

# Capitalism is Awfully Nice

**The farther down you are on the system's ladder, the nicer you are required to be**

Mars Z. Goetia

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From childhood, most of us are taught what is supposedly an essential skill for living within industrial capitalist society: how to be nice. To be nice is to act in a way that gives others pleasure, comfort, and satisfaction in order to receive social rewards or prevent social penalties. To succeed in capitalism, it is important to be liked and likable. Nice people can get and keep jobs, make business deals, have social lives, and more.

Expectations of niceness are often higher for women, people of color, and workers, creating much more risk for people in these groups if they are perceived as not nice. With countless stories of women getting assaulted after resisting male sexual advances, it's no wonder so many women choose to appease men even when they do not desire a sexual interaction. While still costly, it often seems to be significantly lower risk to give in.

Similarly, it is a common experience for people of color to receive more negative attention for expressing anger or dissatisfaction than their white counterparts. Workers also risk losing employment if they do not respond to their bosses and managers in a nice way that keeps them comfortable. This is true even when bosses and managers are communicating in an aggressive way, or making unreasonable demands.

Because of the consequences we may face if we fail to be nice, we often feel compelled to be so even when it is not a genuine expression, and this comes with inherent internal costs. If we authentically wanted to give someone pleasure, comfort, or satisfaction, there would be no internal costs. In fact, it would likely nourish us in some way, like when we see our children eating a healthy meal, or a lover experiencing sexual pleasure.

When we feel extrinsically compelled to act nice in a way that does not reflect what we know to be true, then the dissonance comes at a cost to our own well-being, and can perpetuate systems that do not work.

The cumulative effect of this dissonance over time takes a toll on personal and community health.

Niceness socialization prevents feedback that might disrupt the status quo. That is precisely why the less privilege one has, the higher the risks are for going against expectations of niceness. When we are nice, we play our part in upholding the illusion that the systems we live in work well.

Those who are in positions of power in oppressive systems are prevented from experiencing discomfort and risk, because those costs are taken on by others with less power who have been socialized to be nice.

I grew up in conservative Muslim communities in New York, raised with a huge expectation for me to be nice and obedient.

On top of that, there was also a lot of Islamophobia, before 9/11 and even more after. I felt like I had to represent all Muslims and prove that we weren't all anti-American terrorists. The combination of this pressure from two directions created a context in which I felt very compelled to be nice. I mostly succeeded at it, having a lot of friends and being well regarded by most of my teachers.

In my teenage years, I rebelled against that pressure, refusing to wear hijab or do much of what I was obligated to do. I went to punk shows and dropped out of high school. I did a major pendulum swing away from being nice, and spoke directly and aggressively even when I lost friends or hurt others.

Both ends of that spectrum were missing something. In my childhood, I was missing authenticity. In my teenage years, I was missing care.

What could it look like if instead of niceness or brutal honesty, we aimed to integrate authenticity and care?

There are two things that are directly necessary to move toward a culture of authenticity and care. One is to build this in microcosmic ways within our communities and movements, and the other is to support each other in facing the risks of refusing to be nice when we engage with oppressive systems.

To increase our capacity to act with authenticity and care within our own communities, we can look at where we have agency in terms of recreating expectations of niceness. For example, if someone has trouble locating their own needs and experience, then they may need practice and support to develop the necessary self-awareness to act authentically.

If someone struggles with receiving feedback without defensiveness, then they may need practice and support to develop the capacity to vulnerably hear others. If someone tends to be received as stoic regardless of an inner experience of care, they may need practice and support to find ways to express genuine care.

We can ask questions to help each other locate our care and experiences so we can express them authentically. We can engage in community dialogue to explore these things together and come up with mutually supportive ideas that engage our unique circumstances and gifts.

In order to increase our capacity to refuse to be nice in the face of great risk, we can act in solidarity with one another. This might look like empathetic or material support once someone has already experienced some sort of cost for refusing to be nice.

It could also look like finding ways to use our collective strength to make it more difficult for someone to be singled out. We see this when workers choose to strike together when only one of them is being targeted for speaking out about terrible conditions.

It could look like supporting each other to actively choose whether we want to take a risk or be nice, rather than do so out of habit. It also means having compassion for ourselves and others when we lack the capacity and support to take the risks of acting authentically with care.

Integrating care into this model means refusing to give in to dehumanizing others even when we are determined to stop them from causing harm. Humans are not compartmentalized beings, and dissonance causes cumulative harm to our communities. It's no wonder military and police families experience higher than normal domestic violence rates.

Not only does the revolution begin at home, but the war comes home with us whether we like it or not.

Holding care for others does not mean saying things perfectly so that we are managing other's responses to us. It is not possible to predict or manage someone's response. It is only possible to authentically express our care and experience, and be willing to take the risk of showing up for the outcome.

Moving away from niceness toward authenticity and care will allow feedback to enter systems and change them. They might not change because someone powerful finally understands something, but because disrupting the norm opens up non-normative possibilities.

Acting authentically makes visible the often invisible costs that we take on in order to survive in an oppressive system. Refusing to be nice can sometimes mean facing very real danger, and it does us no good to minimize that.

We can cultivate willingness to face risks, big and small, with self-awareness, support, and solidarity.

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# fifth Estate

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