

Why Show Your Nasty Side

I spent the evening with the friend of a friend recently and found myself feeling uneasy in his company. At first I just couldn't work out why. He had all of the attributes of people whose company I usually enjoy. He was friendly. He knew when to listen and when to talk. He was well read and his conversation erudite without being overbearing. He spoke carefully and thoughtfully in a voice that was pleasant to listen to, and yet I felt uncomfortable.

It was only some time later that I realised the cause of my discomfort. On none of the many occasions that I have met this man have I ever seen him out of sorts. I have never seen him agitated or anxious. I have never seen him be angry or sharp with his partner or his children.

Now it might be that he is a truly saintly man and never has any of those uncomfortable and shaming emotions which the rest of us experience, but I suspect not. I think it is more likely that he is just very adept at maintaining his public persona.

In order to oil the wheels of social intercourse, and in order to persuade other folk that we are nice people whom they should like, most of us try to present an pleasant demeanour. We laugh at jokes that are not funny made by people at parties to which we would rather not have been invited. We are jovial and friendly to other people's children even when their shrill voices irritate and we wish their parents would send them to bed. My friend's friend was just rather better at this sort of thing than I. But my unease was more than just pique at meeting someone better at being equable.

Some years ago I was a care worker in a children's home. On the first evening of my short career in childcare one of the children decided to break a plate, an action I initially interpreted as an accident. I reassured him and we cleared up the pieces together. Then, when my back was turned a second plate fell to the floor. By the time plate three hit the deck I knew it was deliberate. Then came the self induced vomiting and the screaming. Over the course of an evening this young man tested my patience. Eventually I broke. I shouted, I lost my composure and for a time I really didn't feel very warm towards my young charge. However that was the limit of the expression of my frustration. After that evening this boy would always run to greet me and want to be by my side. He knew my nasty side and could see that it wasn't that bad. In provoking me he had established what my limits were.

I have no sense of my friend's friend's nasty side and that's what makes me uneasy. Somewhere in him there must be spite, anger, resentment, jealousy, shame, and fear but I have no sense of it and it is all the more frightening for being hidden.

By showing our nasty side we risk being disliked but we also make it easier for people to trust us and, paradoxically, to be vulnerable in our company. We all instinctively trust what is real over what is nice.

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Comments and feedback on this article are warmly welcomed.