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What Makes a Good Person?

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By Ishan Singh

A few weeks ago, my editor sent me this *New York Times* article about “how to be good”, asking if I'd be interested to pen a commentary based on a similar premise. It seemed easy enough at the time, so I readily agreed. But once I got down to actually thinking about the subject, I found myself at a loss for words.

Things were much simpler when I was a young boy, back when I viewed things in “black-and-white” terms. It didn't take much for someone to make it into my “good person” book—all they had to do was make *me* happy. But as I've grown in both years and experiences, I no longer believe that to be the case.

In my first job I waited tables at a bar and got acquainted with a group of regulars who were quite generous with their tips. To afford a new pair of sneakers, I'd have to save up for a whole month, but thanks to them, I got my new kicks in just two weeks. Sure I'd seen them get into fights with other patrons and berate the staff, but for all I cared, these were the kindest people I'd met. All I had to do was look down at my new sneakers for proof.

Gradually, however, I began to see things a little differently. It began from an incident when they felt I'd taken too long to bring out their order. For the first time, I became the subject of their rebukes. I apologised and took it in my stride—maybe they were right and I wasn't fast enough; perhaps this was just a one-off thing. But a few days later, they called me out again for another “mishap”, and pretty soon, the verbal abuse became a regular thing.

It was then that I began to question their reasons for being upset. Though I recognised that they were being unreasonable, I was reluctant to say anything because I appreciated the extra pocket-money their tips provided. But one thing was for sure: my opinion of them was certainly changing for the worse. I was no longer able to convince myself these were “good people” because they were “generous”—not if they felt that their “generosity” entitled them to treat people poorly.

Looking back now, I see that I'd convinced myself then that the rude customers were good people by ignoring all the signs that suggested otherwise. I used to think that if they had good intentions, it made up for their bad behaviour. These days, I no longer believe I can speak for one's intentions; but no matter what these may be, there is no excuse for acting like a jerk.

Whenever I stumble upon realisations like these, I take them as a sign of personal growth. I've been having such "epiphanies" far more frequently since leaving home (in India) to live and study in Singapore. As the lyrics to Oddissee's "You Grew Up" go: *You can raise a child in a house full of love, but can't keep them safe in a world full of hate.* I don't necessarily think the world's full of hate, but navigating through the complexities of human behaviour has also shown me it isn't always full of love.

This brings me back to the question at hand: *What makes a good person?*

Though my editor had assured me the question is rhetorical, I appreciated this futile exercise in attempting to come up with an objective answer anyway. If nothing else, it proved that no definition can satisfy everybody. Besides the fact that there aren't any reliable tools to quantify goodness or any universal standard against which it is measured, what it means to be a "good person" is different for everyone.

In that spirit, perhaps I shouldn't be so hard on my younger self for being naive. If I were to go back in time and tell that boy anything, it's that it's OK to have had such a "black-and-white" view of what constituted a "good" or "bad" person. I may not feel the same way now, but those beliefs held true for me at the time.

And so I can only speak for myself when I say that, in my current reality, a good person is someone who's aware that they can be better. A good person isn't perfect, but someone who's not afraid to acknowledge their mistakes. You'll know you're in the company of a good person when you feel happy in their presence.

A good person is who I aspire to be.