

Voices: An epidemic of rude behavior making America sick

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The scene is iconic, and if you've seen it, you'll never forget it.

Woodrow Call, Augustus McRae and their cowhands arrived in Ogallala, Neb., from Lonesome Dove in far South Texas.

Some of the boys went into town for pleasures not available on the trail. Larry McMurtry tells the scene in vivid detail in his Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *Lonesome Dove*, which became the hit television miniseries. The cowboys were gathered in the street as Dish Boggett brushed his prized horse Sugar.

As the cowboys chatted, a group of soldiers led by an "ungodly big" scout named Dixon approached. Dixon looked at Sugar and demanded Dish turn her over to the U.S. Army. McMurtry narrates the subsequent events in detail, as Dixon spits tobacco on Dish, clubs him with the butt of a pistol and grabs Sugar's reins to ride off.

Newt, Call's unclaimed son, intercedes, grabbing Sugar's bridle, holding him so Dixon can't ride off.

"These cowboys are pests," Dixon said. "Even the pups."

And with that, he grabs a rawhide quirt and proceeds to whip Newt.

Up the street, Call and Gus walked out of the dry goods store. Call jumps on his horse, rides at full speed and knocks Dixon off his mount. What follows is a savage beating of the Army scout by Call, to the point of almost killing him.

When Gus finally ropes Call and pulls him away from the scout, he tells the sergeant watching, "Get your man and go."

"Reckon he's dead?" the sergeant asks.

"If he ain't, he's lucky," Gus replies.

Amid the commotion, a crowd of townspeople gathered, staring in disbelief at what they had witnessed.

Feeling he should make some explanation, Call turns to the audience and announces in simple Texan: "I hate a man that talks rude. I won't tolerate it."

Rude behavior

I was reminded of Call's response to rude behavior recently as my wife and I stood in line at a convenience store. A woman buying some cotton candy wrapped inside plastic put it on the counter, and when the clerk picked it up to scan it, she berated him.

"What are you doing?" she asked, with an edge on her voice that could cut meat. "I don't like anyone touching my food."

The bewildered clerk informed the customer he had to pick it up to scan it, a response that only brought more derision from the woman, who even accused the mild-mannered gentleman behind the counter of "shouting at me."

At this point, I'd had enough and leaned forward. But my wife gently grabbed my forearm to keep me from interceding. That's when I remembered Woodrow Call's response to rudeness. I'm grateful my wife stopped me.

Finally, the customer took the cotton candy and stormed off to the other side of the store. We stepped up to the counter and did our best to assure the poor clerk the incident wasn't his fault.

Growing anger

Is it just me, or are people getting angrier? According to the Institute for Crisis Management, which monitors and reports annually on more than 15 categories of crises affecting businesses, evidence points to growing anger.

The Institute for Crisis Management reports [dramatic increases](#) in areas such as workplace violence, which in 2019 accounted for 1.6 percent of business crises, but by 2023 had exploded to 9.4 percent.

ICM also reports categories like “hostile” takeovers, CEO firings and class action lawsuits are spiking year over year. And it seems our responses to perceived slights are getting more drastic, leading to school shootings and daily scenes of over-the-top reactions.

If you need more evidence of the anger out there, try driving on any of our freeways in North Texas. That friendly finger wave we're used to in rural areas means something different in the Metroplex.

A cure for the epidemic

Two days before the convenience store incident I conducted a celebrity interview with Kelsey Grammer—Dr. Frasier Crane—for an audience at a fundraising event. It was one of those structured interviews he's done dozens of times.

At the end, we did five rapid-fire questions, like who is the most famous person in your cellphone contacts. And this one: “If I were president of the United States, I would ...”

A nervous chuckle echoed from the audience as they braced for Grammer's answer, a reflection of the current political climate in our country where rude behavior and bravado are seen as leadership.

I squirmed waiting for his words, expecting to intervene and defuse the situation. But to the surprise of everyone in the room, Grammer's response was pure and simple.

"If I were president," he said with a pause, "I would work to reintroduce kindness to our country. I would do everything I could to make our country kinder and encourage everyone to treat each other with respect and dignity."

So much for tariffs and trade. Nothing about immigration. Let's just be nice to each other. I'm not sure kindness and niceness can be legislated, but what if our leaders set the tone and changed the culture in our nation?

Right now, it feels more like public figures are taking the Woodrow Call approach and beating others into submission. Rude behavior and unkind speech have no place in our society, but violent and unchecked responses are just as bad.

Take the lead

I retired in January after 40 years of the daily grind. Meeting after meeting. Tasks with deadlines. Pressure to perform. It's like being hyped up on steroids all the time. All those things led to impatience with myself and everyone around me. A quick response was easier.

Now that my pace has slowed, I'm finding more time for patience and thinking about my responses. Maybe that's part of the cure for rudeness. Just stop. Think. Give yourself the gift of a minute before responding.

A good starting place may be with the words of Jesus, who told his

followers: “Here’s a simple, rule-of-thumb guide for behavior: Ask yourself what you want people to do for you, then grab the initiative and do it for them” (Matthew 7:13, *The Message*).

Embedded in Jesus’s words is the key. Let’s see ourselves as initiators of behavior rather than victims who are aggrieved. Take the lead. Just be nice.

Scott Collins is a retired communications professional and former journalist. The views expressed in this opinion article are those of the author.