

MN NICE HAS ITS LIMITATIONS  
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Does “MN Nice” really exist? According to my research and a recent Mpls Tribune article--it does. Newcomers to MN declare it to be true. When I worked as a church executive and we were resettling Southeast Asian Refugees all over the country, the Hmong folks had a phrase that they used instead of the word “MN” which literally meant, “the cold place with the people of the warm hearts.” Wasn’t that a nice thing to say!

MN nice has its positives;

- people are civil and kind, they smile a lot
- the workplace, social gatherings are very peaceful
- nice people get ahead, the first thing said about a really rich person in MN is, not how they made their money, but that they are “nice people--you really can’t dislike them for their money”
- we feel safe with nice people
- people and situations are predictable, under control
- there isn’t a lot of upsetting, needless change because people don’t rock the boat--so we feel safe, comfortable

#### THE DOWN SIDE OF MN NICE

There is a down side of MN nice, it has become our own version of political correctness.

- we are fearful of people who different, especially people who aren’t nice, people who speak out, we label them, avoid them.
- there are Nice Rules the first one is “never embarrass anyone” that means don’t embarrass someone by speaking up, even when they are doing something reprehensible--not embarrassing them is more important than justice. MN nice means we can’t correct people, we become voiceless (JANITOR STORY)
- not only can’t we speak for others, we can’t speak for ourselves, we become voiceless (CANDY STORY) “They won’t think I’m very nice”. We can’t hold ourselves or other accountable for our actions.
- We care about the wrong things, being liked over doing the right thing. I know, I’m guilty.

So, how does MN Nice affect race relations in MN?

- we don’t talk about race when we should--when people make racist comments/jokes we have a hard time confronting them.
- we avoid addressing race when we insist on “color blindness”. We often invoke “color blindness” when we should be looking at the issues of color. When is that? When people are telling racist or sexist jokes—when they are making racist

comments behind a person's back...when they are scape-goating people. When people stop discriminating I can be blind to color. What we often mean is if I don't see it, I can't be accused of being racist. I was invited to speak in Starbuck, MN. The woman who came to pick me up was looking for a blonde Danish American Vivian Jenkins Nelsen. She looked and looked. I finally put her out of her misery and asked if she was "Ms. Jane Doe." Later in the car, she said "You know, I don't see color."

- We accuse others of being too obsessed with race--instead of asking them why they feel that way. There are people who I feel always see everything through a race lens, just as my good friend Betty sees everything through an alcohol lens. "He or she probably did this or that because they are probably an alcoholic!" I get into a denial, defensive mode instead of listening from the other person's point of view. That is really hard to do. Suspend judgement, listen from the heart and then talk from your heart.
- Yes, there are people of color who use race as an excuse. There are white people who do the same. Think about it, how often do we blame the one and excuse the other? How often do I hear, "Oh, you have to excuse Bill, he just doesn't know any better." Are you going to enlighten him? Am I?
- we talk about race when we shouldn't --MN press stories about race--describing race. Giving the race of people when you can't really identify them, "black male, average height, medium skin color, no other identifying characteristics. This leads to racial misidentification (half the African American male population fits this description) and hysteria. Or we ask people "what race ARE you?" We they are bi or tri-racial and we don't have a neat box to put them in. Or we describe someone as the new Asian dentist—she or he is the new DENTIST.
- we break Nelsen's First Rule--never believe your own propaganda, "I'm not prejudiced...my best friend is (fill in the blank). "We don't have a race problem here." "It's those outsiders who are the problem, the criminals, the racists, the whatever. (They said that in Selma about Dr. King)
- we don't talk honestly about our feelings, we smile at people to their face and knife them behind their backs. (Weazel behavior). We smile and shun. Smile and Shun. Every African American I have ever met who has moved here from the South says the same thing. "I don't get it, I never know where I stand--at least down South, people called you names." You go to work, they smile, you get home, hear a sloshing noise, it's blood in your shoes, you've been knifed and didn't know it."

#### WHAT DO WE DO ABOUT MN NICE?

- let's stay civil--my parents are civil. We didn't raise our voices, so yelling at kids, each other...wasn't done in our house. My mom had THE LOOK that would stop a car.
- let's hold each other responsible, when things happen that we know need a response, we have to ask ourselves, "Self, what are you going to do about it? We have to ask our friends & colleagues, "So, friend--what are WE going to do about it?"
- confront your own racial feelings, biases, we all have them--stop denying it. We often do and say things unknowingly.

- be both kind and honest—we need to consider others feelings when we confront them. We need to stop worrying about embarrassing people when they are doing things they shouldn't.
- own our feelings, feel our feelings—we have to get beyond political correctness and say what we really feel. That's where growth starts. Many of us don't know what we feel, since certain subjects like race have never been talked about at home or church/synagogue.
- assume we are going to make mistakes—I make them. (Seder Story)
- ask forgiveness for mistake—don't just clam up, or pretend that it didn't happen. You will feel better. If the other person won't forgive you, forgive yourself.
- get over it and get on with it. Get on with making yourself less prejudiced—join me in moving beyond your comfort zone. Reach out to people you have never encountered before. Become that three dimensional, graceful, intelligent and courageous person you can be.