

Leave Some Good Ones for Others

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Recently, my friend Hsü told me about a respected elder acquaintance of his who'd written an essay reflecting on his past. In the piece, the writer recalled how when he was a boy, he was once sent to buy oranges. Before he left home, his mother told him how to choose the good ones. Yet what had left the deepest impression on him was his mother's final instruction: "Leave some good ones for others - don't take all the good ones for yourself." His mother couldn't even read or write, the writer remarked with feeling, and yet those words had served him all life long.

Those words affected me too, leaving me troubled and pensive, and casting me back to events in my own childhood. I think my own mother must have said something similar. She often taught me to be modest and polite, and to have a care for others. For instance, when taking the bus, one should give up one's seat to the elderly or frail, to women or children; when walking, one should first let others pass; when eating, one shouldn't pick all the things one liked to eat exclusively for oneself, but should "leave some good ones for others" At

the time, I was still young, and thought everything my mother taught me an incontrovertible truth, so I naturally held fast to her advice, never doubting it for a moment. For example, if I was taking public transport and saw someone elderly or frail, or a woman or child, I would be sure to give up my seat, even though I was scarcely very old myself. In my memory, it seems that the mothers of my classmates for the most part all brought their children up in this way. I still remember, for example, how when I was in primary school, a really naughty classmate of mine who used to misbehave had been scolded by the teacher. He ran off home, only to receive a good drubbing from his parents, who then took him straight back again to apologise to the teacher. I remember his mother standing tearfully to one side, feeling terribly ashamed! Such were my school days in the forties and fifties, in the southern Taiwan countryside.

Yet, by the sixties, after I'd gone to university in Taipei, these social mores had gradually changed. One began to hear of parents who would tell their children: "What your teacher said about this or that is wrong". Many of the parents had better academic qualifications than the teachers, so they felt themselves to be far more knowledgeable. One began also to hear of parents who, when their child had been scolded by a teacher, would go to the school and denounce the teacher in person. And again, one would hear of people telling their children: "You don't need to give up your seat to anyone. You've bought your ticket just like everyone else, so why should you give it up?" Hearing so many of these stories, one gradually became

inured to them. Whilst one felt that social mores were gradually changing, what one didn't notice was that, quite imperceptibly, one was actually changing along with them too. Many people felt that they shouldn't always be the ones to lose out, and so they started to fight to be in the best position, to fight over their rights, to fight to enjoy what they could - the mentality was that "if there's a benefit, be the first to enjoy it; if there's a problem, don't hesitate to push it away." To take the analogy of buying oranges, everyone was scrambling to get the good ones, and what's more to get all the good ones - why should they leave any good ones for other people to enjoy? The times were indeed changing, and many people would lament the loss of the old ways. Yet at the same time, they themselves would be pushing the new mores forward.

Since the seventies, I have been teaching in or visiting Taiwan, America and Hong Kong. I have often heard, in private, people lamenting the loss of the old ways, the deterioration of values from one generation to the next. And in fact, as I observe it, the situation is indeed essentially so: parents and teachers are no longer teaching their kids to be modest and polite but rather to fight their corner; they are no longer teaching them to have a care for others but rather to keep their eye on the main chance. In this respect, it's the same in every country - we're all brothers suffering the same fate. It seems that the Realm of Great "Harmony" has arrived on earth sooner than expected.

Teaching in Hong Kong these last few years, my impressions about this phenomenon have undergone some change again. Previously, when people took the bus or went shopping, they would of course not give up their place, but they would at least always line up in an orderly fashion, without complaint. Now, they still don't give up their place, but there has gradually emerged the tendency of "suddenly inserting a flower" - queuc-jumping, in other words. What is most worrying is that this society has actually always been very orderly, with everything following its prescribed course. So, to take the case of buying oranges, everyone's been educated that they have the right to pick the good ones, and to pick all of them too, but only as long as they line up in front, in accordance with the rules. Now however, there are signs that a slight change is taking place. In order to strive for the opportunity to choose, it seems there's something of a tendency to vie for the front position, for fear of being last in the queue.

In former days, that mother who couldn't read or write understood how to teach her child that when he went to buy oranges, he shouldn't pick all the good ones for himself, but should always leave some good ones for others. Nowadays, parents and teachers are not only literate but also very eloquent. And yet, for some unknown reason, they have become mean about uttering such words.

留些好的給別人

吳宏一

最近聽友人許君說起，有一位前輩，在回憶往事的文章裏，提到小時候有一次去買橘子，出門前，母親教他如何挑選好的橘子，但印象最深刻的，是他母親最後說的一句話：「要留些好的給別人，不要把好的全挑光了。」那位前輩慨歎的說，他母親雖然不識字，但這句話，使他受用一輩子。

這句話，也使我悵惘了很久，使我想起童年的一些往事。我的母親彷彿也說過類似的話。她常教我要謙讓，要為別人着想。譬如說，搭公共汽車要讓位給老弱婦孺，走路要讓別人先過，吃東西不能盡挑自己喜歡吃的，「要留些好的給別人」……。那時候年紀小，覺得媽媽所教的，都是天經地義，自然信守不渝，也不曾懷疑。例如在車上遇見老弱婦孺，一定讓位，雖然自己年紀也不大。記憶裏，那時候同學的母親，好像是大都如此教導子女的。猶記小學時，一位調皮搗蛋的同學，被老師責罵了，跑回家去，反而被他父母揍了一頓，再領着他回學校向老師賠罪。記得他母親當時還羞愧的站在一旁，陪着他掉眼淚呢！四、五十年代，在台灣南部鄉下，我的中小學生活，是這樣過的。

可是，到了六十年代，我到台北讀大學以後，這種風氣就漸漸變了。開始聽說，有父母告訴孩子說，你們老師這個地方那個地方講錯了。因為為人父母的，很多人學歷比老師高，自己認為學識比老師強得多。也開始聽說，有父母因為孩子在學校裏被老師責罵，就到學校向老師與師問罪。更聽說有人這樣

告訴子女，不必讓位給誰，別人一張票，你也一張票，為甚麼要讓？諸如此類的事情聽多了，感覺逐漸麻木了，覺得社會風氣逐漸在變，卻沒有注意到，在不知不覺間，竟然自己也跟着變了。很多人覺得不能老是讓自己吃虧，於是開始爭位子，爭權利，爭享受，有福先享，有事先推。用買橘子做比喻，大家都搶着要好的，而且搶着把好的挑光，憑甚麼留下好的給別人享受？真的，風氣變了，很多人一方面感歎人心不古，一方面卻自己在推動這種風氣。

七十年代以後，我在台灣、美國及香港等地教書、訪問，私下也常常聽到有人在感歎：人心不古，一代不如一代。然而，據我的觀察，事實上也大致如此：父母師長教給兒女子弟的，已經不是謙讓，而是爭取；已經不是為人着想，而是為自己爭取機會。就這方面來說，各地方都是難兄難弟，都是兄弟之邦。原來世界早已到了大同的境地了。

這幾年在香港教書，對此現象，前後感受又有不同。以前大家都搭車購物，當然不會讓位，但一切依序排隊，沒有話說；現在則同樣不讓位，卻漸漸有「臨時插花」的現象。最令人擔心的是，這個社會本來很有秩序，一切講求按部就班，就像買橘子，雖然很多人所受的教育是：只要你按規定排在前面，你就有權利挑好的，而且把好的挑光。但現在則漸漸有點轉變的跡象了。為了爭取挑揀的機會，似乎有點兒爭先恐後的浮動。

以前不識字的母親，懂得教孩子去買橘子的時候，不要把好的挑光，總要留些好的給別人，現在為人父母師長的，不但識字，而且都很會說道理，但不知道為甚麼吝嗇於講這樣的一句話。