

Have Contempt for No One?

Everyone seemed to know of Henry's reputation. They said he was a Communist politically with a Stalin-like personality. Henry was born abroad, who knows for sure where, and found himself running a small business catering mainly to teenagers. No one could imagine a person less desirable for the job of dealing with kids than Henry. As Henry aged and became even more cranky, his superiors prayed for the day when he would die or retire.

I witnessed one negative exchange of political ideas between Henry and some other folks. It was truly ugly, and I elected simply to walk away from the scene of the human debacle.

So much for Henry; he departed the scene and a new director of the program took over, John. John is a well-kept, serious-looking athletic man in his late 60s. Like Henry, John is a serious-looking dude. Nevertheless, John seems to get along well with the loud, and oftentimes disruptive, summer teenagers, and the talk on the street is that he is competent, able and successful in running the youth program.

I ran into John, surrounded by 35 noisy middle school kids. I turned to John and said, "Boy, you sure must be a patient man." He didn't answer me. He seemed almost annoyed by the quip. I tried to engage him in conversation, to no avail. Finally, I asked him his name and he looked at me like, "why the heck should I tell you my name?" I told him my name, and he finally mumbled "John." I then asked him his last name, and the look of dissmell was quite evident. I am not exactly sure what "dissmell" is, but it is kind of like when people wrinkle up their nose with an ugly expression, like they just stepped in dog poop.

In forcing John to talk to me, I discovered that we graduated from the same small-town high school, within one year of each other. I knew his family's last name, and I was sure I had run into one of his seven siblings growing up. One word led to another, and John proceeded to tell me his life story, while the 35 kids dispersed. John had lost \$700,000 in the stock market, the "love of my life," his wife, died after a long and tragic illness, and John, somewhere along the line, proceeded to have two heart attacks. "I had given up on life." Everything had gone wrong for John, and it was understandable why he was ready to give up. It was a strange blast from the past; we knew many of the same people in the small town, and undoubtedly our paths had crossed.

I truly could have been knocked over with a feather when John said to me, "Do you know who it was who saved my life?" I said, "Who?" "Henry," and another fellow whose name I did not recognize. It was the mean, disliked, rude, crude, Henry who had saved John's life. Henry suggested that John work with the kids and help to run the program. Eventually John took over when Henry left. "Those kids and that program saved my life."

When we were done talking, I went to shake John's hand. The cool, steely-looking gentleman proceeded to put one hand around my shoulder and give me a hug. This was a guy

who, 20 minutes or a half hour sooner, was reluctant to tell me his first name, and now he was giving me a hug after telling me his life story.

I immediately talked to my son about this, who had interacted with Henry and did not have a good impression of him, just like everyone else. I said to Joshua, "You see, Pirkei Avot is really right when it says, 'Have contempt for no man because everyone has their purpose, reject no idea out of hand and greet all people cheerfully.'" That is my translation of a phrase in the last book of the Talmud, which has been the subject of much discussion over the centuries.

The story, while seemingly inconsequential in the scope of life, provided an important message to both me and my son. Sometimes we are ready to write off people based upon what we do not know about them. They may truly be heroic in how they assist others. But there is an even deeper message, and that is that people are complex. The same person who might have an awful, terrible way of dealing with people can also be capable of saving the lives of others. The same package can be good or bad, which is the paradox of life. I miss my family when I am not with them, but I am delighted that they are happy, productive, and doing what they love. Everyone can think of tons of paradoxes in their life where in the same situation a person can show signs of being great and being despicable at the same time. Most of us are not that dramatically different, and those who are get the label "bipolar." Nevertheless, the world and our relationships are ruled, not infrequently, by paradoxical feelings and behaviors.

The story of Henry and John is reminiscent of the old railroad crossing sign, "Stop, look and listen." How often do we do that, and how often do we ignore the warning?

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