

How To Act “Grace - Fully”

When my husband Jim and I went out to eat and the waitress was not particularly pleasant or efficient, he made it a point to give her a larger tip than usual. “She must have had a hard day,” he’d tell me.

When I’d balk at this counter-cultural approach of his, he’d remind me that we never know what’s going on in another person’s life and it is always better to err on the side of kindness and mercy. To put it another way, it’s always better to act “grace-fully.”

This seems to be the tone of Pope Francis’ papacy, urging us to be compassionate, to listen carefully, and to be quick to forgive and not condemn. Only God knows what’s going on in another’s heart and it’s not our job to judge them.

A popular psychologist told the story of riding the subway in New York. A father and his three young children got on and the children were rowdy and disruptive. Fellow passengers first gave dirty looks, then finally one of them barked at the father, “Why don’t you make your children behave?” “I’m sorry,” he said, “We just came from the hospital. Their mother died. I don’t know what to do.” The mood in the car changed dramatically at that moment. Instead of judgment and anger, there was compassion and support.

We just never know another’s burden. If that’s the case, then how do we handle those people that make the hair on the back of our neck stand on edge, make us want to run away screaming or “get on our last nerve?”

The Big Book of AA (Alcoholics Anonymous) has a wonderful suggestion I used often when I worked with alcoholics and addicts—pray for them—pray not that they shape up or stop doing what annoys you, but pray that God gives them every good thing you want for yourself—good relationships, peace, security...Do that every day for two weeks, the authors suggest. Do

it even if you have to pray to be willing to be willing to do it. Your heart will change and you will be free.

As I was sharing that one day in a lecture a person shouted out, “That’s the stupidest thing I ever heard.” He went on to talk about how he had been wronged and wanted to take matters into his own hands. “Where is that person who harmed you?” I asked. “I don’t know,” he answered, “but if I did...” “And where are you?” I asked gently. “In a treatment center—but what does that have to do with anything?” There was a moment of silence. Then I asked “What do you have to lose by trying?” “Nothing,” he muttered. “Still it’s the stupidest thing I ever heard.” A few weeks later he came up to me and whispered softly, “You were right. It does work.”

It does work, but we instinctively resist. Though it makes no sense, somehow we seem to like hanging on to the anger and judgment that imprison us. Somehow we think that if we allow our hearts to change we will be vulnerable and those people will hurt us and cause us pain again. However, forgiving doesn’t mean that we let these people repeat their bad behavior. In fact, it helps us set better boundaries and be more appropriately assertive.

Forgiving—letting go—has an amazing effect on us. We are freed, unburdened. Often it takes a while to get to that point. Another bit of AA wisdom suggests that “when the pain of hanging on is greater than the pain of letting go, you’ll let go.”

So maybe the “stupidest thing I’ve ever heard” is an invitation to live “grace-fully.” What do we have to lose by giving it a try?

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