

The Blame Game



by Theodore Dalrymple

It is much easier, and more fun, to denounce bad behavior than to behave well. Denunciation brings its pleasures, among which is the discomfiture, or worse, of the person or persons denounced. We love to imagine the squirming of someone under the lash, or as a consequence of our words. And all this in the name of righteousness! A double delight.

The above is but a preliminary to a little story. My house in England is in what is called a church close, that is, a street built around a church. There has been a church there for hundreds of years, but the present building was heavily restored by the Victorians (it would have fallen down otherwise). But it still has a leper squint, a narrow vertical

opening in the wall through which lepers could watch church services. Nowadays, we have neither lepers nor church services.

Residents' parking spaces are at a premium around the close. As many readers will probably know, the matter of parking spaces can arouse deep and furious emotion, none stronger in fact. People have been murdered over parking disputes, and only yesterday (as I write this), *The Daily Telegraph* had an article about the case of a man who attacked and damaged a car that was parked in his designated parking space, despite the fact that he had no car, did not drive, and had not used the parking space for twelve years. The infringement of his rights was purely symbolic, but whole wars have been fought over trivia.

Anyhow, there exists a WhatsApp group on which matters of mutual concern to residents of the church close may belong. And one of the matters that most exercises the residents is the habit that some people have of parking carelessly and taking two places instead of one. It is the principle that matters, not whether someone in practice cannot find a parking space as a result.

Recently, a photograph was posted on the WhatsApp group site of a car egregiously straddling two parking spaces. The residents being small in number, the car's owner was easily identifiable; the photograph was captioned "This year's prize so far for selfish parking."

The owner of the car then posted that she was sorry that she had parked so badly, but that, having just returned from the funeral of a close relative, she had other things on her mind than accurate parking. Initial outrage at her parking turned almost instantaneously to sympathy for her loss, and even outrage at the censorious person who had posted the photograph in the first place. Frailty, thy name is outrage.

What is the moral of this story? To park a car without regard to the interests of other motorists is reprehensible, no doubt, though on the scale of human wickedness it does not rank very high; on the other hand, censorious vigilantism and naming and shaming are often inglorious manifestations of sadism rather than true zeal for the public good (which also has its dangers).

At the same time, if minor infringements of civility go unremarked, they will increase in number and in severity. At what point such an infringement merits public exposure is a question of judgment, and no hard-and-fast rule can be laid down.

In this case, it is probable that it did not occur for a second to the person who posted the photograph that there might be a reason other than complete selfishness of the driver for the way in which she parked the car, let alone an extenuating one.

On the other hand, the excuse given strikes me as a somewhat facile one as well. What, I wondered, if I had parked in such a manner and the photograph had referred to me? I have little doubt that I could have, and indeed would have, found an exculpatory reason without much difficulty; for even the least imaginative person can find, almost immediately, and with lightning speed, an excuse for what he has done wrong and of which he has been justly accused. I was very tired after a long wearisome journey, I had just come back from visiting the sick, I had been to the doctor's because I was worried over a certain symptom that might have been cancer, etc., etc. And I am not sure that I would have been too worried over whether the excuse was actually true or not, because no one would be able to verify (or, more important, falsify) it. As they say, any port in a storm.

In fact, a question has long been present in my mind as to whether it is worse (or better) to be justly or unjustly

accused. Both have their psychological advantages and disadvantages. To be justly accused forces one to face up to what one has done, which is always unpleasant; to be unjustly accused, while it may have terrible consequences in practice if the falsity and injustice of the accusation are not ultimately recognized, has at least the consolation of allowing the accused to feel morally superior to his accusers.

The sad fact is that the justly accused are often able to deny their guilt at least as convincingly as the unjustly accused. I am not an especially gullible person (I am probably medium-gullible), but I have sometimes been taken in by vehement denials that subsequently turned out to be false.

When I look back to my own childhood, I remember my furious, almost tearful denials of my own wrongdoing, even coming to half-believe them myself. After all, who, myself included, could put up so vehement and fierce a performance in anything but the defense of the truth? I sobbed, I wailed, I screamed, I stamped my foot; therefore, what I said must have been true. I was never a full-blown psychopath, however, because a still small voice—I can almost locate it geographically in my skull, it was in the top left-hand corner—kept repeating, “Oh, come off it, you know perfectly well that you’re playacting.”

Be that as it may, the outpouring of sympathy for the recently bereaved bad parker made me feel slightly queasy, as if I had consumed too many chocolate truffles very quickly—which, incidentally, I am inclined to do if the opportunity presents. Of course, it is not my fault, I was born like it.

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