

Singapore Management University

## Institutional Knowledge at Singapore Management University

---

Research Collection School Of Computing and  
Information Systems

School of Computing and Information Systems

---

8-2008

### When 'good good' can be bad

M. THULASIDAS

*Singapore Management University*, [manojt@smu.edu.sg](mailto:manojt@smu.edu.sg)

Follow this and additional works at: [https://ink.library.smu.edu.sg/sis\\_research](https://ink.library.smu.edu.sg/sis_research)



Part of the [Asian Studies Commons](#), and the [Sociology of Culture Commons](#)

---

#### Citation

THULASIDAS, M.. When 'good good' can be bad. (2008). *Today*. 1-1.

Available at: [https://ink.library.smu.edu.sg/sis\\_research/6161](https://ink.library.smu.edu.sg/sis_research/6161)

This News Article is brought to you for free and open access by the School of Computing and Information Systems at Institutional Knowledge at Singapore Management University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Research Collection School Of Computing and Information Systems by an authorized administrator of Institutional Knowledge at Singapore Management University. For more information, please email [cherylds@smu.edu.sg](mailto:cherylds@smu.edu.sg).

# WHEN 'GOOD GOOD' CAN BE BAD

Should we embrace politeness, as Hollywood would have us practise it?

MANOJ THULASIDAS

WE SINGAPOREANS have a problem. We are graceless, they say. So we train ourselves to say the right magic words at the right times and to smile at random intervals. We still come across as a bit graceless at times.

We have to bite the bullet and face the music; we may be a bit on the rude side — when judged by the Western norms of pasticky grace popularised by the media. But we don't do too badly when judged by our own mixed bag of Asian cultures, some of which consider the phrase "thank you" so formal that it is almost an insult to utter it.

One of the Asian ways of doing things is to eat noodles like a mini vacuum cleaner. This Singaporean friend of mine was doing just that while lunching with me and our French colleague.

I hardly noticed the small noises; after all, I'm from a culture where loud burps at the end of a meal are considered a compliment to the host. But our French friend found the suction action very rude and irksome, and made French comments to that effect (ignoring, of course, the fact that it is rude to exclude people by talking in a private language).

I tried to explain to him that it was not rude, just the way it was done here, but to no avail.

The real question is this — do we paint a thin veneer of politeness over our natural way of doing things so that we can exude grace *a la* Hollywood?

The thinness of this kind of grace echoes loud and clear in the standard greeting of a checkout clerk in a typical American supermarket: "How' ya



TODAY FILE PHOTO

**FOOD FOR THOUGHT** Our table manners may be acceptable to us, but they may not appeal to Westerners.

*doing today?*" The expected response is: "Good, how are you?" to which the clerk is to say, "Good, good!"

The first "good" presumably to your graceful enquiry after his well-being, the second expressing satisfaction at your perfect state of bliss.

I once decided to play the fool and responded to the ubiquitous "How' ya doin'?" by "Lousy man, my dog just died." The inevitable and unhesitating response was: "Good, good!" Do we need this kind of shallow grace?

Grace is like the grammar of an unspoken social language. Unlike its spoken counterparts, the language of social mores seems to preclude multilingualism, leading to an almost xenophobic rejection of other norms of life.

We all believe that our way of doing things and our world views are the only right ones. Naturally too, otherwise we wouldn't hold on to our beliefs, would

we? But, in an increasingly flattening and globalising world, we do feel a bit alien because our values and graces are often graded by alien standards.

A day will come when we all conform to the standards prescribed to us by the global media and entertainment networks. Our amorphous "How' ya doin's" and "Good, good's" will then be indistinguishable from the prescriptions.

When I think of that inevitable day, I suffer a pang of nostalgia. I hope I can hold on to the memory of social graces judged by lesser standards — of gratitude expressed in timid smiles, affections portrayed in fleeting glances, and life's defining bonds conveyed in unspoken gestures.

Ultimately, the collective grace of a society is to be judged, not by polished niceties, but by how it treats its very old and very young.

And I'm afraid we are beginning to find ourselves wanting in those fronts. We put our young children through tremendous amount of stress, preparing them for an even more stressful life, and unwittingly robbing them of their childhood.

And, when I see those aunties and uncles cleaning after us in eating houses, I see more than our lack of grace. I see myself in my twilight years, alienated in a world gone strange on me.

So let's spare a smile, and nod a thank you when we see them — we may be showing grace to ourselves a few decades down the line.

*The writer is a scientist from the European Organization for Nuclear Research (CERN). He currently works as a Senior Quantitative Developer with a local bank. His book, The Unreal Universe, is available in local bookstores.*