

MIKE PEMBERTON: VOICES

# You say you want a revolution? Be nice



"Always remember, be nice to people," the great actor Jimmy Stewart, told his children.

Obvious advice, we think. Not exactly revolutionary. But, hey, we're talking Jimmy Stewart here, an icon of nice.

But is it so obvious? Are we nice to each other?

Not enough, I'd say. Not as individuals or as a society.

I include myself in that accounting. I have not always been nice. Moments where I've lost my temper or made a sarcastic comment, although not prevalent, would appear in any replay of my life. Not exactly the highlight reel I'd like St. Peter to review. So I've worked harder at being nice, reminding myself to take the high road, look for the positive, view the world from other's perspectives. I've made amends when and where I can and I try, every day, to be nice.

This does not mean I'm now a doormat. I express my thoughts and stand up for myself. Good manners, being nice, should not be confused with weakness, no more than belligerence should be considered a strength. We can agree

to disagree in an agreeable way. But it takes effort. As the old Three Dog Night song goes, it's "easy to be hard, easy to be cold ... easy to be proud, easy to say no."

In fact, I don't believe being nice, or the "better angels of our nature" as Abraham Lincoln put it, is a dominant intrinsic human trait. We're genetically wired to survive. We possess a self-centeredness that wages war against the desires of others, even the greater good, when they conflict with our own survival.

Yes, we have reached a higher level in Darwinian development than our brethren who first walked upright 6 million years ago. But when we feel threatened, fight or flight kicks in as strong as ever, the 6 million year gap disappearing in a finger snap. Our ancestors, however, were fighting or fleeing sabre-toothed tigers. We go to DEFCON 1 berating minimum wage, call center employees over credit card bill disputes.

My refined, well-educated, good-mannered mother, a woman who wrote thank-you notes to people she paid to do work for her, often shocked folks when, commenting on raising five children, she would say:

## About Voices

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"They start out as self-centered savages. We have to civilize them."

And so she did. In a nice way, of course.

So being nice is a choice. A choice we make every minute of every day in how we react to each other and events. It's not always the easiest or the default choice. It's sometimes easier to return fire with fire, rudeness with rudeness. Righteous anger, we say.

Perhaps, in isolated cases, such behavior can be justified. But let's face it, too often we as individuals and society as a

whole choose put-downs, sarcastic one-upmanship and fiery emotional responses over being nice.

I'm not focusing solely on interpersonal exchanges — our family, friends, the cashier at the grocery store — but also in how we view the world and other humans whom we may never meet. There is a seething tension between people where, depending on our perspective, we feel free to chastise one another, be judgmental and holier than thou. We slip these negative feelings on like a favorite, well-worn jacket, cloaking ourselves in the comfortable certainty of what we deem to be right and wrong, reveling in the schadenfreude of other folks' problems.

It's not a pretty picture.

But if we are self-centered and wired for survival, maybe there's a practical, self-serving argument we can make to justify being nice over being nasty. A reason that not only benefits society but improves our own well-being.

In an Oct. 19, 2016, Wall Street Journal article, Arthur C. Brooks argues that nice people are happier people. Brooks points out "that in everyday life, the nice people, not the creeps, do the best at work, in

love and in happiness." He cites numerous studies in support of being nice. One 2015 NBC poll notes that most people would take a nicer boss over a 10 percent pay increase. Another study showed that 85 percent of the time women chose the nice guy over the handsome guy who is a jerk. So much for the "bad boy" and "nice guys finish last" mythology.

For us closeted revolutionaries — people who secretly long to buck something, anything, just to understand the thrill, but don't want to throw a brick and break things — Brooks argues that being nice can now be considered "a countercultural statement. To be nice is to subvert a pop culture that celebrates tactical nastiness."

In short, it's cool to be nice. Which means Jimmy Stewart, who few associate with being hip, might now be seen as a countercultural revolutionary.

Not so obvious, after all, I guess.

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