



The Power of Kindness

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This is a response to Inger Mewburn's post, which [you can find here](#). It is a nice post (thanks for the book tip, Inger, I will definitely read it!). Now, I just want to share some thoughts about this topic.

The topic is about jerks in academia. I think everyone could share a story about such people. For instance, I volunteered in doing a talk shortly after my PhD. I not really had to do it – it was just a favor for a good time and a good collaboration. They wanted to extend to grant (it was a research training group), there was an evaluation commission, and so students from this project should do talks and tell about the project. My old advisor asked me and I said yes. However, I was actually the backup for someone I knew 99.999% would do the talk.

Nevertheless, I prepared the slides, practice the talk, discussed it with my old advisor. And then there was a “final rehearsal” where everyone should do their talks. My talk was the last one. It was a really bad talk. Today I am a little embarrassed when I think about it. Imagine the audience: about 30 students and about 10 professors. Students were fine (just asked a couple of questions), but there were a lot of critics from the professors.

Now, critics is fine. How you deliver it, is the question. I like to be direct and ask people to be this likewise. However, you do not have to be an asshole to be direct and vice versa. Among the professors there was the *One*. You probably have seen this oh-I-have-also-an-affiliation-with-a-top-university-somewhere-else-so-be-glad-that-I-talk-to-you-at-least.

One literally insulted me and my talk. “*Das ist Fliegenschiss!*” (about: *This is no more than flyspeck* – hard to translate such things!). The more he talked the more he raged and got even more angry. Minutes. I got angry – and I swear if I would have something in my hand... The others did not say anything. Fear? Do they fear this colleague so much to not interrupt him? Well, one tried. She started with “*Look, we appreciate your work and contribution to this research training group, but ...*” Then raging *One* took over again. Tension rising. It was a hard trial for me. I do not want to talk too much about details – because this makes me angry again. I do not want to be like this.

Nevertheless, at some point (in one of the raging breaks) another professor raised his hand. Let us call him Professor Teddybear. He looked like one. People told me that his hearing is not really good anymore. Professor Teddybear raised his hand. And he pointed out some very plain thing (something about putting a name on one of the slides), another professor pointed out just before him (another raging break). Everyone was aware of this. I looked at him and at my slide. Looked at him. I was about to say something like “*Yeah, X just pointed that out.*” but...

He smiled. Professor Teddybear sat there, his eyes half closed, and smiled. “*This is a very good idea.*“, I said and smiled, too. Suddenly, all this tension and rage... was gone. People laughed (except *One*, of

course). Session ended well.

Do not tell me, this is not power – to relax everyone's tension at once. To make people comfortable. I want to be like this. (Still, I do not know if he really just did not hear the comment before him – in future versions of this story I will probably just skip his omit the info about his bad hearing...)

Since then, I try to be more relaxed, which is hard work, in fact. Irrascibility is a beast. You need to hunt it down. Every day. Every moment. Now I am at my second postdoc (Canada – incarnate politeness and diversity – love it!) and just try to be kind and nice. Not to rage. Seeing things very relaxed – a good way to stay healthy in terms of mentality.

You know what? People like me. They come to me to get an advice. I suggest things based on my experience (I do not use my experience to argue!) and try not to force my opinion on people. I tell them when I may be wrong. I tell them “*my way might not be the best, you have to figure it out yourself*”, etc. Being a good friend and colleague is the key for good collaborations and work. **I have some ethics.**

As far as I understood, this is what Inger & Friends are doing as well. I like to be part of a “Circle of Niceness” rather than a part of people everyone fears. Kindness gives you power. It can be as solid as rock withstanding waves after waves of raging. Smiling. This is true power. (By the way: buddhistic way of thinking helps a lot here!)

I think – and this is important – people appreciate kindness. There are probably far more people of kind manners and honest attitudes than you think. The only reason you never hear about these persons: Raging is much louder than smiling.

So, what do you want to do 'bout these assholes?