

## **“The inconsistency of human nature”**

***“There are few people whom I really love, and still fewer of whom I think well. The more I see of the world, the more am I dissatisfied with it; and every day confirms my belief of the inconsistency of all human characters, and of the little dependence that can be placed on the appearance of merit or sense.” (Jane Austen, Pride and Prejudice)***

As was so poignantly written by Jane Austen in her masterpiece of English literature, *Pride and Prejudice*, I have in these last few months come to a heightened awareness of the unpredictability and complexity of human nature. How can human relations change so suddenly from being pleasant and friendly to being hateful and discourteous? One day, you are interacting positively with someone and the next thing you know, you are being ignored, judged or criticized on matters which you either have no idea about or issues that could simply have been resolved through communication and conciliation.

The complexity of human relations started daunting on me at a very tender age. As a child from a mixed racial family, I was raised in a fairly balanced environment where I thought respect, humility and empathy were common values that were shared universally. Unfortunately, I got to learn too early that my faith and expectations about the gentleness of human nature were simply unrealistic. I still remember those girlfriends in primary school, who took pleasure in tormenting me or other sensitive souls by constantly auctioning and bargaining their friendship. Indeed, one day they would be your best friend and the next day without any tangible or relevant reason, they would become your worst enemy. I also remember those teachers who only knew how to teach and educate using very callous methods and ended up instilling fear and anger in us. There were also those random moments when I would be teased and rejected just for being different because of my mixed racial background. All those daily experiences were already bringing some insight about the unpredictability of human behaviour and the pain that can ensue from that.

As I grew up into a more realistic and balanced view of interpersonal relations, I realised that in order to survive, I had to learn to navigate through the volatility of human behaviour. I used to have a rather monochromatic view about the nature of human interactions. It had to always be kind, decent and virtuous. There were no shades of grey, no room for treacherous and unempathetic behaviour. I always questioned how people could be so self-absorbed, arrogant, heartless and spiteful. I knew that we could have different backgrounds and different perspectives on issues but I still always held on to the fact that we could always thrive to find a common ground by tapping into our shared human values and aspirations for a more just and kind world.

My conviction had always been that our education, our upbringing and our life experiences shaped us into the complex emotional beings that we are. Hence, my assumption was that when one came from a battered childhood or an underprivileged community, it was very difficult to relate to the values of compassion and kindness. I could understand that populations that had been deprived of their basic human rights and liberty could find it difficult to adhere to the concepts of peace, respect and gratitude. It is indeed beyond reasonable to expect that people who have suffered and continue to suffer would find the inner strength to respond to callousness with gentleness, to hatred with love and to aggression with understanding.

By opposition, my belief was that people from a relatively balanced, educated and healthy background could not be found wanting in terms of graciousness and mindfulness. I struggled to understand when human behaviour was geared towards generating pain and anxiety. I could not come to terms with the fact that God fearing people could humiliate and reject a fellow human being based on their self-righteous reasons. Again, I found it difficult to accept that people of experience, maturity and exposure, faced with the complexity and carelessness of human behaviour, would fail to rationalise and self-introspect and rather choose to be guided by false assumptions, misconceptions and a misguided ego.

It has been a long journey, but I am beginning to accept the fact that it is all about expectations. We all have expectations based on our personal understanding of the world and how relations should be governed in any given circumstances. Obviously, we are all unique and we all function, act or react according to our biological set-up, our upbringing and experiences and our personality. Understandably, we all have varying levels of emotional intelligence, psychological challenges, empathetic abilities and resilience. And therefore, it is indeed an illusion and completely unrealistic for me to expect from everybody the same level of grace, sympathy, thoughtfulness and mercy.

I am also beginning to understand that when a person is aggressive and behaves unreasonably towards us, it is not always because of our actions but rather because of the person's own fears and fragility. Wickedness and arrogance does not come from a place of contentment and serenity. It comes from a place of turbulence, failure, pain, anger, frustration and resentment. Who has never been in those spaces of distress, disappointment, anger and failure? I think we can safely assume that we all navigate within those spaces all the time be it in our family, educational, professional and social settings. Due to the negative emotional baggage that we sometimes have to carry, we may not always be able to take a step back in order to display a more rational, respectful and gracious behaviour when life pushes us to the confines of our emotional capacities. Furthermore, psychological disorders can also significantly impair a person's emotional and social capabilities. Indeed, an individual can appear to be very confident and yet be suffering from extreme anxiety. A person may be very funny and yet be battling with depression. These borderline psychological and personality traits can lead to emotional and social disengagement compounded with the disregard for

other people's feelings and emotions. This causes not only pain for the person suffering from the disorder but for all the people that come into contact with that person.

Consequently, as Jane Austen wrote, there will always be an innate ***"inconsistency of all human characters"*** because that is the foundation of human nature. There is no consistency in human behaviour. If we were to hold on and be guided by our expectations, we would be constantly disillusioned. We all go through trials, tragedies, illnesses, disappointments, and failure. We are all wired differently and we all have different levels of tolerance towards pain, towards sorrow, towards anger, towards incompetence, towards ignorance, towards foolishness, towards prejudice, towards insecurity, in a nutshell, towards the imperfection of our humanity.

Nevertheless, regardless of our imperfections and psychological challenges, I still believe we are all born from a place of emotional purity and we come to this world for a purpose. To grow, to learn, to connect, to love, to share, to empathise, to appreciate and to help each other make our journey as human beings worthwhile. Because after all, in the end, what really matters when we look back and try to make sense of our existence? Where do our reflections lead us to? Do we ask ourselves how many people we have hurt in our lifetime? Or do we ask ourselves if our existence was of any value to humanity? I have not been to the end of the road yet, but by witnessing the passing of my beloved parents, my instinct tells me that in the end, we all try to make peace with our humanity and we encourage those that we leave behind to be more mindful, respectful and compassionate towards other human beings.

And this is why, based on this personal conviction, I would love to advocate for more love and generosity in this world. Let us always strive to be caring and merciful to one another. Let us always have the courage and the humility to put ourselves in the other person's shoes so as to understand where we may have faltered and why they may be reacting in contradiction with our expectations. Whatever situation we find ourselves in, even if we are confused, hurt or uncertain of how to react, let us always try to choose gentleness and moderation over callousness and indifference. Whatever decision we may be faced with or whatever conviction we may have, let us endeavour never to deliberately hurt, reject or destroy another human being's feelings because in so doing, we are destroying ourselves and the essence of our humanity. And if only we could be patient and willing to choose the light over darkness, we would be surprised to observe the impact, the redemptive power, the healing nature and the magical difference that we can bring to someone's life and to our own lives.....

Nathalie Ocran-Edmund  
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