

Saving an "Endangered" Species: Decency - Dr. Jharna Chatterjee



Am I the only person to feel that in recent years we are seeing less and less of basic human decency? Oh, we say "sorry", "thank you" and "hi, how are you?" all the time, but most often we don't even look at the person in his/her eyes and don't really mean it. It is even worse in case of close relationships; many of us take others for granted, and do not bother to extend the minimum courtesy that we offer to strangers or colleagues – perhaps because we don't think it would ever get out. We do not trust, appreciate or respect one another; we think others are taking advantage of us or are imposing on us which we resent, but sometimes we tolerate because we need their 'services' at other times. And yet, treating each other with decency is the first requirement of a viable society. Are we becoming more and more ego-centric and materialistic animals? A large number of animal species, for example, the penguins, the ants, the bees, the gorillas, the meerkats and the wolves do not behave this way – as far as I know.

Take most modern TV shows, sit-coms in particular. I have stopped watching them because it seems that "funny combined with smartness" means outright rudeness, subtle or not-so-subtle insults, obscene comments, one-upmanship and prompt come-backs that put down and embarrass the other person. Why? Is it not cruelty by another name? Love seems to exist only between two young people physically lusting for each other – seldom does it reach beyond. It does not seem to exist between a parent and a child, except when the child has been kidnapped or murdered, and there is an enemy to be killed; almost never between grandparents and a child except in life insurance commercials; not between siblings – more likely there is jealousy between them to the extent that one does not hesitate to kill the other, and so on. The concept of modesty was unceremoniously buried about thirty years ago – now "anything goes". Senseless, graphic violence in numerous shows mercilessly assaults our sensibilities (with viewer discretion religiously advised, of course).

This type of show has been increasing as our longevity and affluence are growing steadily – if we disregard the recent global recession for a moment. Again, I ask 'why'? Do we have nothing better to aim for, to try to achieve? The few channels people with a sense of decency can watch safely are Public Broadcasting Service (educational), TV Ontario (educational), News, History, Geography, Discovery or Science; other choices are "America's funniest home-videos or children's programs (some of them are full of violence too, albeit in cartoons) or the reruns of old shows such as "Little House on the

Prairie", "I love Lucy" and "Happy Days". North American shows are not the only ones to blame. I witnessed the same trend on Indian TV as well. The majority of "Bollywood" films has acquainted the world with a version of Indian culture that most people with a sense of decency dislike. All of the Indian soap-operas and many of the recent movies are filled with greed, shameless manipulation and dark conspiracies. I am not knowledgeable about Rock music, but occasionally read laments in sensible print-media about the praise of cruelty, violence, obscenities and general unwholesomeness in some lyrics. It seems that entertainment has ceased to be entertaining for people with decent taste, who, most likely, would be dismissed as ultra-conservative and obsolete. If arts reflect reality, is this the reality now? If so, it's a sad statement indeed about our so-called cultural sophistication, and scary.

Any social psychologist would tell you that TV and popular music have a significant influence on children's and adolescents' socialization, and therefore, on their behavior. How would they learn that violence (ruthless, in many cases) is not the best way to settle differences? How would they know that hurting others' feelings is just as bad as hurting them physically – that in the long run, it is not an intelligent, mature and effective way to behave? How would they learn to be honest if they see time and time again that deception works? Especially in the situations where both parents are busy making ends meet, how would they learn to be good human beings with decent behavioral norms and decent taste in choosing role models? The obvious question is: could or should we change this situation? Personally, I think we must. The next question is: how? Here is what I have gleaned from experts who have considered the more fundamental question of 'ethical behavior'; and we need to start at the most basic level – the individual.

There is one overall test of ethical or moral behavior: could the person defend his/her speech and actions before the public if the actions became public? In this case, I will take the word 'public' to mean *all who matter to this person* or whose good opinion matters to this person - spouse, children, close relatives, friends, neighbors, business associates and colleagues. For example, could they be transparently honest with their children without feeling uneasy and explain to them what they said or did? Being honest with oneself or looking oneself in the mirror *honestly* is a good rule of thumb too. Another recommendation came from a world-famous philosopher and ethicist, Immanuel Kant, who recommended acting in a manner that you would wish this to become a universal law, if you had the authority to implement this.

I would also like to remind ourselves some age-old precepts such as "Treat others as you would like to be treated" (the golden rule), "If you spit up in the air, it could fall back on your face", and "As you sow, so you reap". Parents have to remember that like it or not, usually they are the most influential and available role models who set the standards for acceptable behavior in the family and outside. It is also good to remember that children understand and learn a lot more than we give them credit for, and that research shows observational learning to have greater (and not less) impact on what they learn than the 'ten commandments' or something similarly sacred the parents may try to teach them verbally. So, in the future, they could very well expect their children to mirror some of their own actions.

Patience, compassion, kindness and respect are other old-fashioned but fail-proof concepts to seriously and sincerely consider. Agreeing to disagree is another valuable principle for all decent people, as long as it is done calmly and respectfully and not by a shouting match. In interpersonal interactions, it is advisable to think of the positive more than the negative in others – if the glass could be seen as half-full instead of half-empty – it might go a long way toward mutually respectful, decent behavior. Also, *let go, let go, let go!* If something cannot be changed, and won't hurt anyone, then let go instead of engaging in futile arguments to prove a point. And if you have made a mistake, intentionally out of temporary insanity or unknowingly and unintentionally, try saying "sorry" sincerely and resolve to learn from your mistakes. We should always remember that it takes a greater person to admit one's own mistake than pretending to be always right, which also reminds me of the philosophy and practice of 'restorative justice'. 'Forget and forgive', if and when possible, is healing for everyone. Even a parent whose child had been murdered found peace only after meeting and forgiving the perpetrator, sentenced for life. With the exception of genocide and serial murders, very few situations can be potentially more 'unforgivable' than that. Anger or grudge carried throughout life, no matter how justified, can be a heavy burden that often wears out the soul of the person who carries it. These are 'prescriptions' for a more decent (as well as satisfying and peaceful) life on an individual scale.

Now, what could we do to change the messages of the media, especially, the television and movies? I know it is not easy to make changes in a democratic country without very hard and long collective effort, especially if there is a profitable market to contend with. However, let us think about the recent public awareness about living in harmony with nature, and avoiding harmful chemicals for better health. The industry *had to respond* to this increased public awareness and the result was the beginning of solar lights, houses with solar energy, hybrid cars, less harmful gasoline at the pumps, use of natural weed-killers and insecticides, as well as food items with no trans-fat, Omega-3 cooking oil and eggs etc. Similarly, it is possible to raise public awareness about unhealthy mass media products too. If enough people with decent taste make it known that violence, cruelty in any form, obscenity in any form and shallowness in human interactions are not palatable and acceptable, then industry will have to respond. Freedom of expression does not mean the right or freedom to poison children's and young adults' minds, and freedom of speech does not include the use of condescending jokes, comments, gestures or lyrics, in my opinion.

Could we, collectively, save decency and try to maintain human dignity? Being an optimist, I believe we can, but we must start our efforts now, with ourselves – because it is the only being we have some control over. We can start the snowball rolling on our own backyard and wait to see it grow into an avalanche.

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