

Three Cures for a Society Obsessed With Offenses

I'm a positive type of person. I like to smooth things over, to think the best of others.

So it startled me to realize that, several months ago, I was doing the exact thing I prided myself on *not* doing: jumping to conclusions and thinking the worst of another person.

Unfortunately, many fall into this habit with increasing regularity. Someone makes a comment on Twitter or another public forum. Perhaps it was intended to be funny, perhaps not. Either way, someone views it as offensive, gets his dander up, and proclaims his indignation against the other person far and wide.

Many of us are tired of the automatic offensive reaction taking root in society. So how do we find our way back to civility?

I stumbled upon a possible answer to this while reading Whittaker Chambers' [Witness](#) the other day. For those unfamiliar with the book, *Witness* tells the life story of an American boy, Whittaker Chambers, who became a Communist spy in the 1920s. Chambers eventually escaped the clutches of the Communists and exposed some of their activities in the infamous Alger Hiss case of the late 1940s.

As Chambers explains, his time in the Communist party did not deter him from the manners his mother instilled in him, manners which established a clear course of action in dealing with offenses. According to Chambers' mother, "a gentleman... is known not so much by what he does as by what he will not do." Three of the things a gentleman – or "man of breeding" – will not do include the following:

1. He Will Not Think the Worst

According to Chambers' mother, a true gentleman "never imputes a base motive to anyone else." Instead, he believes the best about the one who offended him, "assum[ing] that the rudeness is unintentional," and even acting as if it is, even when it clearly is not.

We are bound to be offended. It's how we handle those offenses that matters. Those with enough strength to turn a blind eye to an offense will quickly diffuse the situation and may even gain a friend rather than make an enemy.

2. He Will Not Yield to Anger

In a situation where one individual is getting riled up, nothing is easier than to match wits and lungs in a heated shouting match. A truly polished individual, however, refrains from hot-headedness, and "never [meets] anger with anger," declares Chambers' mother.

3. He Will Not Patronize

There are many smart individuals in the world, but the smartest ones combine intelligence with humility. According to Chambers' mother, a gentleman "never patronized anyone because he never assumed that he knew more than anyone else or that uneducated people are unintelligent." Furthermore, a gentleman "never correct[s] (or smile[s] at) other people's slips."

Chambers concludes these exhortations with another quotation, "'Always,' my mother would say, 'allow other people the luxury of being mistaken. They will find out for themselves soon enough. If they don't they are the kind of people in whom it does not matter.'"

Is it time that we followed this maxim? Instead of immediately jumping to conclusions, pointing fingers, and getting angry, would we demonstrate superiority of mind and character if we swallowed our pride and instead believed the best about those who seek to offend us?

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