we've got to learn and observe those rules, or we're toast; unless perhaps you're a singular genius like Einstein, and in his case, the exception proves the rule.

Indeed, Einstein could laugh out loud at Emily Post's nostrums on gentlemanly etiquette precisely because of the unusual setting in which he and other theoretical physicists worked. It's a world quite unlike the one in which most of live. Whether it was the labs set up in Cambridge under the supervision of Ernest Rutherford that discovered and described the workings of the atom, the institute in Copenhagen led by Niels Bohr that hammered out the mysteries of quantum mechanics, or university departments like those in Gottingen, Germany, that fostered the revolutionary, scientific explorations of young women and men in their early twenties, in these places the search for the weird, counterintuitive realities of the atomic and subatomic worlds emerged and thrived in an environment where the proper rules of civility and decorum were turned upside down. Deference to authority and received wisdom, observance of standard hierarchies of age, class, and status, and decorous speechifying went out the window in the service and search for truth. Criticism could be merciless. Debate between tough, uncompromising, indefatigable rivals and co-workers could be crushing. Hans Delbruck, one of the key participants in the heady early days of quantum theory put it like this:

“I found at an early age that science is a haven for...freaks and misfits. If you were a student...in the 20s and went to [a] seminar [called the] ‘Structure of Matter’...you could well imagine that you were in a

madhouse as you walked in. Every one of the persons there was obviously some kind of severe case....If you were an oddball, you felt right at home.” (from Gino Segre, *Faust in Copenhagen...*, 2007, p169)

After having read Gino Segre's delightful study of physics in the 1920s and 30s, I have come to the conclusion that if theoretical physicists had knuckled under to the rules and assumptions about what is and is not proper, polite, gentlemanly behaviour drilled into the likes of me from the time I was a child, *to this day* we'd know precious little about the structure and behaviour of atomic particles and the origins and prospects of the cosmos.

Have you seen the Molson's beer commercial that attempts to demonstrate that Canadian's are not nearly as polite, reserved, passive and humble as we tend to think we are? The commercial shows scenes of hockey rink mayhem, raucous rock concert crowds, House of Commons shouting fests, and the boorish behaviour of maple leaf flag waving maniacs to underscore their point. Still, I am not sure that I'm convinced. Take a look at the CBC series "Corner Gas" and what do you see: mildly funny, rarely objectionable, perfectly polite Canadian fare. When I lived in France for two years, I remember well how we used to run away from Americans tourists; you could hear them from blocks away; while by contrast, I remember the many young Canadians walking the streets of Paris, maple leaf flag decals stitched to their back packs—they were the very model of public decorum.  
who announced themselves