

## AN ANTIDOTE TO ME-FIRST 'TUDE

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Monday morning, after driving her sister to work, our daughter Kimberly returned home, dejected, minus her wireless phone.

Backtracking proved fruitless. Whoever found the phone had probably kept it, she figured. To Kim, paying \$50 to replace her insured phone paled in comparison to losing her entire directory of telephone numbers. "Can't even call my friends," she fretted. She didn't know anyone's number. An hour later, a young woman, a Boston University student, dialed the number listed in Kim's directory as "home," said she'd found the phone, and arranged to return it.

"She was so nice," Kim said afterward. "She restored my faith in people."

While I am pleased by Kim's renewed faith, it troubles me that my 23-year-old daughter had ever stopped believing that most people are, by nature, good, decent human beings. Yet these days, despite my stubbornly professed optimism, my own faith is often challenged. Never mind that driving anywhere at rush hour is like negotiating a war zone, civilian tanks charging from every direction, all gears in attack mode. It's the pervasive me-first rudeness that disturbs me.

Recently, I overheard a young Whole Foods employee complaining about an incident at his store. After his shift, still in uniform, he had gone to the canned foods aisle to buy beans. Scanning the shelf, he stepped backward, inadvertently blocking the aisle.

A cart nudged his hip. He turned, stunned to find a well-dressed older woman staring at him indignantly. When he failed to instantly leap out of her way, she drew the cart backward, poised for a second assault.

"I grabbed the cart," he said, and asked her what she thought she was doing. "I wasn't about to let her hit me again."

"Outrageous," proclaimed the woman, her cheeks ablaze. "Never in my life have I been treated with such disrespect."

Disrespect. She actually said that.

Once rare, this self-entitled aggression has become so commonplace that some workers in local shops have taken to copping a preemptive 'tude. These service people, tired of being bullied by nasty, overbearing clients, abide by an unwritten them-against-us code. As understandable as their solidarity is, ultimately it serves only to add fire to an already incendiary atmosphere. When I walk into an establishment and am greeted by an unfriendly, impolite, or surly employee, my mood quickly deteriorates. Though I do my best to offer a courteous smile, I'll admit, I'm tempted to respond in kind.

This is not to say that we in Greater Boston are any ruder than folks in most major US metropolitan areas. During a recent family trip to New York, a speeding van careened around a corner onto Broadway, nearly clipping one of our daughters as she entered the crosswalk. With our rapid-fire technology, we've devolved into an on-demand nation, our cellphones and laptop computers, PDAs and GPS devices ensuring instantaneous connection between our

multitasking selves and some place, any place, other than where we are at the moment. Stressed out, maxed out, overworked, relentlessly pressed for time, we have no time to think. We just do.

While it may be no surprise that our dog-eat-dog culture where competition rules and money reigns supreme has produced a country of bulldogs, it's sad. Call me naive: I refuse to believe that anyone truly enjoys living in such opposition. Nor do I believe that, deep down, we see ourselves as the gods or goddesses that our arrogant comportments purport us to be. Yet, for some reason, we feel a need to maintain the charade. Maybe we're afraid if we let down our guard others will perceive the sometimes weak, sometimes wounded human beings we are. And the bigger, stronger dogs will devour our flesh and spit us out, forever purging us from the pack.

I have no idea how to end this downward spiral so many of us grumble about, even as we ram our metaphorical carts into the poor, unsuspecting person blocking our way. I do know this: a lovely BU student has, at least for now, restored my 23-year-old daughter's faith in humanity. This random act of kindness may be but a ripple on the undulating surface of the murky pond bearing our collective reflection. But for me, that's enough.

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