



EMBODY

By Sossity Chiricuzio

Perspectives

Embody - The Danger of Being Nice

by Sossity Chiricuzio, PQ Monthly

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A word can be a weapon, a cage, a map. It can be an embrace, or a beating. It can move us forward, or reverse progress.

I remember the Newsweek “Lesbians” cover in 1993. “Coming out strong” was juxtaposed with “What are the limits of tolerance?” It made for a great segue with family members and straight friends for talking about me being queer, but in a way that brought up as many questions as answers.

“Congratulations!” some of them said, as if it was proof that I was going to be OK. That the world was becoming a place safe for someone like me. “Thanks,” I answered “except that’s not me.” When they looked puzzled, I elaborated. “I’m not a nice lesbian. I’m a loud freaky outlaw.” They’d often reply “But you are nice!” and that’s true. Generally speaking, if it doesn’t cost too much, I am nice.

There's a danger, there, though. A danger that women and people of color and poor people and queer and trans folks know all too well. We're supposed to be nice, and quiet, and emulating the mainstream, and not causing trouble. If we aren't those things, sometimes even if we are, we can be beaten or used up or killed.

Like Gabriella Naverez and Anyia Parker and Leelah Alcorn and Christina Tahhahwah and Eric Garner. Like Ferguson and Detroit and Oak Flats and Baton Rouge and Appalachia and the rainforests and the polar ice caps and the children making the phones many of us are reading this article on. Like we are getting close to wasting our last chance to come down on the side of love, and life, and learning.

Sometimes those conversations I had with friends and family were uncomfortable, or made it clear we weren't ever going to agree. Sometimes they got tired of arguing with me about politics, or gender, or sex, or racism, or classism, or dreamcatchers and dreadlocks and Chinese characters on white people, or using the word 'gyped,' or buying diamonds, or prison reform.

Not that I had to argue most of this with my family – respect for diversity is fundamental for us – but sometimes they didn't realize it was a problem, because it wasn't a problem for them. The very definition of privilege, despite being poor weirdo liberal white trash hippies. Not a lot of cultural coinage in those words, but still, not fearing for our lives everyday. Not going without basic human needs, or watching our sacred spaces be mined for copper and coal and oil.

We could afford to be nice to the social workers who came to check on me after I became obsessed with what it would be like to have one less eye or one less limb, dramatic limps and gauze dressing trailing behind me down the hallway of our housing unit. It was unlikely the state would remove a nice white child from such nice white parents.

We could afford to be nice to the cops that stopped us when our turn signal stopped working halfway through Texas. We were obviously American, and my dad spoke comfortably with the officer, even exchanged some laughs over mechanical failure and timing. At no point was he afraid he might be

shot, or deported, or that his family would be handcuffed or intimidated.

We could afford it, but what did it cost? What is it costing us now? The bigger us. Struggling to survive our own stubborn, wasteful and competitive nature and tendency to hate what we fear, which is what we don't know, which is so many things. This planet, struggling to survive us.

I'm not saying we should all start being rude or unkind, in fact I think we could use more courtesy and compassion. However, we're so far beyond creating change with please and thank you, or even court battles and Congress. Now is the time for climbing flag poles to pull down hate, for suspending ourselves from bridges in the face of eight thousand tons of steel, for blocking traffic and police stations, for building defiant garden memorials next to bigots, even for interrupting the President.

I spent a great deal of my twenties protesting. I joined Queer Nation and Act Up and Take Back the Night and the queer group on campus. I sat on panels and taught workshops and read theory and history and talked to my elders and listened to people with different lived experiences. I questioned the status quo. I still do. These things are frequently not easy, but they are a vital step closer to being part of the solution.

What that step could look like for you depends on what you have to give, and whether it's more important to be nice, or a force for change. If you're white, interrupt that racist behavior or language before a person of color has to. Support their businesses, respect their neighborhoods, film and witness the police.

If you have more resources, donate to the legal aid funds for protestors doing direct action. Volunteer to do childcare so poor parents have time to do activism or look for work. Send letters or books to prisoners. Invest in struggling communities, but not like tourists. Like the valuable members of our society they are.

Staff a hotline, create community spaces, build tiny libraries, call your authority figures out, feed the

homeless, put a ramp on your steps, purge hateful words from your vocabulary, be willing to be wrong and to have that pointed out.

Start small if you must, but start now. The world doesn't have time to wait for nice anymore, and neither do we.

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