Don’t Pay the Price Of Being Nice

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You better not shout, you better not cry, You better be nice I’m telling you why...

(You will not be rewarded, accepted, included, etc. You buy love by submitting to what others want, right?)

Have you been a naughty or a nice boy or girl? You have been Nice? Well then you must be enjoying the reward for being a good little boy or girl, i.e. depression, intermittent explosiveness, career confusion or job meaninglessness, ambiguous anxiety, low awareness of one’s own needs, either flat or explosive relationships, resentment about being the victim of the “mean people” and subtle self hate.

What a tragedy that our culture puts us in conflict with our human nature. It took me till the end of the school year in first grade before I could sit for the whole period with my hands folded, my feet together and my mouth shut. Then I was told “What a nice little boy you were today!” That is when I was seduced into the slavery of people pleasing. I prostituted and prevented my little boyness from expressing itself in order to get those few little drops of perverted praise. The energy it took to control such a vital force took a noticeable toll on my physical body.

My mentor, Virginia Satir noticed it the first time she met me. She put her hand on my uptight shoulder and proclaimed to a large audience of people in La Jolla, California, “Now this man has paid a heavy price for learning to be nice. In order to survive he has learned to be a people pleaser and now carries all this tension in his shoulders in order to control his spontaneous expression.” (Satir, author and mythic figure in the social sciences and mental health fields, is called the Mother of Family Therapy and is credited with coining the term “People Pleaser.” John Bradshaw best selling author and creator of the popular Public Broadcasting Service series on “The Family” and other well known self help authors draw heavily from her work.) She was right. Not only did I pay a heavy price, but so did everyone around me. So now I am trying to get the word out that being nice has it’s price. Here are just a few of the costs:

1. Always being nice prevents people around you from receiving congruent feedback that would stimulate their growth. (By growth I mean gaining knowledge about and insight into oneself and others.)

2. “Nice” people often react with pain if anyone around them expresses uncomfortable feelings. They get angry, thinking others should have to be nice too. Or they feel hurt and confused if someone does not appreciate their niceness. Others often sense this and avoid giving them congruent feedback thereby effectively blocking the nice person’s emotional growth.

3. With “nice” people you never know where you really stand. The nice person allows others to accidentally oppress them. The “nice” person might be resenting you just for talking to them, because really they are needing to pee. But instead of saying so they stand there nodding and smiling, with legs tightly crossed, pretending to listen. (Lights are on but nobody’s home)

4. You never know with a nice person if the relationship would survive a conflict or angry confrontation. This uncertainty prevents risks from being taken which of course greatly limits the depths of intimacy possible.

5. Do you really trust a “nice” person to back you up if confrontation were really needed?

6. Often people in relationship with nice people turn their irritation toward themselves because it is so confusing how they could be so upset with someone so “nice.” In intimate relationships this leads to guilt, self-hate and depression.

7. “Nice” people frequently keep all the anger in until they find a safe place to dump it, i.e., a child, a federal building to blow up, a helpless dependent mate. (Timothy McVeigh, the suspect in the Oklahoma City bombing is described by acquaintances as a very, very nice guy, who would give you the shirt off his back.) Success in keeping the anger in, will often manifest as psychosomatic illnesses (arthritis, ulcers, back problems, heart disease, etc.).

In my work as a psychotherapist, I have found that those who had “Nice Parents” or “Rigidly Religious Parents” (as opposed to spiritual parents), are often the most stuck in the chronic low grade depression. They have a difficult time accessing or expressing any negative feelings towards their parents. They sometimes say to me “After all my parents did for me, seldom saying a harsh word to me, I would feel terribly guilty complaining. Besides it would break their hearts.” The psychologist Rollo May suggested that it is less crazy making to a child to cope with overt withdrawal or harshness than to try to understand the facade of the always nice parent. When everyone agrees that your parents are so nice and giving and you still feel dissatisfied, as a child you conclude that there must be something wrong with your ability to receive love.

I remember this family of fundamentalists who came in to help little Mathew with his anger problem. The parents wanted me to teach little Mathew how to “express his anger nicely.” Now if that is not a formula making someone crazy I do not know what would be. Another woman told me that after her stinking drunk husband tore the house up breaking most of the dishes in the kitchen she meekly told him, “Dear, I think you need a breath mint.” Many families I work with go through great anxiety around the holidays because they are going to be forced to be with each other and are scared of resuming their covert war.

They are scared that they cannot keep the garbage can lid of nice, on tight, to hide, all the rotting resentments and hopeless hurts they nicely keep inside.
Dear mom and dad here’s why I can’t come home.
I can talk with either one of you just fine, when it’s either one alone.

But Thanksgiving table’s goin’ to be pulled out bigger.
If we talk at all, one of you will pull the trigger.
I used to run those battle lines try’n to smooth over what got said.

Try’n to get a medal try’n to get some shrapnel in my head.
Thought it was my duty to plead and to implore,
But I caught too much crossfire in your covert war.
Television talk fills the air so you don’t have to start.
You claim your territories in the rooms upstairs,
To keep yourselves apart.

Holy days they bring us all together,
After so much left unsaid.
You taught us well not to kick under the table.
Kick under your breath instead.

I love you and I’d never want to see you bleed
When comments cut like steel
So to hold your fire I’d block the shot and
Take the hit for you as if I could not feel.
I thought they passed right through me
And I had no scars to hide.

Now I open up and try to love
And find they’re still inside.
’Cause I used to run those battle lines
Trying to plead...to implore.

Please won’t you hold the cease-fire out a little longer
’Till the next uproar.
I took it all in childhood
But I can’t take it no more.

’Cause I caught too much crossfire in your covert war.

There is a huge difference between someone who has true respect, honor, and empathy for the needs of others and someone who is “nice” because they were trained to honor the needs of others and not their own. For the most part, observing the behavior of both of these people one might come up with the same evaluation, that they are polite, cultured and have good manners. The intention, the feeling and the reasons behind these same behaviors are totally different. The “nice” person is operating from Level Two – Conventional Morality in what Kohlberg and Piaget called Stage Three - “Good boy-nice girl” orientation in their “Stages of Moral Reasoning.” This is where “right action” is one that would be carried out by someone whose behavior is likely to please or impress others. The genuinely empathic and considerate person operates from Level Three – Postconventional Morality (Which, according to Kohlberg and Piaget, is usually reached only after age twenty and even then only by a small portion of adults in our culture. It is called postconventional because the moral principles that underlie the conventions of a society are actually understood.) People at this level deeply understand that rules are needed to maintain the social order and do not have to be obeyed out of a blind obedience to authority but are followed on the bases of mutual agreement. At the same time the needs of the individual are protected and respected. It is at this Stage Six – Universal ethical principle orientation – where people make moral decisions based on self-chosen ethical principles that are applied in consistent ways. So although both may not cheat at cards, the “nice” guy does not cheat because he wants people to like him. The “real” guy does not cheat because he sense the interconnectedness of life and all beings and wants to contribute to the harmony and well being of all. He has consciously chosen to live by certain principles that selfishly keep him in harmony with himself, his community, nature and life. Living by these principles keep him or her free from resentment and full of self worth which comes from receiving feedback that one is serving the life within themselves and in nature. This is not the case for “nice” guys.

Nice guys and gals not only finish last they do so with great resentment. They then turn this resentment inwards (because it would not be nice to express it) and become depressed. I work with a lot of divorced depressed disillusioned women who tell me “It’s not fair, I did everything right, touched all the bases with a lot of divorced depressed disillusioned women who tell me “It’s not fair, I did everything right, touched all the bases and I have nothing to show for it. Now I don’t even know who I am or what I want.”

This is because our culture did it’s job well with these women. Sadly our culture is designed particularly to make women keenly aware of what others want at the expense of an awareness of their own needs. In fact submissiveness for women is romanticized and eroticized. Think of all those images little girls are exposed to so early on in their lives they have no way to defend themselves. By this I mean images of a Prince Charming coming along and sweeping her off her feet and riding off with her to his castle, images of the man again lifting her off her feet to be carried over the threshold into their new happy life. The father giving his daughter (like a piece of heirloom furniture) to the groom, images of the natural caveman dragging the woman by the hair behind. (Read the book “Sacred Pleasure” by Riane Eisler for a more thorough treatment of the subject.) They are taught to only listen to an outside patriarchal authority.

No wonder there is so much self doubt and confusion when faced with the question “What do YOU want out of your life?” This question alone can be enough to trigger an episode of depression. It often triggers a game of “cognitively arresting Ping-Pong” in their heads. It is like the sport of sket shooting. Their imagination throws up a clay pigeon possibility and their pessimistic shotgun mind shoots it down. “Maybe I want to go back to school... No, that would be
selfish of me because the kids need me... Maybe I’ll start a business...No I hate all that dog-eat-dog competition...Maybe I’ll look for a love relationship....No, I am not sure I am healed yet... etc.”

A part of me is concerned about introducing yet another label into the culture, but sometimes potential fun outweighs the danger of contributing to people’s stickiness. So my new label is “Niceneck”. A “Niceneck” is someone who is too nice for their own good.

Or maybe I should invent a disease out of it like “Niceneckism”. Or maybe ADDS (Assertiveness Deficit Disorder Syndrome) and open up treatment centers all over the country to help people recover from it. I could model it after all the Codependency Treatment Centers. I will create a list of symptoms that everyone can relate to like occasional restlessness with life, occasional loneliness or depression, etc., and give out free books on it to therapists.

Here is a checklist to help decide whether you are a “Niceneck” and need to put yourself on the waiting list to Here is a checklist to help decide whether you are a “Niceneck” and need to put yourself on the waiting list to check into one of my marvelous new ADDS treatment clinics. (Once they get built.)

You just might be a “Niceneck” if …

1. When someone bumps into you from behind with their grocery cart, you apologize.

2. People have a tendency to grab you by the shoulders and shake you a lot.

3. Some Babalonian (that’s someone who uses more words than you know how to enjoy hearing) has been talking to you forever on the phone but you are afraid to tell them you want to go to sleep. You are afraid of either hurting their feelings (which really means that you are afraid of feeling guilty) or being perceived as rude.

4. You have trouble saying your real “yes’s and no’s.”

5. You are constantly thinking about how to say things without upsetting people.

6. It takes an hour to tell the telemarketer you have no interest in buying a cactus ranch in Yuma. (Do you realize that you are the cause of the starvation death of the telemarketer’s children? Because he could have made some money by selling to someone who was actually going to buy.)

7. Your roommate skips out on you without paying his rent. Instead of filing in small claims court you spend hours meditating on “Why did I create this in my life?” or you may call and thank him for helping you face the karma of your money issues. This I would call graduate level Niceness - Avoiding Assertiveness through Spiritual Self-Blame. (Or Aass for short.)

Now how did we come to be such aasses? One answer is that we were sweetly seduced by our teachers, parents and society with conditional love, bribes and punishments. I like the fun way Alfie Kohn says it in his book Punished by Rewards, The Trouble with Gold Starts, Incentive Plans, A’s, Praise, and Other Bribes:

When we call out a hearty “Good Girl” in response to a child’s performance, the most appropriate reply would seem to be “Woof!” With respect to the workplace or public policy we talk casually about the use of “carrots and sticks,” and there is food for thought here, too. Before these words came to be used as generic representations of bribes and threats, what actually stood between the carrot and the stick was, of course, a jackass.

So we have all these “nice” parents out there trying to “do the right thing” by punishing and rewarding their children into becoming one of the “nice dead people” who create no problems for the social structure. Well meaning “nice” parents believe that it is necessary for their child’s survival to learn to jump through hoops to respond to the rewards society has to offer. They have no idea how it deteriorates internal motivation to get their children hooked on extrinsic rewards. They make no distinction between self esteem and “other” esteem. They see no difference between celebrating one’s accomplishments and contributions and constantly seeking external approval.

I recognize that some of you are only aspiring “Nicenecks” perhaps because you have not been through Western punishment/reward school system, nor had other religious education that challenges you to mold yourself through self disgust. If you want to catch up with the rest of us “Nicenecks” I suggest practicing the following:

Seven steps to Self Sacrifice or how to become a “Niceneck”

1. Listen to other people longer than you want to. Examples: Listen to telephone solicitors, religious missionaries, multilevel marketing acquaintances, and all your whining friends to their satisfaction.

2. Do everything you feel obligated to do. Examples: Write thank you letters to all the relatives and acquaintances you think you should after each holiday, go to every meeting, political rally or religious service you think you should, contribute to every charity and volunteer for every organization that asks you for help. If no one asks, motivate yourself to initiate a call to them. Basically live by the TV psychologist (although she has no degrees in psychology), Dr. Laura’s motto “Do the right thing.” (I have this motto emblazoned on my very own $1.99 coffee mug, which Dr. Laura gave me for appearing on her show. Dr. Laura would probably feel better knowing that I do feel a little guilty now, having made fun of your life’s purpose motto after receiving that fine parting gift. But in all fairness the Dr. Laura show did pay for a stretch limo that brought myself and a friend from San Diego to Hollywood at a cost of about six hundred dollars each way.)

3. Work for a living, instead of figuring out how to get “paid to play.”

4. Do anything to prevent other people from freaking out.

5. Chant the mantra “No pain no gain”.

6. Adopt the motto: “Me last”.

3.
7. Call my Aunt who is a Jehovah’s Witness, Amway salesperson, Blackbelt Babaloman (meaning she can speak on the inhale as well as the exhale) and volunteer to be her friend.

The benefits of being one’s own final authority – to being “real” instead of “nice”:

As mentioned in number three above there is a possibility of getting paid to play once we quit nicely conforming to the belief that “one must work for a living.” I can tell you from my own real life that that is absolutely not true. Sure there are many sweat shop owners and proud McDonald franchise owners who need workers to believe that.

Many of us have allowed ourselves to become conscious of things we really enjoy doing and then figured out ways to get paid to do them. I love the story in Marsha Sinetar’s book “To build the life you want, create the work you love,” where this woman remembered how fun it was to receive “rapt attention” from little children when she would read them a story so she developed a business called Travelling Storyteller. Now she dresses up in a white evening gown and sparkling tiara to tell stories to “crowds of enraptured children” near her home in New York.

If none of the steps to self sacrifice appeal to you and you are tired of trying to get better at “walking on eggshells” then I suggest “walking in rhythm to the beat of your own soul” and learn how to enjoy people freaking out about it. How? I teach Compassionate Communication to help myself with this. When tempted to be nice and give up my needs I like to say “I'm ...... and then the emotional Truth.” Ex: “I'm worried about staying on the phone because I want to get this article written before the deadline.” Passion is the larger part of Compassion. So I like to first have passionate self compassion, fierce self love and then I can have compassion and empathy when others freak out. Ex: “Well fine, see if I ever call you again!” My answer “Are you hurt because you wanted to keep talking.” And if I can empathetically connect with their pain about wanting to continue connecting with me I actually do enjoy the feeling of that connection. Also I can enjoy the sense the healing and relief it brings to the that person to have their hurt truly heard.

Another way to enjoy it when people freak out is by letting their “freak out” give me a chance to practice and celebrate my divine selfishness.

Example:

I once did an interview on a relatively big radio station that broadcast all over L.A. about using Compassionate Communication in love relationships. I mistakenly gave out my home phone number during the show and consequently began receiving lots of calls at all hours of the day and night from lovesick men and women. One morning at about 2 a.m. I received a call from what sounded like a crying teenager.

I groggily answered with my usual self programmed “Center for Compassion, Kelly Bryson speaking.”

“My boyfriend won’t answer my phone calls...What should I do?” says the tearful voice on the other end.

I sleepily answered “You sound really hurt and upset.”

“Yes, what should I do?” she sniffled.

“I’m sleepy right now but if you wanted to call me back in the morning after 10am, I would be willing to talk with you.”

“Never mind, I thought this was the Center for Compassion!” she said followed by the clunk of the line being disconnected.

Her freak out gave me a chance to practice asserting my needs when faced with a woman in pain (something I need practice in) and celebrating that I honor my self, my feelings and my needs. I went back to sleep with a warm guiltless feeling of appreciation for myself.

Here’s another example of Compassionate Communication in action:

Suppose you best friend asks you “Am I fat?”. The nice friend responds “Oh, no you’re pleasingly plump.” The friend who is just learning tough love says “No you are not fat, but your blood type is Ragu and you are outrageously obese Mrs. Thunder Thighs and I can no longer be involved in this friendship until you get into a treatment program.” The first response is likely to support your friend in rationalizing away a desire for a more healthy body. The second response would likely trigger a shame attack, (of course depending on the relationship) necessitating a trip through the emergency room entrance to Baskin and Robbins (Basking in self pity and Robbin’ themselves of health) for some Rocky Road Resuscitation. The nice friend’s response is trying to meet the need for compassion and gentleness at the expense of honesty and trusting the other’s strength. The tough love friend’s response is a type of honesty, but at the expense of the gentle compassion needed to establish connection, which allows for lasting influence. This radical brutal honesty does sometimes influence the other to change out of shame, fear, hurt or guilt, but because it is coming from the outside and is pain motivated, the change will likely be temporary. For change to be lasting it needs to come from an inner willingness and be focused toward some pleasurable goal like feeling alive and healthy. Pain is a good short term motivator, but self love or pleasurable satisfaction is necessary for sustained motivation. If I want to be a lasting positive influence on my friend I need to come from gentle strength myself. In response to my friend’s question “Am I fat?”, I might respond “Are you worried about your health or your attractiveness?” And then I would wait to give my friend space and time within which to be heard, to explore and unwrap what it is all about for them. After they have gotten the empathy they need I might then ask “Would you like to hear my honesty about your weight?”

Again I would pause here to be sure they really are consenting and not just capitulating. (With certain friends I have them sign a legal document in blood that they really do want my honesty, and that if my honesty messes up their lives they not complain to me about it.) It might sound like this: “I am very scared about your health because I want you for a friend for as long as I can have you. I am very sad that you haven’t had a date in such a long time. I want you to be happy and have love in your life. How do you feel about what I am saying?”

In this world we are constantly faced with dealing with people who are consciously or unconsciously behaving in ways that can oppress us on some level. Many of our teachers taught us not to “talk back”. In other words to be quiet when our needs were not being met. We learned to deal with our pain by stuffing it or taking it out on weaker beings. We learned
creative ways to try to take care of our needs, like dissociating from them or using passive aggressive tactics. By passive aggressive I mean what I taught myself to do in order not to risk getting punished for asserting my needs. I learned to pout. I am hoping my pouting will make you so miserable that eventually you will come to me, guess what I need and give it to me without having to go through the humiliation of asking for what I want. I am teaching myself some new behaviors when someone else’s behavior is not meeting my needs. Here is a story showing how I would prefer to negotiate my needs.

Once I was in a workshop with Dr. Rosenberg and had just completed a huge piece of emotional work around issues related to my father. I had been crying belly sobs of grief release and was now starting to catch my breath as the focus of the group went on to the next person’s issue. I unconsciously began to rock and make a little whimpering, squeaky sound on my breath’s exhale. I was sitting right beside Dr. Rosenberg when he leaned over and whispered in my ear, so as not to embarrass me “That little sound you are making, is that soothing to you?” I was startled from my self involved state “Ahh.. yes.” “It’s irritating as hell to me,” he said “because I want to both comfort you be focused on this next person’s issue. Could you find another way to soothe yourself?” I was a little embarrassed despite his attempt to protect me from it, but I was able to just open my throat a little more on the exhale and comfort myself through breathing and rocking.

What Dr. Rosenberg demonstrated was:

Three graceful steps to self assertiveness:

1. Demonstrating empathy to the feelings, needs and intentions for the person unpleasant behavior. (“That little sound you are making, is that soothing to you?”)

2. Self responsible expression of our feelings and needs. (“It’s irritating as hell to me, because I want to both comfort you and be focused on this next person’s issue.”)

3. Express a request for an action that demonstrates a willingness to get both people’s needs met. (“Could you find another way to soothe yourself?”)

The more I care about someone the more painful it is to be “nice” to them or to allow them to accidentally oppress me. The other day my partner came bouncing into my room saying she was very hungry and asked if I wanted to go to breakfast. I really wanted to keep reading but I was too humble to admit that. I wish I had remembered what Golda Meir once said “Quit being so humble, you’re not that great”. I chose instead to go to breakfast and subtly resent myself for giving up my need to read. The tragic part of the story occurred a few days later when she once again asked me to go somewhere while I was reading. I felt the resentment rise up from my belly and a little voice saying “I don’t want to do that to me again.” Then I felt the temptation to project the resentment and blame her for asking. Finally I told her what was going on with me. How I had given up my need for her sake the other morning. Immediately tears welled up in her eyes as she told me she never again wanted to be the stimulus for resentment or for me giving up my needs. Wow! I began to see practically how important it is not to be NICE and how we cannot really sacrifice our needs for the other, lest we trigger pain for them.

It is important to hang in there until we find Win/Win. Whenever our niceness allows another to oppress us and prevent us from getting our needs met, we either resent ourselves, the other or both. I would go so far as to call it a form of violence. It is a violence of self abandonment and whoever we allow to oppress us, we will subtly hate and withdraw from.

We are all taught that unselfish (translate good), flexible people know the value of compromise. Compromise as I define it is where we learn to share the resentment 50/50. Much compromise comes out of a scarcity consciousness that does not trust that we could have all that we want. It comes out of a lack of creativity that could lead us to a synergistic solution that would be better for everyone. It comes out of a lack of trust in the compassionate generous nature of human beings that could lead to a shift that would allow for a true and natural “giving to” instead of a compromising resentful “giving in.”

In our schools and families we are taught how to think in terms of moralistic judgments instead of in terms of our needs and requests. Our teachers and parents think it is their job to teach us right from wrong, appropriate from inappropriate. Sadly what we learn is to disassociate from our feelings and needs and express ourselves in judgmental terms of what is wrong with other people. We learn to say things like “It’s not fair” instead of “I’m hungry, would you share the donuts?”. Or “You’re rude” instead of “I’m feeling distracted, would you lower your voice so I can hear the movie?” Instead of gaining successful experiences of asserting our needs and getting what we want we collect painful experiences. We ask for what we want in the only way we have been taught, through moralistic judgements of others, which gets perceived as an attack and provokes a counter attack. Then we not only don’t get what we want we end up feeling fear, shame and guilt.

Example:

Jane: “You are afraid of intimacy and commitment” (A judgmental diagnosis instead of an expression of her own intimate feelings or requests)

John responds: “And you are needy and insecure. Get a life.”

Or

Little Jane “You’re mean. Why won’t you let me play with you?”

Little John “Because you are a little dweeb, that’s why!”

No wonder we learn to stop expressing ourselves early on in life. We get so wounded by others reactions to how we have learned to express our needs that we shut down. We learn: “If you are going to get along you have to go along.”

Autonomy is not simply one value among many that children should acquire, nor is it simply one technique for helping them grow into good people. In the final analysis, none of the virtues, including generosity and caring, can be successfully promoted in the absence of choice.

“Nicenecks” are terrified of being abandoned by others or being isolated from the group. This is partly why nice people deny that there is anything terrible going on, like in the
Emperor’s New Clothes story (This is where the Emperor is hoodwinked into believing he has expensive new clothes on but he is actually parading down the street naked. None of his nice subjects would say anything except for an innocent-not-yet-jaded-into-being-nice child.) To a niceneck it would be “rude” to acknowledge that there is an elephant in the living room. (In my family there were herds of elephants being ridden by nude emperors parading through our living room.)

You have heard the old saying “If you can’t say something nice, better to say nothing at all.” I have a new one “If you’re going to say something nice better not to say anything at all.”

I suggest that the really catastrophic acts of violence in the world were passively condoned by the nice, educated, majority in the culture. In WWII large numbers of people, particularly certain international religious leaders, knew what Hitler was up to and what was happening in the concentration camps but chose not to make waves. Even the Nazi’s themselves were trying to flee their inner demons and avoid the inner conflict created by German child rearing practices. They were taught to “knock on the door to love through obedience to authority”. This is why all they could do was be nice, go along, and never be naughty by saying “NO” to “Heil Hitler dur fuhrer” (the father). It was out of this fear of coping with the inner conflict between their culture and their nature (inner child) that they supported their government in attacking what they were educated to believe was the “Evil Empire” out there. In this case it was the Jews. Partly from my own experience in traditional schools and partly from my reading of history I come a bit of suspicion about schools. Some say our public schools are doing what they were designed to do. Supposedly some factory owners got together in Lowell, Massachusetts, put some money together and asked their town council to create the first public schools in the USA, so they could get the docile subservient workers they needed for their factories. I can not help but wonder if early pharmaceutical companies also needed future Prozac users.

Victor Frankel, MD author of Man’s Search for Meaning and originator of Logotherapy has even more troubling reasons to be suspicious of public education as he suggests in the following:

I am a survivor of a concentration camp. My eyes saw what no person should witness: gas chambers built by learned engineers, children poisoned by educated physicians, infants killed by trained nurses, women and babies shot by high school graduates. So I am suspicious of education!

My request is: help your students to be Human. Your efforts must never produce learned monsters, skilled psychopaths or educated Eichmans. Reading and writing and spelling and arithmetic are only important if they serve to make students more Human.

One of the most Humanistic plays I have ever seen is called “1,000 Clowns.” Last Summer I produced a version of it to help me pay for my tour of N. Ireland, Israel, and Ex-Yugoslavia teaching Nonviolent Communication(sm) Skills. In it the lead character Murray tells these social workers who have come to compel his nephew to attend school: “Before I give him over to you I want to make sure he won’t learn how to become one of the nice dead people. I want to be sure he’ll know when he’s chickening out on himself. I want him to get to know exactly the special thing he is or else he won’t notice it when it starts to go. I want him to see all the wild possibilities and to give the world a little goosing when he gets the chance. I want him to know the subtle, sneaky, important reason he was born a human being and not a chair.”

Well I have been a good, nice useful chair for the society but it has cost me my creativity and my connection to my wild wonderchild. I’m relieved to report that this elan vital (vital life energy which cannot be created or destroyed) has not been murdered as I feared but simply trapped in a tomb of fear, guilt and shame. As a recovering “Niceneck” I’m discovering and uncovering a long lost and precious friend of mine. Here is a poem I wrote to celebrate our reunion:

Heart broken by shattered childhood dreams.
Knowledge of Realms of Creativity lost,
I grieve the cost to my now lonely soul.
Panic is nearby, I want to fly, afraid to die.
But the Sirens of my Soul sweetly sing their song of loss,
And I want to hear, ignore the fear and allow myself to
Come Home, come Home, ye who are weary come Home.

I relive the moment of our separation
and through this recreation
find my long lost soul again.
I start to feel my body soften,
resurrecting from its coffin
Of tension, armor and pain.

Oh great Joy, could it be, could it be?
That the soul I thought had been crucified,
Had just been lost, buried, and denied,
And is finally, finally reuniting with me.

By Kelly Bryson

So if you want to start the spiritual practice of reuniting with yourself, train yourself to notice when you begin feeling that uneasy “giving in” feeling and hang tough until it turns into “giving to” energy either toward the other, or if not, toward yourself.

Here are some mottoes to help you stop that nasty “niceness” habit and start “Perfect Your Selfishness”:

Me first and only in every situation at all times.
Ask for 100% of what you want 100% of the time and be prepared to empathize with whatever response comes back.
Never listen to one more word than you want to hear from anyone.
You never have to answer anyone’s questions because you are not on trial.

Trust that all you needs are gifts to other people.

Present your needs like you were Santa Claus passing out gifts. “Ho, ho, ho you luck dog, you get to dance with me, if you’d like.”

Develop the willingness to let the people you love suffer. (Not to be confused with making them suffer)

Never let anyone get their needs met at your expense. To do so is violence to both of you.

Remember that when you are nice, people do not respect you, they suspect you.

Never do anything to prevent someone from freaking out.

(Except babies under 15 months)

You may want to take classes, workshops or buy books or tapes on Nonviolent Compassionate Communication. If so, you can go to my website at www.LanguageOfCompassion.com for that information or for a link to the international website which will offer more training materials and list classes and trainers in your area.

The Duty-Giver

When someone gives something out of duty or guilt they often become very demanding of appreciation for what they did because they are getting no appreciation from themselves for what they did. In fact, often unconsciously, they resent themselves for what they did and this prevents them from taking in appreciation from others even if it is offered. Often the appreciation is not offered because the request for it, spoken or unspoken, is perceived as a demand. Often there is little appreciation for it because others sense that it came from duty and not love. Receiving from someone who is giving out of obligation often leaves one feeling worthless and thinking themselves a burden.

I remember overhearing my aunt and uncle complaining to each other that they had given up their retirement to raise us kids. I remember the pain and guilt and worthlessness I felt in response. I remember wanting to disappear, eat less, take up less room. We also had a ritual around the dinner table. It started with my Uncle looking at my brother and me with furrowed brow, which meant “You better not forget!” What we were not allowed to forget, under threat of physical beatings, was to say “Thank you Aunt Willie, the dinner tasted good.” My Uncle Jake would listen very carefully to make sure we did not use that most subtle form of rebellion, the sing-song tone of voice school children use when they have to say “Good morning Mrs. Tyrant.”

If appreciation is offered to the person who has given out of duty, the “duty giver” will often have anger and resentment triggered and say things like “well it’s about time” or “Is that it? Is that all the thanks I get?” My Aunt was fond of saying “I give and give and give and all I ever get is a kick in the teeth.”

What the duty giver needs is empathy for the resentment of having sacrificed her life energy for another, empathy for abandoning herself, and for the loss of her self. When these people grieve for what they have done to themselves, they will be grateful that others did not reinforce this self-sacrificing behavior by giving appreciation for it. Even if people did offer appreciation, the duty giver can’t take it in until the self-resentment has been transformed through empathy into sorrow. Nor can they really love. Because love is giving from free will. The duty giver gives to avoid guilt and shame.

The first thing I would like the duty giver to do is grieve the cost of giving out of a role expectation, or duty. Many middle aged women I see in my psychotherapy practice have great resentment and sorrow about the years they spent cleaning up after their husband, or doing all the family laundrey, with very little appreciation coming back. They first need empathy for their resentment and then for the sadness for the self abandonment. How sad that they were taught that they must do their duty in order to deserve love.

The second thing I would like the duty giver to do is have compassionate understanding for what made them abandon themselves to give out of duty in the first place. In other words to get conscious and have nonjudgmental understanding of the dynamics involved. Often the dynamics include an element of trying to “buy” other people’s love through giving, fear of being judged as selfish or irresponsible if they do not do their “duty”, or operating out of an unconscious conformity to doing the “right thing”.

This unconscious tendency to conform by giving in and compromising has a couple of elements worth discussing. One is the training we all receive about not hurting others physically or emotionally. This training does not usually make clear the difference between “impact” and “cause”. Nor does our typical cultural training say much about what we are responsible for and what we are not, nor about the primacy of intent. When little Johnny laughs at his mother’s new hat, he is told how evil he is and how he caused his mother’s tears and pain. What “craziness” we could save little Johnny if we could explain that the impact his laughter had on his mother was to trigger hurt, and that the cause of her hurt was what she thought when she heard Johnny laugh. And what a relief it would be if Johnny’s intention would be acknowledged. Perhaps his intention was just to express humor and surprise he felt when he saw a hat that reminded him of a cartoon peacock. Now Johnny may choose next time not to laugh when he sees someone’s new hat out of compassion for the “impact” that it may trigger, but not out of fear or shame or the belief that it is his sweet laughter that causes pain in others.

The other element that contributes to a compromising conformity is the lack of training we have in both asserting our needs and in continuing to negotiate once we have asked for something we want. Many of us are so afraid to ask for anything because of our fear that we will “cause” the other pain and then we will in turn have guilt and shame triggered. We are also afraid of what we will tell ourselves when the other says no. And yet another fear is that in this polite culture the person will say yes even though they mean no and then go along with our request but with resentment toward us, which they will one day make us pay for. I made my aunt and uncle pay every day by having to look at my long face, deal with my constant foot dragging, live with my cold shoulder.

In this polite culture pretended agreement permeates all the areas of our lives. There are people who say they will show up for an appointment and then do not, make agreements and then
I am particularly sad about people being afraid to assert their needs in the arena of physical affection. Because we are so thoroughly trained to give in and give up on our needs when someone feels sad or hurt, we are often afraid to begin expressing any form of affection. We are afraid of the guilt we will feel when we reach a limit and tell the other person “No” to some request to “go further” with the physical intimacy. We are afraid to start any physical expression of caring unless we intend to fulfill “our obligation” to “go all the way”. We often feel obligated to totally satisfy the other person if they get aroused in any way. So much loving nurturing is missed out on because of these duty bound, guilt created beliefs. So much isolation, loneliness, distance and skin hunger are suffered because we think we are “responsible for” the others’ needs. This fear of being “responsible for” others’ needs makes it scary to even start to be “responsive to” others’ or even our own needs.

The moment anyone thinks that they have the power to hurt someone else’s feelings they enter into an ego maze of control struggles. To the degree I believe I can hurt your feelings I live in the fear of guilt. To the degree I guide my behavior based on the fear of feeling guilty I will begin to build resentment (This, by the way is, Level 2, Stage 3 called Good boy-Nice girl orientation in Piaget, Kohlberg, and Gilligan’s book Moral Development.). I will also gradually lose touch with my ability to empathize with others and guide my behavior with true empathy for the impact my actions make on others. (Stage VI of moral development)

When you give from duty other people do not feel gratitude, and they aren’t inspired to want to give to you. She did not do it because she loved me but because she’s my mother or wife etc. The duty giver thinks people should be appreciative, which of course makes it all the harder to feel appreciation. They also think people should show their appreciation, in fact it’s their duty.

I heard one of these spiritual songs that said, “Love is always giving.” If I believed in evil I would say that this is a truly evil concept. To take something as precious as love and pervert it into something out of alignment with natural principles. Anything that you always give to you’ll eventually kill, whether it is a relationship, a project, or anything else. Do you know that the major cause of death in houseplants is over-watering? I’m saying that if you want your relationship to wither up and die, try to be all-giving.

As I have said before, I recommend never doing anything for other life forms, only do things for your self, for the joy of giving. That way any appreciation that comes back to you is icing. And I only want “icing appreciation”, never that flat monotone “obligation appreciation” I used to give my Aunt Willie after every boring meal so that my Uncle Jake would not thrash me.

By only giving when it comes from the satisfaction of contributing to someone’s well being, you have already gotten paid for what ever you have done and can protect yourself from ever getting into the “collection business”. If you ever find yourself in the collection business, that is trying to collect some appreciation or payback from someone for something you have done for them, I recommend you cut your losses.