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1

Why We Don't Really Want to Be Nice

Setting out to try to become a nicer person sounds like a deeply colourless and dispiriting ambition. In theory, we love niceness, but in practice, the concept appears to be embarrassingly anodyne, meek, tedious and even sexless. Being a nice person sounds like something we would try to be only after every other more arduous and more rewarding alternative had failed.

Our suspicion of niceness may feel personal, but it has a long history, bearing the sediment of at least four major cultural currents that we should try to understand:

i.

The Legacy of Christianity: Nice but Weak

For centuries, Christianity was the single most powerful force shaping our intellectual horizons, and it was profoundly committed to promoting niceness to the world. With the finest aesthetic and intellectual resources, it sang the praises of forgiveness, charity, tenderness and empathy.

But – unfortunately for niceness – Christianity didn't simply leave it there. It also suggested that there might be a fundamental opposition between being nice and being successful. Successful people, believers were told, were not, on the whole, very nice people – and nice people were not, on the whole, very successful. It seemed that applicants to the Kingdom of Heaven had a choice to make: niceness or success.

This dichotomy deeply tarnished the appeal of niceness to anyone with the faintest spark of healthy, worldly ambition in their hearts. Christianity might have been striving to enthuse people about niceness, but by connecting it up so firmly with failure, it created an enduring feeling that this quality was chiefly of interest to losers.

ii.

The Legacy of Romanticism: Nice but Boring

For the last 200 years, we have been heavily influenced by the cultural movement known as Romanticism. For the Romantics, the admirable person has been synonymous with the exciting person: someone intense and creative, mercurial and spontaneous; someone who might upset tradition and dare to be forceful, or even rude, while following the call of their own heart.

The diametric opposite of this heroic figure was, for the Romantics, someone mild and respectable, guarded and conservative, unflashy and quiet: in other words, the boring person. Here, too, there has seemed a radical choice to be made: either fiery, unpredictable and brilliant or meek, conventional and in bed by 9 p.m.

iii.

The Legacy of Capitalism: Nice but Bankrupt

To this charge sheet of niceness, capitalism added another indictment, presenting an interpretation of the world as a deeply competitive arena in which all companies were committed to forge continuous battle for market share, in an atmosphere marked by ruthlessness, determination and impatience. Those who succeeded had to know how to destroy the competition and handle the workforce without a trace of emotion. A nice person, unwilling to squeeze wages or outwit an opponent, would end up either bankrupt or in the mailroom.

iv.

The Legacy of Eroticism: Nice but Unsexy

A final, more personal, association hangs over niceness: the belief that the nice can't be sexually desirable, because the qualities that make us sexy are bound up with the possession of brutal, domineering, confident edges at odds with the tenderness and cosiness of the nice. Once again, an awkward choice presents itself: between the pleasant friend with whom to go to the park and the dangerous companion with whom to disappear into the dungeon.

Despite all this, the truth is that we like niceness very much and depend upon it even more. It is just that our true memories of niceness have been suppressed by a culture that unfairly makes us feel unintelligent for lending niceness our approval. All of the qualities we have been taught to think of as opposed to niceness are in fact highly compatible with and, at points, highly dependent upon it.

However much we are committed to success, for long portions of our lives we are intensely vulnerable creatures wholly at the mercy of the gentleness of others. We are only ever able to be successful because other

people – usually our mothers – have given up a good share of their lives to being nice to us.

As for excitement, this too can only be a phase, as all those who have ever made real contributions to humankind know. Quiet days, domestic routine and regular bedtimes are the necessary preconditions of creative highs. There is nothing more sterile than a demand that life be constantly exciting.

For its part, capitalism may reward competition *between* firms, but it relies on collaboration *within* them. No company can function long without trust and bonds of personal affection. Much to the frustration of bosses, money cannot guarantee the commitment required from employees in all the more sophisticated areas of the economy; only meaning and a spirit of companionship will.

Lastly, the sexual thrill of nastiness only ever properly entices in conditions of trust. However much we may fantasise about a night with a ruthless conqueror, it would be alarming to wind up with an actual example. We need to know that someone is fundamentally kind before an offer of a rope and the sound of swear words become properly interesting.

So much of what we value is in fact preserved by niceness and is compatible with it. We can be nice and successful; nice and exciting; nice and wealthy; and nice and potent. Niceness is a virtue awaiting our rediscovery and our renewed, unconflicted appreciation.