

THE PERILS OF ENTITLEMENT

Several years ago, I worked with someone who offered seminars. He habitually arrived at such meetings whenever it was convenient for him, regardless of what time the meeting was scheduled to start. Because he was beloved by those who knew him, and because he offered a program that was much appreciated, people indulged him. Audiences arrived on time, just in case he did, and waited without complaint when he generally didn't. People who valued his work shrugged and said that truly great speakers were entitled to their quirks, and kept coming back for more.

Another story.

When I was running a business, I purchased services from a well-known consulting company that charged exceptionally high fees. When I got the bill, I discovered the company had charged its anticipated high daily rates, plus an exceptionally high hourly rate for every conversation their staff had with me or anyone in my company, and a daily rate for travel days, meals and hotel stays, even though they were located less than two hours by car from my office. The final bill was much more than I anticipated, based on our initial discussion – which they also charged for, although in my mind it was a sales call. The most impressive thing about their work was their bill.

I called the senior consultant to inquire about the bill, mentioning that no discussion had been held in advance about all the extra charges. “I thought a sophisticated business person like you would know that a consulting firm with a reputation such as ours is entitled to charge for every minute of its valuable time and every one of its assets,” the consultant retorted.

Another story.

While overseas during the Vietnam War, I was an English professor for the University of Maryland. Nearly all of my students were adult military personnel, many nearing retirement. I could never get the classes on a first-name basis for discussions because the officers expected to be addressed properly by the enlisted people, and the military people all expected to be addressed by rank by the few civilians in the class.

Baffled by this, I decided to have a heart to heart talk with the class. I remember it ended with, “Why can't we all be regular people, just for the sake of enjoying the study of literature together? Literature is about common human themes, things we all know and experience regardless of our rank or station in life.”

A Captain in the class said, “No disrespect, ma'am, but we worked hard for our entitlements and there are people dying right now to preserve them. Why should we give

all that up for a discussion of some story written by someone who has been dead for years and had no idea what it is to be a soldier?"

These are ordinary stories. People could readily see either side of the entitlement coin in such stories, and it doesn't appear to matter much.

So, try this one:

I taught in a junior college in Mississippi in 1968, the first year it had been integrated. Most of the black students were athletes, and I was the out-of-state English teacher, brought in on a federal grant, so I was assigned to teach remedial English. In my afternoon class were all the black students, all but one of them on the football team. The football players didn't come to class and never turned anything in, but the other black student, who was definitely not athletic, attended faithfully. At mid-term, he received a B and those who did not attend got failing notices. I was called in to the office to get a verbal lashing. Apparently, we didn't plan to fail black football players, no matter what.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I'm failing them. They didn't learn anything, and I believe if they are enrolled in a school, they are entitled to an education. The grade is what lets them know whether they are receiving, or accepting, that entitlement." The following morning, all of the absent students presented me with transfer slips into someone else's class. They got their passing grades from their new teacher.

When I complained, I was told they were entitled to a chance to make it in sports because they wouldn't have other opportunities.

Or this one:

I was the editor of a newspaper section of a major daily newspaper in the late 70's. We hired a promising young woman writer, who moved from another state. She was just about to settle a divorce at the time we paid for her move. A few months after she had started work, she informed us that she had received a grand piano and a few other antique pieces unexpectedly in the divorce settlement, and she wanted us to pay to move it. "We already moved your household goods," I said. "I don't think we can work this out."

"Well, you better work it out," she huffed. "I'm a woman and I'm entitled, and I'll sue this paper for discrimination to kingdom come if you don't move the piano and the antiques. Believe me, I know what I'm entitled to and you don't want trouble from a woman on this liberal newspaper."

Or this one:

A woman who worked for me was married to a man who started getting up in the wee hours three or four mornings a week to go fishing. She became suspicious, since he had never had that much interest in fishing before. So one morning, she crept out after him and followed him – a few blocks to another woman’s house. She went back to her house, got his gun from the closet, returned to the other woman’s house, broke down the door and shot him. She was nervous and agitated and had never shot a gun before, so she didn’t kill him, just wounded him. The first I heard about it, she called me from jail asking me to help her with bail. She was upset that she was being held behind bars. “That two-timing so and so was entitled to die!” she said. “And I’m entitled to my freedom. Anyone would have shot the -----.”

In these stories, “entitlement” is a little murkier, and there’s more at stake. An edgier sense of the idea of entitlement, though, casts a clearer light on the seeming superficiality of the first set of stories.

None of these are heartwarming, reassuring human interactions. All these stories leave one uneasy. They don’t have a good feeling to them. In every case, there’s something unsettling, something not in harmony with our deepest human hopes for each other and how we’d like life to work. People are alienated by their own ideas in each of them. Regardless of one’s expertise, isn’t it rude and heartless to feel so “entitled” that you leave good people waiting for you to appear on a whim? Doesn’t it seem arrogant and selfish to charge outrageously beyond the true value for services, regardless of how well-known one is? Why should a rank or title keep people from being able to relate to each other, person to person, and connect to each other’s humanity? Who are any of us to decide what students are entitled to and what their future must hold for them? Does gender give a person rights beyond common sense and equity? No matter how angry someone is, is it ever right to shoot another person? Who made this stuff up, anyway?

Entitlement is a set of personal thoughts we polish and come to admire over time. We are not born entitled to anything but life, with all its rich possibilities, and the ability to think our way through our life. What we think is a choice; *that* we think is our birthright, the only absolute entitlement. That gift of thinking gives us the freedom to unshackle ourselves from any idea that is unsettling and knocks us out of step with life. We are destined to live our lives as the thinkers of our own thoughts, and we are destined to live the consequences of the thoughts we think. But we are not locked into the thoughts we think; we can think differently and change our own destiny. Or we can think indefinitely from the perspective of our imagined entitlements and never reflect on new possibilities.

Are the rich and mighty entitled to crush the poor and disenfranchised?

Are the pious entitled to judge the humble?

Are the fanatic entitled to terrorize the open-minded?

Is anyone entitled to anything just because they made it important in their own mind?

Would we have a different and gentler experience of life if we cherished the powerful capacity we have to free ourselves from our own ideas of entitlement more than we cherished the entitlements?

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