Bus Stop Blues

by Theodore Dalrymple

Politeness is a virtue. But, as with all virtues, it becomes a vice when carried too far. It is not merely that it can be oleaginous; it can be pusillanimous, the cowardly avoidance of uncomfortable disagreement when such disagreement becomes necessary.

These thoughts came to my mind at the bus stop in the small town in England where I live. From time to time, I take the bus to the nearest station, and if I take it at a certain time, a man in his 60s who smells appallingly is sure to be there. He is dirty as well as smelly; and if he sits at the back of the bus, one can still smell him at the front (and vice versa, of course). This has been going on for years.

Admittedly he does not smell as bad as a patient I once had,

an enormous man in all directions, whose odor lingered for a day or two in the hospital corridors down which he had but walked. It would have taken industrial cleaners with high-pressure hoses and strong detergents to get him clean; for once, at my suggestion, he had tried to clean himself a little, but it had not worked. Rome wasn't built in a day.

No one in all the years that the man in his 60s had taken the bus had told him that he smelled. Of course, to tell someone that he smells is likely to offend him deeply. George Orwell pointed out a long time ago that no insult is more deeply insulting than to tell someone that he smells. Moreover, those who smell presumably do not smell themselves, any more than a snorer hears himself snoring. In this connection (I mention it only for the sake of interest), I recall the notice in the hippopotamus house in the London Zoo when I was a child: "Please excuse the smell," a hippo was supposed to have written, "but we like it." Even then, at the age of 10, I doubted that the hippos were aware of their own smell in another species' opinion.

Why had no one told the man at the bus stop that he smelled? It was hardly for lack of opportunity. Was it politeness or cowardice? They are not entirely contradictory: The silence probably partook of both. One does not like to upset others; one does not like to make a scene. As a result of our mutual politeness-cum-pusillanimity, thousands of people have for years had to put up with a bad smell. San Francisco, I suppose, is this situation on a larger scale.

In the latter case, however, there is also the element of ideology. When I talked, *sotto voce*, about the smelly man to my wife who was with me in the bus queue, she said, "Poor man, he must have had a difficult life." Certainly, he didn't look as if he had declined from a privileged existence to his current state, as some down-and-outs (or is the correct plural *downs-and-out*?) manage to do. He had the manner of a man who was poor and had always been poor.

“But,” I replied to my wife, “there must be many people who had a life as hard as his, who nevertheless wash and don’t smell.” One of the blessings of material progress is that even poor people can keep clean with a little effort. This was once not the case. “To an extent,” I added, “he must have made his own life.”

This might have been harsh; perhaps he was a lost soul who had been widowed early in life. One fears to be harsh much more than one fears to be overindulgent—which is another kind of unfairness.

As it happens, not far from the queue was a young degenerate, if I may be allowed that obsolete term. He had a well-fed and rather handsome dog with him as he sat on the ground, the dog acting both as a companion and a guarantee that he would not be moved to a hostel for the homeless, for such hostels do not accept dogs. I am sure that he genuinely loved his dog, whose state of health contrasted very favorably with that of his master; at least, he loved him when clear-minded enough after taking drugs to do so. Humans had probably given him far more problems than any canine. At any rate, he certainly preferred to sleep in doorways than in hostels for the homeless. For the past few months, he had taken up residence in one particular doorway near the bus stop, in which he nightly spread his mess.

Unfortunately, he has a guitar as well as a dog but is utterly devoid of talent. Nevertheless, he insists on singing for alms; more than once I have thought to ask him how much he would take to stop. His tuneless droning of songs with not much merit even if sung properly is the last thing one wants unavoidably to hear at a bus stop at eight in the morning. An old lady (I call her such in full awareness that I was probably a year or two older than she) looked at me, and we both smiled faintly.

“Noise,” she said.

“Pollution,” I replied—but of course neither of us did anything about it.

The degenerate did not look the aggressive type, and in any case it is difficult to stab someone from a sitting position, but we did not want to hurt his feelings. To tell someone that his singing is painful to the ears is not quite as bad as telling him that he smells, but the information is unlikely to be received with gratitude and a promise to reform by taking lessons. We had not long to wait for the bus and would soon be able to put the noise behind us; our distress was not great enough to be worth risking a scene to alleviate it.

From the pure conceptual angle, the solution to the smell and noise at the bus stop was simple: The first man had to wash and the second to stop playing. In practice, however, things were rather more difficult. Respectable citizens are paralyzed by their charitable feelings and thoughts, as well as by their fear of unpleasantness in public. And so the quality of local life is allowed to deteriorate slightly.

First published in *Taki’s magazine*.