



Let's Open Our Eyes to Better Options

By Stefanie Elwood

Do you agree with these statements?

1. PARENTS SHOULD DEFEND THEIR CHILDREN.
2. RUDENESS SHOULD BE CALLED OUT.
3. BULLYING IS WRONG.
4. IT'S GOOD TO SEE OTHER POINTS OF VIEW.

She was such a sweetheart, courteous, warm and friendly. Her classmates loved her. So do I. After "Lisa" graduated, she sent me a friend request. I was pleased to see wonderful events unfold for her. As we all do, I watch what my FB friends like, laugh at, shed a tear for, and share. One day, I noticed that Lisa liked this video hailing a dad for sticking up for his daughters.

Here's the story: A mom and her daughters were buying sanitary napkins because the twelve-year-old twins were having their first period. This is a tough time. I remember praying there would be a woman behind the counter when I bought feminine products. When Mom and daughters were checking out, the male clerk asked the kids if they wanted a bag because "What would the neighbors think?" Oh dear. Mom and daughters were embarrassed. The girls were in tears when they returned to the car where Dad waited. Dad videos his walk into the store but never shows his face or gives his name. He doesn't film other customers, whom we hear him address with this comment, "Excuse me one second, I got a bone to pick with this man." Dad also doesn't show the face of the clerk he wanted to enlighten—at least not at first—so I thought this might be a respectful approach to filming a useful lesson. And my FB friend Lisa gave it a like.

To be fair, Dad probably *had* a better plan. For one thing, he did ask to be excused for just "one second," so he must not have expected this interaction to last five minutes. Unfortunately, he handled himself well for only about one minute. The clerk seemed unremorseful, uncooperative and Dad's level of frustration got the best of him. He begins to swear. He asks the clerk if he lives around here. Dad mentions that he sees him around. Given his increasingly agitated attitude,

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he starts to sound a little threatening. Then another man jumps into the fray. Swearing and quite aggressive, this man definitely threatens the clerk. At this point, the clerk's face is on camera. A presumably well-intentioned moment has become a mess. And, yet, Lisa *liked* it.

To some extent, I suppose we hit our likes and dislikes frequently, either with authority and righteousness or with wild abandon. We do this from a place of comfort, relative anonymity, thoroughly removed from the incident at hand. We do this with our proud sense of *otherness*. We like to say, look at me, I'm not like *that* person. I'm part of the group that is correct, the one that doesn't make the kinds of mistakes the person on Youtube made. It's so easy to join popular thought or action. Maybe, to some degree, we can't help it.

According to Rob Henderson, "Research shows we do not have as much control over our thoughts and behavior as we think. We take cues from our environment, especially other people, on how to act" (*Psychology Today*). The movie *Dead Poets Society* (starring the late, great Robin Williams) exemplifies this beautifully. English teacher John Keating (played by Williams) takes his high school students outside. With no explanation, he asks three to walk around as the rest watch. Within seconds, they have formed a line and walk in unison.



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The other boys join in the fun with enthusiastic clapping as the walk becomes a march. At the end of this brief experiment, the teacher explains that this is a lesson in conformity. Students were asked to consider the different walking styles, nonchalant, nervous, distracted, and note how quickly the boys fell into a march. Keating clarifies, “I brought them up here to illustrate” the “difficulty of maintaining your own belief in the face of others.” To make sure the rest of the boys could not feel the superiority of believing they would not have marched, Keating asks, “Why were you clapping?” He explains that an individual belief is important even if the “herd” says, “That’s ba-a-a-d.”

But it’s so affirming and comfy to be part of the herd. Henderson discusses a study by Serge Moscovici and Marisa Zavalloni in which people were asked their views on the French president and on Americans. Participants with tentative opinions were then put in a discussion group where their mild view was echoed powerfully by others. After the discussion, those participants indicated much more vehement positions about the same view. The test made this point: “When we see our uncertain opinions reflected back to us, our beliefs strength-

en.” So if you believe that “Parents should stick up for their children” and that “Rudeness should be called out,” you might feel that your views have been validated with the Dad video comments. But Keating would want us to look a little deeper.

Henderson also cites Robert Cialdini’s comment, “Whether the question is what to do with an empty popcorn box in a movie theater, how fast to drive on a certain stretch of highway, or how to eat the chicken at a dinner party, the actions of



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those around us will be important in defining the answer.” Henderson concludes, “Social proof is a shortcut to decide how to act.” I too have wondered at dressy social gatherings if what I consider finger-food is considered such by others. I wait, watch, and then conform.

Leaving trash on a movie theater floor is rude. People probably think, “What’s one more piece of trash? The floor has to be swept anyway.” So seeing some trash encourages more. This sounds like the gigantic number of comments under the dad video. I only read the top fifteen, but not one person uttered a significantly different point of view.

Because behaviors beget behaviors, I pick up at least one piece of trash at the high school where I work every day, usually in front of students. I have no grand expectation that this will start a trend, but why not try? At least, I can role model a better behavior. It is important to combat negative permissions. Consider this: Arizona’s Petrified Forest National Park was having problems with people removing pieces of petrified wood at an alarming rate despite signs at every trail asking people not to. Because of the social proof theory, Cialdini removed signage from one path to see what impact that would have. Interestingly, the theft was reduced on this path by one-third. Henderson surmises that guests “interpreted the sign’s message as permission” because they “thought it was ‘normal’ to take small pieces of wood” since “so much was stolen every year.” Is bad behavior OK if it’s OK with the herd?

Let’s review the questions I posed at the start of this article.

1. PARENTS SHOULD DEFEND THEIR CHILDREN.

A parent’s job is—at the very least—to raise confident, kind, responsible, resilient people. I don’t know how the dad or mom in this scenario handled their daughter’s tears, but the kids did watch Dad go into the store to “pick a bone” with the clerk. I would imagine they heard Dad’s comments about this after he returned. Many people would say that children need to know their parents would protect them. But what was the great offense? No one was mugged or drugged. They were merely embarrassed. Dad’s behavior needlessly elevated the event, made it seem important, made their tears feel oh-so-validated. To raise resilient daughters, the drama should have been lowered. The parents should have skipped the confrontation altogether and matter-of-factly discussed how other people’s ignorance and bad manners are not worth our tears. These girls didn’t need a knight in shining armor. They need to work on developing their own heroic hide.

2. BULLYING IS WRONG. Yes, I would certainly agree with this. But the twins weren’t bullied. They were embarrassed. The clerk was insensitive. The dad, on the other hand, was definitely a bully. And with so much anti-bullying literature, sites and programs available, I was surprised that so many people posted that the clerk deserved it—and worse! Everyone is responsible for his/her own behavior regardless of what others do—the dad included.



Instead of relishing herd-thinking hatred, let's work together to stem the tide of meanness.



3. RUDENESS SHOULD BE CALLED OUT. Maybe. Sometimes. But to what end? Before choosing a behavior, we should consider what we actually hope to accomplish. For example, if Dad's goal was to help this young man develop greater sensitivity, his approach was a huge fail from the start. He could easily have downplayed the incident for his daughters' benefit and called the store later to issue a complaint.

4. IT'S GOOD TO SEE OTHER POINTS OF VIEW. Yes. But this goes both ways. We have become a culture of extremely sensitive people but only where our own feelings are concerned. It would be great if we could be a little tougher ourselves and a little gentler on others. The dad's point of view is clear. He's upset that his girls are upset. But what about the clerk? He was filmed in front of other customers, without his consent. He is at work and helpless to extricate himself from what became verbal assault. He was sworn at by two men, threatened by one, and had to endure this for five minutes. And despite how poorly this went, Dad still felt justified posting the video, immortalizing this debacle to haunt the clerk and perhaps his

daughters. Since he saw firsthand the escalation of tension that resulted in a threat by a bystander, the dad surely should have considered that posting this video might incite more of the same. Any honorable intention I might have attributed to this man devolved quickly. He appeared to be more interested in showing off, seeking validation that, yes, he is his daughters' hero. Unless there is actual danger, he should put the cape away.

Instead of relishing herd-thinking hatred, let's work together to stem the tide of meanness. When a post annoys you, give it a pass. If you can't, try a kindly phrased private message. Don't post or perpetuate humiliating videos—even if you don't know the person. Imagine the trauma of becoming famous on FB for a mistake *you* make. What if it happened to your friend or brother? Well, that clerk is someone's son, brother, or friend. What happened to him will likely be way more devastating and perhaps dangerous than the silly comment he made to the twins. And I truly wish those girls well. I hope they grow up strong in character and sensitive to others. I'm sure Lisa does, too.

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