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A How-To Guide for Young People*

Disinhibited Thoughts #21

Reactions to my tics in general don't faze me much anymore. On occasion I'll step up on behalf of others so as to educate in how one should behave when one sees an individual ticcing. For the most part, though, I no longer get personally affronted. Except when something like this happens.....

It's a Friday evening and I'm taking the transit down to Union Station to meet a friend. A man in his late 30's is riding the rocket as well, sitting across from me with his two young boys. Both youngsters stare at me with their wide, young, impressionable eyes as I tic. Their expressions reveal an innocent amazement at this unusual new input; before long they look to their father, knower of all things, for the appropriate response. He turns to follow their line of sight, sees me, gazes down at his trusting and awaiting offspring... and smirks. Their query answered, these boys now grin back, and settle into slyly sneaking knowing glances at me before giggling to each other. Just like dad. This demonstration of utter faith and paternal modeling would be touching, excepting of course that this father just reinforced in his charges that it's ok to be a bigot.

As a TSFC volunteer I've in-serviced a substantial number of classrooms over the past five years and change. I can tell what the classroom atmosphere will be like long before entering it. All I need to do is spend a moment with the teachers, gauging their ease with the child I'm there to help. As a clinician working in schools on a daily basis now, I am treated to all ranges of staff reaction to my presence, from the extreme of outright admiration to the opposite pole of distaste. Most have not uttered a word, and they don't need to. I'm not fooled, and neither are the children. While I have not to date had any complaints or questions with respect to my competence in any of the schools that I service, should any ever arise I could predict for you right now with some confidence which school(s) would lodge them.

While adults of all disciplines and walks of life possess an array of opinions about someone with my difference holding the position that I do, I'm particularly harsh with certain populations like parents and teachers. The choices that these groups make in determining their behaviour are not limited to themselves – they are, unwittingly or not, also moulding the choices of the young minds surrounding them in how to conduct their affairs. In my opinion these special cases demand an added responsibility to become aware, and to model acceptance accordingly. The excuse of ignorance is a luxury that, in these cases, cannot be afforded. Our students, our young patients, our childrenthose who cross at our crosswalks or stand in our cafeteria lines.....they are all blank slates on which we write. We must be much attuned to this privileged duty, and we must be mindful of what we inscribe. For it is written in an ink not easily erased.

Bearing this duty takes no more effort than inflicting the damaging lessons of the father described above. I recall being at St. Jacob's Farmer's Market a couple of summers ago with a previous girlfriend – she had noticed that I'd caught the eye of an astonished young girl, now intent on spying on me. My partner met her eye and smiled warmly at her – “your curiosity is ok”, her response communicated. Next my partner caught my eye and smiled warmly at me. Finally, she returned her gaze to the young girl and, without breaking eye contact, took my hand and drew me close. Volumes were spoken to that young girl that day: important messages about respecting the dignity of others, and the lovability of those who might appear different than most. Yet not a single word was uttered between them.

As my bus neared the Yonge and Eglinton station I let loose with a fresh volley of tics. The youngest son stared in stark incredulity. Dad looked down and gave him a sharp jostle with his elbow. Ok, so buddy wasn't *all* bad. Score one for papa.

Until next time, my friends!

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