

The Price of Nice

**You better not shout, you better not cry,
You better be nice I'm telling you why...**

by Kelly Bryson, MA, MFT

Have you been a naughty or a nice boy or girl? You have been Nice? Well then you must be enjoying the reward for being a good little boy or girl, i.e. depression, intermittent explosiveness, career confusion or job meaninglessness, ambiguous anxiety, low awareness of one's own needs, either flat or explosive relationships, resentment about being the victim of the "mean people" and subtle self hate.

What a tragedy that our culture puts us in conflict with our human nature. It took me till the end of the school year in first grade before I could sit for the whole period with my hands folded, my feet together and my mouth shut. Then I was told, "What a nice little boy you were today!" That's when I was seduced into the slavery of people pleasing. I prostituted and prevented my little boyhood from expressing itself to get those few little drops of perverted praise. The energy it took to control such a vital force took a noticeable toll on my physical body.

My mentor, Virginia Satir noticed it the first time she met me. She put her hand on my shoulder and proclaimed to a large audience of people "Now this man has paid a heavy price for learning to be nice. In order to survive he has learned to be a people pleaser and now carries all this tension in his shoulders in order to control his spontaneous expression." (Satir is called the Mother of Family Therapy and is credited with coining the term "People Pleaser." Bradshaw and others draw heavily from her work.) She was right. Not only did I pay a heavy price but so did everyone around me. So now I am trying to get the word out that being nice has its price.

Here are just a few of the costs:

1. Always being nice prevents people around you from receiving congruent feedback that would stimulate their growth. (By growth I mean gaining knowledge of oneself and others.)
2. "Nice" people often react with pain if anyone around them expresses uncomfortable feelings. They get angry, thinking others should have to be nice too. Or they feel hurt and confused if someone does not appreciate their niceness. Others often sense this and avoid giving them congruent feedback thereby effectively blocking the nice person's emotional growth.
3. With "nice" people you never know where you really stand. The nice person allows others to accidentally oppress them. The "nice" person might be resenting you just for talking to them, because really they are needing to pee. But instead of saying so, they stand there nodding and smiling, with legs tightly crossed, pretending to listen (lights are on but nobody's home).



4. You never know with a nice person if the relationship would survive a conflict or angry confrontation. This uncertainty of course greatly limits the depths of intimacy possible.
5. Do you really trust a "nice" person to back you up if confrontation were really needed?
6. Often people in relationship with nice people turn their irritation toward themselves because it is so confusing how they could be so upset with someone so "nice." In intimate relationships this leads to guilt, self hate and depression.
7. "Nice" people frequently keep all the anger in until they find a safe place to dump it, i.e., a child, a federal building to blow up, a helpless dependent mate. (Timothy McVeigh, the suspect in the Oklahoma City bombing is described by acquaintances as a very, very nice guy, who would give you the shirt off his back.) Success in keeping the anger in, will often manifest as psychosomatic illnesses (ulcers, back problems, heart disease, etc.).

In my work as a psychotherapist, it's the ones who had "Nice Parents" or "Rigidly Religious Parents" (as opposed to spiritual parents) that are often the most stuck in the chronic low grade depression. They have a difficult time accessing or expressing any negative feelings towards their parents. They sometimes say to me "After all my parents did for me, seldom saying a harsh word to me, I would feel terribly guilty complaining. Besides it would break their hearts." The psychologist Rollo May suggested that it is less crazy to a child to cope with overt withdrawal or harshness than to try to understand the facade of the always nice parent. When everyone agrees that your parents are so nice and giving and you still feel dissatisfied, as a child you conclude that there must be something wrong with your ability to receive love.

Nice guys not only finish last they do so with great resentment. They then turn this resentment inwards (because it would not be nice to express it) and become depressed. I work with a lot of divorced, depressed, disillusioned women who tell me, "It's not fair, I did everything right, touched all the bases and I have nothing to show for it. Now I don't even know who I am or what I want." Of course people who are depressed never know what they want, that's why they're depressed. They are out of the sweet flow of life. They are playing a game of "cognitively arresting their alternatives Ping-Pong" in their heads. "Maybe I want to go back to school... No, that would be selfish of me because the kids need me. Maybe I'll start a business....No I hate all that dog-eat-dog competition. Maybe I'll look for a love relationship....No, I do not know if that's appropriate yet... etc."

A part of me is concerned about introducing yet another label into the culture, but sometimes labels are just too fun to resist. So my new label is "Niceneck." A "Niceneck" is someone who is too nice for their own good.

Or maybe I should invent a disease out of it like "Niceneckism," Or maybe ADDS (Assertiveness Deficit Disorder Syndrome) and open up treatment centers all over the country to help people recover from it, kind of like what they did with Codependency.

Here's a checklist to help decide whether you can apply this new self judgement to yourself. Or to borrow a phrase from the comedian Jeff something-or-other-Worthy, **"You just might be a "Niceneck" if ..."**

1. When someone bumps into you from behind with their grocery cart, you apologize.
2. People have a tendency to grab you by the shoulders and shake you a lot.



3. Some Babalonian has been talking to you forever on the phone but you are afraid to tell them you want to go to sleep. You are afraid of either hurting their feelings (which really means that you are afraid of feeling guilty) or being perceived as rude.
4. You have trouble saying your real "yes's and nos."
5. You are constantly thinking about how to say things without upsetting people.
6. It takes you an hour to tell the telemarketer you have no interest in buying a cactus ranch in Yuma. (Do you realize that you are the cause of the starvation death of the telemarketer's children? Because he could have made some money by selling to someone who was actually going to buy.)
7. Your roommate skips out on you without paying his rent. Instead of filing in small claims court you spend hours meditating on 'Why did I create this in my life?' or you may call and thank him for helping you face the karma of your money issues. This I would call graduate level Niceness — Avoiding Assertiveness through Spiritual Self Blame.

Now I recognize that some of you are only aspiring "Nicenecks" perhaps because you haven't been through the western punishment/reward school system, or had other education that tries to get you to grow and change through self hate. If you want to catch up with the rest of us "Nicenecks" I suggest practicing the following:

Seven steps to Self Sacrifice or how to become a "Niceneck"

1. **Listen to other people longer than you want to.** Examples: Listen to telephone solicitors, religious missionaries, multilevel marketing acquaintances, and whining friends to their satisfaction.
2. **Do everything you feel obligated to do.** Examples: Write thank you letters to all the relatives and acquaintances you think you should after each holiday, go to every meeting, political rally or religious service you think you should, contribute to every charity and volunteer for every organization that asks you for help. If no one asks you, motivate yourself to initiate a call to them.
3. **Work for a living, instead of figuring out how to get paid to play.**
4. **Do anything to prevent other people from freaking out.**
5. **Chant the mantra "No pain no gain."**
6. **Adopt the motto: "Me last."**
7. **Call my aunt who is a Blackbelt Babalonian** (meaning she can speak on the inhale as well as the exhale) **and volunteer to be her friend.**

If none of these options appeal to you and you are tired of trying to get better at "walking on eggshells" then I suggest "walking in rhythm to the beat of your own soul" and learn how to enjoy people freaking out about it. How? I teach Compassionate Communication to help myself with this. When tempted to be nice



and give up my needs I like to say "I'm feeling _____" and then I express the emotional truth. **Example:** "I'm feeling worried about staying on the phone because I want to get this article written before the deadline." Passion is the larger part of Compassion. So I like to first have passionate self compassion and then I can have compassion and empathy when others freak out. Example: "Well fine, see if I ever call you again!" My answer, "Are you hurt because you wanted to keep talking?"

Or suppose your best friend asks you "Am I fat?" The nice friend responds "Oh, no you're pleasingly plump." The tough love with an attitude friend, "Let's just say your blood type is Ragu and if someone threw a snowball at you it wouldn't hit you it would go into orbit around you." The first is likely to support your best friend in rationalizing away a desire for a more healthy body. The second response would likely trigger a shame attack, (of course depending on the relationship) necessitating a trip through the emergency room entrance to Baskin and Robbins (Basking in self pity and Robbing themselves of health) for some Rocky Road Resuscitation. The nice friend's response is trying to meet the need for compassion and gentleness at the expense of honesty and trusting the other's strength. The tough love friend's response is a type of honesty, but at the expense of the gentle compassion needed to establish connection, which allows for lasting influence. This radical brutal honesty does sometimes influence the other to change out of shame, fear, hurt or guilt, but because it is coming from the outside and is pain motivated, the change will likely be temporary. For change to be lasting it needs to come from an inner willingness and be focused toward some pleasurable goal like feeling alive and healthy. Pain is a good short term motivator, but self love or pleasurable satisfaction is necessary for sustained motivation.

If I want to be a lasting positive influence on my friend I need to come from gentle strength myself. In response to my friend's question "Am I fat?", I might respond "Are you worried about your health or your attractiveness?" And then I would want to give my friend space and time to be heard in, to explore and unwrap what it is all about for them. After they have gotten the empathy they need I might then ask "Would you like to hear my honesty about your weight?" Again I would pause here to be sure they really are consenting and not just capitulating. With certain friends I have them sign a legal document in blood that they really do want my honesty. It might sound like this: "I am very scared about your health because I want you for a friend for as long as I can have you. I am very sad that you haven't had a date in such a long time. I want you to be happy and have love in your life. How do you feel about what I am saying?"

In this world we are constantly faced with dealing with people who are consciously or unconsciously behaving in ways that do not meet our needs. Many of our teachers taught us not to "talk back." In other words, to be quiet when our needs were not being met. We learned to deal with our pain by stuffing it or taking it out on weaker beings. We learned creative ways to try to take care of our needs, like dissociating from them or using passive aggressive tactics. By passive aggressive I mean what I taught myself to do in order not to risk getting punished for asserting my needs. I learned to pout. I am hoping my pouting will make you so miserable that eventually you will come to me, guess what I need and give it to me. I am teaching myself some new behaviors when someone else's behavior is not meeting my needs. Here's a story showing how I would prefer to negotiate my needs.

Once I was in a workshop with Dr. Marshall Rosenberg and had just completed a huge piece of emotional work around issues related to my father. I had been crying belly sobs of grief release and was now starting to catch my breath as the focus of the group went on to the next person's issue. I unconsciously began to rock and make a little whimpering sound on my breath's exhale. I was sitting right beside Dr. Rosenberg when he leaned over and whispered in my ear, so as not to embarrass me, "That little sound you are making, is that soothing to you?" I was startled from my self involve state "Ahh.. yes." "It's irritating as hell to me, because I want to both comfort you be focused on this next person's issue. Could you find another way to soothe yourself?" I was a little embarrassed despite his attempt to protect me from it, but I was able to just open my



throat a little more on the exhale and comfort myself through breathing and rocking.

What Dr. Rosenberg demonstrated was **“Three smooth steps to self assertiveness”**:

- 1. Demonstrating empathy to the feelings, needs and intentions for the person unpleasant behavior.** (“That little sound you are making, is that soothing to you?”)
- 2. Self responsible expression of our feelings and needs.** (“It’s irritating as hell to me, because I want to both comfort you and be focused on this next person’s issue.”)
- 3. Express a request for an action that demonstrates a willingness to get both people’s needs met.**

The more I care about someone the more painful it is to be “nice” to them or to allow them to accidentally oppress me. The other day my partner came bouncing into my room saying she was very hungry and did I want to go to breakfast. I really wanted to keep reading but I was too humble to admit that. I wish I had remembered what Golda Meir once said: “Quit being so humble, you’re not that great!” I chose instead to go to breakfast and subtly resent myself for giving up my desire to read.

The tragic part of the story occurred a few days later when she once again asked me to go somewhere while I was reading. I felt the resentment rise up from my belly and a little voice saying, “I don’t want to do that to me again.” Then I felt the temptation to project it and blame her for asking. Finally I told her what was going on with me. How I had given up my need for her sake the other morning. Immediately tears welled up in her eyes as she told me she never again wanted to be the stimulus for me resenting myself or giving up my needs. Wow! I began to see practically how important it is not to be NICE and how we cannot really sacrifice our needs for the other, lest we trigger pain for them. It is important to hang in there until we find Win/Win. Whenever our niceness allows another to oppress us and prevent us from getting our needs met, we either resent ourselves, the other or both. I would go so far as to call it a form of violence. It is a violence of self abandonment and whoever we allow to oppress us, we will subtly hate and withdraw from.

In our schools and families we are taught how to think in terms of moralistic judgments instead of in terms of our needs and requests. Our teachers and parents think it is their job to teach us right from wrong, appropriate from inappropriate. Sadly what we learn is to disassociate from our feelings and needs and express ourselves in judgmental terms of what is wrong with other people. We learn to say things like “It’s not fair” instead of “I’m hungry, would you share the donuts?” Or “You’re rude” instead of “I’m feeling distracted, would you lower your voice so I can hear the movie?” Instead of gaining successful experiences of asserting our needs and getting what we want we collect painful experiences. We ask for what we want in the only way we have been taught, through moralistic judgements of others, which gets perceived as an attack and provokes a counter attack. Then we not only don’t get what we want we end up feeling fear, shame and guilt.

Example:

Jane: You are afraid of intimacy and commitment (A judgmental diagnosis instead of an expression of her own intimate feelings or requests)

John responds: And you are needy and insecure. Get a life!

OR



Little Jane: You're mean. Why won't you let me play with you?

Little John: Because you are a little dweeb, that's why!

No wonder we learn to stop expressing ourselves early on in life. We get so wounded by others reactions to how we express our needs that we shut down. We learn: "If you are going to get along you have to go along."

"Nicenecks" are terrified of being abandoned by others or isolated from the group. This is partly why nice people deny that there is anything terrible going on, like in the Emperor's New Clothes story. To a niceneck it would be "rude" to acknowledge that there is an elephant in the living room. (In my family there were herds of elephants being ridden by nude emperors parading through our living room.)

I suggest that the really catastrophic acts of violence in the world were passively condoned by the nice majority of the culture. In WWII large numbers of people, particularly certain international religions, knew what Hitler was up to and what was happening in the concentration camps but chose not to make waves. Even the Nazi's themselves were trying to flee their inner demons and avoid the inner conflict created by German child rearing practices. They were taught to "knock on the door to love through obedience to authority." This is why all they could do was be nice, go along, and never be naughty by saying NO to "Heil Hitler dur fuhrer" (the father). It was out of this fear of coping with the inner conflict between their culture and their nature (inner child) that they supported their government in attacking some "Evil Empire" out there. In this case it was the Jews.

I produced a play this summer called *1,000 Clowns*. In it, the lead character Murray tells these social workers who have come to compel his nephew to attend school, "Before I give him over to you I want to make sure he won't learn how to become one of the nice dead people. I want to be sure he'll know when he's chickening out on himself. I want him to get to know exactly the special thing he is or else he won't notice it when it starts to go. I want him to see all the wild possibilities and to give the world a little goosing when he gets the chance. I want him to know the subtle, sneaky, important reason he was born a human being and not a chair."

Well I have been a good, nice useful chair for the society but it has cost me my creativity and my connection to my wild wonderchild. I'm relieved to report that this elan vital (vital life energy which cannot be created or destroyed) has not been murdered as I feared but simply trapped in a tomb of fear, guilt and shame. As a recovering "Niceneck" I'm discovering and uncovering a long lost and precious friend of mine. I wrote this poem to create and celebrate our reunion:

Heart broken by shattered childhood dreams.
Knowledge of Realms of Creativity lost,
I grieve the cost to my now lonely soul.
Panic is nearby, I want to fly, afraid to die.
But the Sirens of my Soul sweetly sing their song of loss,
And I want to hear, ignore the fear and allow mySelf to
Come Home, come Home, ye who are weary come Home.
I relive the moment of our separation
and through this recreation
find my long lost soul again.
I start to feel my body soften,
resurrecting from its coffin
Of tension, armor and pain.



Oh great Joy, could it be, could it be?
That the soul I thought had been crucified,
Had just been lost, buried, and denied,
And is finally, finally reuniting with me.

Kelly Bryson MA, MFT, author of the best selling book, *Don't be Nice, Be Real - Balancing Passion for Self with Compassion for Others (COVER TEXT: A Handbook to Nonviolent Communication™)*, has been featured in Elle and Shape magazines, appeared on many TV and radio shows, lived in an ashram many years, is a humorist, singer and licensed therapist in private practice. He keynotes conventions (national Montessori), is an inspirational speaker and has been an authorized trainer for the international Center for Nonviolent Communication for over 20 years, and has trained thousands in the U.S., Europe and the Middle East. He trains, presents and consults with groups, corporations (Tony Robbins, Paul Mitchell Salons), churches (all flavors), schools (U.Cal.L.B, Body/Mind College), clubs and all types of organizations. He also studied with E. Stanley Jones, Gandhi's concierge and friend. Learn more about his work or information about his private or phone-based sessions, visit his website at www.LanguageOfCompassion.com or contact him directly at 831-462-EARS (3277) (most insurance accepted). To purchase Kelly's book *Don't be Nice, Be Real* or other related CD's, audio tapes & books, or to read chapters from his book click <http://www.languageofcompassion.com/Publications.htm>