

A Tale of Two Cities

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Story 1: I was in a grocery store to pick up just one item. When I approached the cash registers, there were long lines at each one. I chose a line and quietly approached the cashier. “Ma’am,” I said humbly, “could you cash this one item for me please?” I was totally ignored. The cashier served the first and then the second customer. I looked at the next lady in line pleadingly. “Could you let me cash this one item please?” All eyes in the line focused on me and I immediately realised that an order—a civil one—had been established and no one would allow that order to be disrupted. “Excuse me.” Embarrassed, I left my item in a nearby trolley and beat a hasty retreat.

Story 2: My car’s gas tank was almost empty. I pulled into the gas station, a little behind a car at the pump for super gasoline, leaving enough space for emergency maneuvering. Suddenly, another car turned into the gas station and the driver positioned his car between the rear bumper of the car at the pump and my front bumper. “Excuse me, but there’s a line here,” I said from within my car. Ignorance? Maybe he couldn’t hear me because all of his windows were up. I walked over to the driver, but the more I tried to point out his error, the more he said, “Yeah, but I don’t want to hear you, nah!” Looking for support, I turned to the attendant and told him he shouldn’t serve that customer. “That’s why I put a cone there, but ...” To add insult to injury, I saw him take money from the errant driver and take the pump to begin the sale. Furious, I again beat a hasty exit.

One of these stories happened in the “great North” and the other right here in an urban area of my homeland. Can you guess which is which?

Unfortunately, our sweet TnT is becoming a brutal place where civility and courtesy seem to be things of the past. It is easy enough to sit and complain or to get on a plane and move to “greener pastures.” However, the real challenge is to come up with a suggestion to turn things around and to make an effort to get that suggestion implemented. With such seemingly intractable problems, where do we start?

I used to say we must start with the children. Teach them the simple courtesies that make life a little easier living. Saying “Good morning” or “Good afternoon,” “please,” “thank you” and “sorry” can soothe an otherwise tense situation. Teach them alternative responses to the “wrong and strong” stance. Teach them to control their anger and to negotiate from a respectful position and in a respectful manner.

However, I’ve come to realise that if we are to do this in the school, teachers have to be taught the same things, as well as how to incorporate these ideals into their teaching and living. This is a big challenge, knowing the variety of teacher positions on the boundaries of their job, and the variety of teacher attitudes about how lost “those children” are.

Furthermore, adults, particularly parents and others that come into daily contact with our children and young people, also have to be taught these things. They also have to be

taught how to not let transgressions of civil behaviour pass as acceptable or unchangeable. That's a massive task, but it must begin or else we are all doomed to a bestial existence. Teachers, let us start with the children in our class(es) and their parents.

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