

Politeness can sometimes hurt more than it helps

March 13, 2018

Ryan — a brilliant, enthusiastic young scientist — spent a two-year layover in my neuroscience laboratory between his undergrad studies in Vancouver, B.C., and graduate school on the East Coast. On his last day in California, we sat over drinks, reflecting on his plans for the future. I offered some parting advice and then asked the question I pose to everyone who graduates from my lab: “What could I have done better?”

He hesitated, then replied, “You’re too nice.”

This was startling, especially coming from a Canadian. (I’ve omitted Ryan’s last name to protect his privacy.)

“Nice” might count as faint praise, but is it really an insult? I asked him to elaborate.

“Well,” he said, noticeably uncomfortable, “you’re so nice to *everyone* here that we don’t really know what you think about *anyone*. Some people end up assuming the worst.”

Later that night, I realized he was right, though I would use a different term. I was addicted to politeness.

Not everyone shares my addiction. In fact, our culture is in the middle of a politeness shortage. Imagine a reader from five years ago leafing through today’s Washington Post. She’d probably be shocked at the vulgarity of our national conversation. Social media is overrun with bullying. CNN [warns parents](#) they might want to clear the room of small children before the president’s remarks are broadcast. Norms are steadily shredded. The psychologist Steven Pinker [claims](#) that modern society is built on a foundation of “civilizing”: people’s adherence to common decency. If he’s right, our house is teetering.

It’s easy to long for politeness, but just because Archie Bunker is over for dinner doesn’t mean we’d be better off with Miss Manners. Politeness often hurts more than it helps.