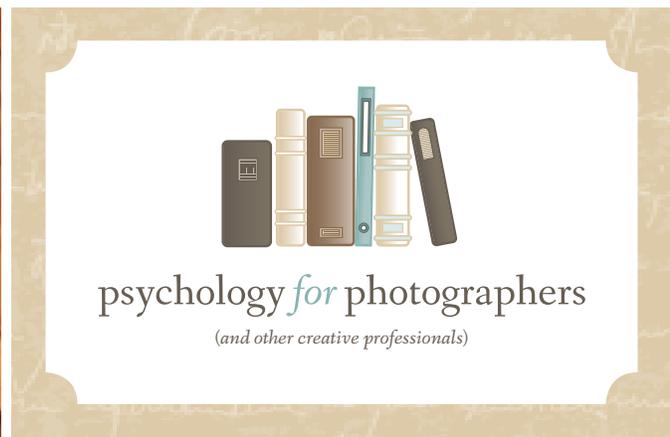




Grateful & Gracious

How to Respond Graciously To Un-Gracious People

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YOUR CHEEKS FLUSH. INDIGNATION SWELLS IN YOUR THROAT. YOUR HANDS SHAKE, ALMOST IMPERCEPTIBLY, AS YOU GRIP YOUR COCKTAIL PLATE.

When you got dressed up and headed out for this festive occasion, this is NOT how you imagined feeling.

BUT NOW SOMEONE WENT AND SAID THAT.

A swipe, a barb, a festeringly inconsiderate opinion lobbed right into your lap.

Now it's up to you to respond.

Do you ignore it? What if you don't want to ignore, yet responding will only end badly? Not to mention - how do you make sure you don't say anything you'll regret later?



Un-gracious people can unleash anguish at the merriest of gatherings.

By 'un-gracious' people, I mean those who act and speak with little consideration of those present. They may offer unwanted opinions or use past grievances as weapons. They may commandeer a conversation to spout personal views that conflict with yours, showing themselves to be wildly dismissive and totally uninterested in hearing anyone else's thoughts.



(Note: There's nothing wrong with strong views, but nothing about ignoring, steamrolling, or demeaning others is okay and such tactics won't help their cause, either.)

Responding graciously means expressing yourself clearly, while still treating them well. Replying with equal nastiness usually just leads to more rattled nerves, regret, and hours spent venting. Being gracious means staying true to the best version of yourself and walking away with a clear conscience.



Today we're going to practice my top five favorite gracious lines & learn when to use them.

I recommend reading them out loud so you get used to hearing yourself say them. They may be gracious, but a couple can still take a little bravery the first time.

Most are some variation on lines I learned in therapist training courses about how to deal with difficult people and emotions, but they're astonishingly effective across all interactions.

Yes, you really can get someone to back down (or even apologize) while staying calm and pleasant.

I don't like to use the word 'magic' when talking about psychology, but I swear there are sparks coming from a wand somewhere when I use these.



SITUATION: SOMEONE MAKES AN UPSETTING GENERALIZATION OR TAKES AN EXTREME STANCE, & YOU HAVE A BIT OF TIME TO TALK.

GRACIOUS RESPONSE #5: “WHY DO YOU SAY THAT?”

Nothing can flare tempers quite like unflattering, broad generalizations:

“Everyone who works for that school is an incompetent crook!”

“I can’t believe anyone would let their children _____.”

“Anyone who believes _____ is an idiot!”

Extreme statements are unwise because they’re pretty easy to counter - you can almost always find exceptions (positive experiences with that school, research that X is fine for kids in reasonable amounts, etc).



It’s tempting to hear an extreme statement and say “Nuh-uh!” and start naming exceptions. Usually, all this does is embarrass the person and make them feel like they have to dig in and defend their original statement.

We’ve all had moments where we spoke more generally or hastily than we meant to, even on things we feel strongly about.

But there IS usually a kernel of truth that led us to speak up. Maybe we really have had bad experiences with that particular school.

Just because we spoke hastily and broadly doesn’t make that untrue. So when someone insists that the school is fine, it makes us feel invalidated and we want to hold our ground and restate the same thing until that kernel of truth is acknowledged.

That’s where “Why do you think that?” comes in.



 **When you say “Why do you think that?” you’re graciously giving that person a moment to think and get more specific about their kernel of truth. They might add:**

“Well, every time I have gone to that school to deal with something, I’ve been treated badly!”

Now, instead of feeling like you have to defend the school, it’s easier to be more reasonable in reply: *“Oh, I’m sorry. That must be frustrating. I’m especially sad to hear it because we’ve had great experiences there.”* Boom. Needless argument averted.

If you give someone a second chance to clarify what they really meant (*“I’m upset by my multiple bad experiences there”*), it leads to a better conversation.

It’s true that sometimes unreasonable people will remain unreasonable. But even the crustiest exteriors can surprisingly give way when you ask for specifics. Sometimes a person is so used to being dismissed that they’re startled at your invitation to say more.

 **When called to explain an extreme statement, people will often ‘hear’ how they just sounded, and soften their follow-up on their own.**

They may start with: *“People should not let their kids watch TV!”* But then, when given the chance to elaborate, add their own qualifiers: *“I mean, I know watching a movie with your kids now and then isn’t bad, but I know people who park their kids in front of the TV all day!”*

You can now probably agree with the kernel of what they’re saying while no longer feeling personally upset. (*“Yeah, TV isn’t a good babysitter. We like our Friday movie nights together though - do you guys have any fun weekend traditions?”*)

 **Before you react - ask people to get more specific.**



SITUATION: SOMEONE MAKES AN OBJECTIONABLE JOKE THAT YOU DON'T WANT TO LET PASS.

GRACIOUS RESPONSE #4: "I'M NOT SURE I UNDERSTAND, CAN YOU TELL ME WHAT YOU MEAN?"

It's **not okay** when someone makes a sexist/racist/ableist/ageist/other offensive joke. And to be clear - you don't have to be 'gracious' here. You can firmly let them know it's not okay. But something upsetting can catch you off guard in the moment, and this response can help. It stops the conversation, buys you time to think, and lets them know it's not okay without leaving an opening for them to reply something like "It was just a joke - lighten up" and dismiss your concerns, or even deny that the joke used any negative stereotypes.



It's ok to make a direct comment: "Jokes like that are not okay, because even 'just jokes' reinforce and pass on incorrect ideas that hurt real people."

The "I'm not sure I understand, can you tell me what you mean?" response offers another option.

The thing about many jokes is, they 'work' when the giver and listener understand an unspoken idea or stereotype. Consider this 'joke':

One day a husband came home from work, and his wife said "I have exciting news - pretty soon we will have three in the house instead of two!" Her husband glows, embraces her, and gives her a big kiss. The wife says "I'm glad you feel this way, because my mother moves in tomorrow."



This joke 'works' because most everyone is aware of the stereotype of the "terrible mother-in-law" - or at least the idea that mothers-in-law can be unwelcome guests. The more a person embraces that belief, the funnier the baby/MIL contrast the joke uses will seem.

 **If you ask someone "I'm not sure I understand - can you tell me what you mean?" it forces them to actually state the underlying stereotype.**

"Well, uh, I think most husbands wouldn't be that thrilled with their mother-in-law coming."

When the joke hinges on something objectionable, the person will probably get flustered when asked to state the premise clearly.

Few people want to say the sexist/racist/ableist/ageist/etc. thing out loud. Which is precisely why jokes can be so harmful - they let people perpetuate and share ideas without confronting the discomfort of saying them directly.

Asking someone to say what they mean brings up that discomfort, and can often make them apologize, redirect, or backtrack on their own. At that point, a calm follow up like "I don't think _____ is true/reasonable/okay, and I'd rather not spread those ideas" comes across differently than if you had simply said that alone.

 **It's not untrue to say "I'm not sure I understand" even if you get what the joke itself implies.**

It's still not always clear what they, personally, mean by sharing it.

Are they mindlessly passing it on? Are they pressing an agenda? Are they trying to get a rise out of you? What is their intent? Knowing where this is coming from can help you respond better.

It's a reasonable thing to ask.



SITUATION: SOMEONE TAKES A PERSONAL SWIPE AT YOU OR SUBTLY HINTS AT AN OLD GRIEVANCE

GRACIOUS RESPONSE #3 MIGHT SOUND FAMILIAR: “I’M NOT SURE I UNDERSTAND, CAN YOU TELL ME WHAT YOU MEAN?”

Let’s say you have a relative who resents that you have a fun, creative job. Over dinner, they jab at you with something like “It must be nice to not have to work!” or “Well we all can’t be as amazing as you!”

Their comment might sting, but it’s so vague you can’t respond to it well. You tend to just sputter and search for words, or let it fester.



But remember the jokes we talked about above? They hinge on mutual understanding of something that goes unspoken.

This happens with personal swipes, too.

Here, the unspoken thing beneath their comment might be “Your life is so great, you must think you’re so special.” (With an even deeper unspoken: “Your life seems so great. That makes me feel bad, so I want you to feel bad too.”)

If you ask someone to speak the unspoken, you’re taking away their weapon of choice: vagueness. The vagueness that lets them bring up something they believe without having to voice it directly.

Telling them, essentially, “I’m not sure I understand the unspoken thing you’re getting at, will you please speak it more clearly?” stops them from achieving their goal of ruffling your feathers without admitting what’s really going on.



If they reply with another vague statement, you can gently persist: “Sorry, I’m still not sure what you’re trying to say,” or “I still don’t think I understand.” Wear an expression of gentle curiosity. Eventually they have to either say what they mean or walk it back.

Best case scenario, they will own up to how they’re really feeling and give you a chance to reassure them that they can go after their own dreams. (I’m not kidding - you’ll be surprised where a conversation can go if you compassionately ask for specifics.)



But even if they simply backtrack or quickly change the subject, you’ve calmly let them know that you won’t have a conversation in code.

That’s a healthy, perfectly-mannered thing to do.



SITUATION: SOMEONE BRINGS UP A CONTROVERSIAL ISSUE, AND YOU KNOW THAT TRYING TO EXCHANGE VIEWS WILL ONLY LEAD TO ARGUING THAT CASTS A GLOOM OVER THE EVENING.

(Or maybe they threw a controversial opinion at you in an inconsiderate moment, such as derailing a different conversation or catching you when you're too busy to calmly talk.)

GRACIOUS RESPONSE #2: "THANKS FOR SHARING YOUR VIEWS. I'D PREFER NOT TO DISCUSS (THAT ISSUE/SPORTS/MONEY/POLITICS) TODAY."

I'm wary of shutting down discussions, even difficult ones with 'difficult' people. Those can be the most important conversations to have.

But there is also a time and a place when a discussion simply can't thrive, and will only lead to anger and rift. In those cases, immediately setting a clear boundary can be the best thing to do.

Some variations and possible follow-up statements:

I hear what you're saying, I have many thoughts about that too. But I prefer not to discuss them today - is there another time we could chat?

I'm glad you feel you can discuss this with me. On a celebration day like this, I'd rather focus on things we can connect over, which will make navigating hard topics together easier in the future.

I agree that ____ is important, and I'd be happy to visit with you another day when we can give it the attention and focus



that tough issue deserves. This is not the right setting for that conversation.



The key is to acknowledge what they put out there first (e.g. I hear what you say, thanks for feeling comfortable sharing). This shows you're not dismissing them as a person.

Having a conversation shut down immediately can feel like a personal rejection, and that can start the exact fight you were trying to avoid. Acknowledging them makes it harder for them to misinterpret your redirection.

Though you don't have to, offering to speak at another time also shows respect while drawing the boundary.

Even if you don't relish bringing this up on another day either, it's still better to demonstrate an appropriate time to bring this up - when there is more time, and when you can devote attention to it.



By the way - this doesn't just apply to public sphere controversies.

Personal conflicts and grievances are still hot topics that deserve focused air time to resolve. It's not helpful when someone tosses one out over the buffet table, and it's unlikely you'll resolve a decades-old problem in the midst of a group dinner.

It's okay to tell someone that you want to resolve this with them, but today does not offer the best chance to do that.

If you offer a clear alternative time to talk and frame it as "this will help us more than talking right now," it makes it harder for them to keep pressing the issue.



SITUATION: SOMEONE SEEMS HURT (GENUINELY OR NOT), SIDE-SWIPE YOU WITH OLD GRIEVANCES, PLAYS A MARTYR, OR GETS BELLIGERENT WITH THEIR OPINIONS.

GRACIOUS RESPONSE #1: “IT SOUNDS LIKE _____”

I saved this for last, because it’s the catch-all of gracious responses. It works as a reply to insults, objections, loud opinions, and most angry feelings, plus gets to the bottom of genuinely hurt feelings.



All you have to do is: Simply say back to them what you heard them say.

Them: Anyone who thinks _____ is an idiot!

You: It sounds like you feel strongly about _____ issue, and it’s upsetting when people feel differently.

Them: Can’t you be on time to something for once in your life?

You: It sounds like me being late has hurt you, especially since it’s not the first time.

Them: It must be nice not to have a real job.

You: It sounds like you’re saying running a small business has different demands than a traditional 9-5.

In a way, “It sounds like _____” does the same thing as other tools we’ve talked about. It gets rid of vagueness and invites specificity. By stating what you heard them say, you’re letting them know what parts of their message might be falling through the cracks. You’re inviting them to elaborate, to say what they really mean, to zero in on what’s upsetting.

People usually reply by clarifying, qualifying, explaining.



Sometimes they reveal that their initial anger is actually masking disappointment or fear.

Sometimes they hear that they came off more angrily than they meant to, and tone it down.



In pretty much any case, their follow-up will help you respond better than you could have to their first statement. It lets you get at the real issue faster.

“It sounds like _____” is a good intro line, but you can simply keep telling people what you heard them say until you know what you want to do. An example:

Them: Can't you be on time to something for once in your life?

You: It sounds like me being late has hurt you, especially since it's not the first time.

T: You're right it has! Every year I can't count on you being here when you said! And here we go again - now dinner is going to be late and I had no help!

Y: Me being late creates stress and it starts the evening off on the wrong foot.

T: Yes! I hate having to rush!

Y: I'm sorry you feel rushed on a fun night. I'll try to be early next time, but for now can I do anything to ease the load, or may I stay late to help clean up?

See how you got to a better resolution than you would have if you had just replied to their first statement? Their first statement invited an “I am not ALWAYS late, last week I was 45 minutes early!” type retort.

But their anger isn't coming from your exact attendance record. Therefore it's pointless to make your rebuttal about that. Their anger is coming from them starting off a fun evening in a mess of stress. Letting them know you hear exactly what they're saying lets you apologize for the specific thing they're mad about.





“It sounds like_____” makes people feel heard.

Sometimes anger escalates for no other reason than the person does not feel like you’re listening, even if you are. Putting their statement into your own words gives evidence you heard them, and this can actually sometimes end the conversation altogether.



“It sounds like” can also let you listen respectfully without agreeing with what they’re saying.

It gives you time to make inroads, find common ground, or lets them say their piece before you change the subject.

Them: Anyone who thinks _____ is an idiot!

You: It sounds like you feel strongly about _____ issue. It’s upsetting when people feel differently.

T: Of course it’s upsetting! How can it not be upsetting that people are going around _____?

Y: Sounds like you think there’s nowhere that _____ is okay. It’s always harmful.

At this point, one of two things will happen.

Either you reflecting how extreme they’re sounding will wake them up: *“Well, I not ALWAYS harmful, but...”* That moment of softening might help you find common ground, or shorten the distance you have to traverse as you explain your differences.

Or you’ll get to the point where you can use a fragment from Gracious Response #2: *Thank you for sharing your thoughts, I’m glad you feel comfortable talking to me about it. I see this issue from a different perspective...*

And you can either share your perspective or tell them that another day would be best for this discussion.

This tool requires a big deep breath before you try it. You’ll be soooooo tempted to just fire back. But once you see how swiftly a conversation can change, you may become so curious you will apply it everywhere, just to see what happens!



A HANDY CHEAT SHEET OF GRACIOUS RESPONSES TO PRACTICE ALOUD:

Why do you say that?

I'm not sure I understand, can you tell me what you mean?

Thanks for sharing your views. I'd prefer not to discuss (that issue) today.

I hear what you're saying, and I have many thoughts about that too. But I prefer not to discuss them today - is there another time we could chat?

I'm glad you feel you can discuss this with me. On a celebration day like today, I'd rather focus on things we can connect with each other on, which will make navigating hard topics together easier in the future.

I agree that ____ is important, and I'd be happy to visit with you another day about it when we can give it the attention and focus that tough issue deserves. This is not the right setting for that conversation.

It sounds like ____.

May your gatherings be more festive and calm as you use these!

**HOPE YOU ENJOYED PART 2 OF 3
OF THE GRATEFUL & GRACIOUS SERIES.**

WATCH YOUR INBOX FOR THE LAST INSTALLMENT!





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