

The Polite Thing to Do

Johnson Cheu

My parents taught me to be polite. Whether this is the result of my mom's proper-Beijing upbringing, my father's recent admission that, when they first came to America, they didn't have the language skills to "talk back" to people, or if they learned that, for safety's sake, it was sometimes better to repay meanness with kindness (or feigned ignorance), or some combination of all of the above, I'm not sure.

I'm not altogether sure what the root causes of my lessons in politeness were, but I grew up swimming in politeness. Every Halloween, when our ("the colored people's") house was egged or our lawn dug up or littered, and my father greeted our neighbors the next day with a jaunty "hello," I saw the politeness. When family outings to the park, mall, local buffet or steak house were interrupted with people coming up and telling my parents, "I don't know if you know God, but he really helped me, and I saw your son, and ..." and Mom and Dad responded with a silent nod and a smile, instead of an "our son and his disability are none of your business, go away," or some such equally curt response, I got the message: be polite, they mean well, just let it go. Better to catch flies with honey than with vinegar, as the saying goes.

It's not my parents fault. A smile and nod is sometimes the quickest way to just get back to the rest of your day. Or perhaps because these occurrences of people who

wanted to offer help were just too frequent to confront every time, they didn't. These disruptions of my daily life by people who "mean well" have continued well into my adult life.

A few Sundays ago, I'm having breakfast at a local diner I frequent. (I have long-since ceased going to church, keeping my religious life private.) My briefcase is next to my wheelchair and I'm reading a grad student's dissertation prospectus so I can email some feedback when I go into the office later. The restaurant is full of patrons, and not the usual university-student crowd, but with people staying at the hotel across the street. I catch enough snippets of conversation to gather that these people are from the South and that there's a big wedding in town.

So I'm finishing my eggs and flipping through the prospectus when these four middle-aged Southern women who, because they're in the booth behind me, I can only surmise have spent their meal with the back of my wheelchair in their line of sight, approach.

"Did you enjoy your breakfast?" one asks getting in my face like she cooing at a baby in a baby carriage. Her voice sounds like she's talking to a baby too. *Oh Lord!* I think.

But I'm polite.

Another one says, "That's a really nice wheelchair." I'm polite, agree. Sometimes people want to know about wheelchairs for the elderly or disabled in their lives.

And then, "You're so amazing. It's so nice to see you out today. Seeing you makes me count my blessings."

“Really?” I want to say, “What makes you say that? What’s amazing? That I’m out and about? That I’m shoveling eggs into my mouth? That I read? Can you tell I’m a university professor from looking at the back of my wheelchair?”

But politeness wins out. Smile, nod. They’ll go away more quickly.

I power up my “really nice wheelchair” and turn to go up and pay.

“Hang on a minute,” one of the women says. *What NOW?*

“I’m going to be a Mom now,” she says laughing. And before I have time to react, she takes out a napkin and proceeds to wipe the corner of my mouth.

I guess in my rush to leave, I missed a few toast crumbs.

I don’t know which I’m madder about: the insinuation that my life is in the toilet—they’re so *blessed* compared to me, after all—or that she wiped my mouth like I’m two, or my own inability to react, to tell them to go count their blessings elsewhere, thank you.

I’m annoyed by a little of all of it. And really, I’m somewhat surprised that I’m annoyed. This kind of stuff happens all the time. A couple weeks later I’m grading papers at a café and strike up a polite conversation with a young couple who’s asked to share my table. Turns out the young man is a pastor at a local church. He tells me about his nephew who, through what he believes is “a miracle,” has very little of his disability left today. “You can hardly tell,” the young pastor says. I politely decline to attend his church. He then asks to meet with me “to learn how to better love all kinds of people.” I smile, but decline. After he leaves, I toss away his number. It’s polite. What he doesn’t know won’t hurt him.

And yesterday: “I have good news for you,” the man says handing me a pamphlet. I notice he’s not approaching others who are walking to and fro with the same urgency or look of earnestness. I know what the pamphlet is about of course, what it promises. But because I’m curious and writing this essay in my head, I take it.

“There’s good news and bad news,” it says, “the bad news is about you. The good news is about God.”

I’m thinking that I’ve achieved some weird kind of religious tri-ecta. My mere existence, apparently, inspires others to reflect on their inherent luck, love, and innate goodness. And the presence of miracles. And the promise of cure. Hurray!

But I really shouldn’t be so cynical. Images of the disabled and Christ’s ability to cure us are all over the Bible. The morning of the diner incident, Jerry Lewis was on television asking for money for a cure again. This kind of stuff happens to disabled people all the time. In his new book *Eavesdropping*, my friend the writer Stephen Kuusisto writes about three people who want to cure him of his blindness while he’s navigating his way through the airport.

I’m not about to ramble on and on about religion. People are entitled to their faith. I won’t deny that there aren’t some days where being disabled just plain sucks. But that’s not everyday. I don’t spend every waking moment wishing for a cure or hoping for a miracle. But people will think what they want to think.

But I ask, *why* do people think that my life as a disabled person is so much worse than theirs? And then, if they think my life is so *hard*, well what are they *doing* about it, besides telling me how much I inspire them, when I’m doing something as mundane as picking out my yogurt (peach) or shoveling eggs (over-easy) into my mouth. When was the last time they volunteered for meals on wheels? Or wrote city officials about potholes

in the sidewalk or inaccessible public transportation or housing? When was the last time they looked around their workplace and wondered why so few, if any, disabled people are employed there?

Yes, I should have stuck up for myself with all these people who wanted to cure me or use me for inspiration. Then again, who are they to presume that they have the right to make pronouncements about the quality of my life? I mean, imagine it: in this society where sexism and racism are still with us, would we go up to women or people of color and school them about the way to a supposed better, easier life? People would get beat up. And what would that better life look like? Better for whom? I'm sure people go up to openly gay people and discuss religion, but that's someone else's essay.

Really, I'm just trying to get through my breakfast or my errands or get to work and get on with my day. People ought to respect that and not intrude, certainly not just to make themselves feel better about their lives. After all, it'd be the polite thing to do.