

The concept:

Niceties-tokens began life as a thought on a bus on a week day morning.

I sat there watching people get on and off the bus. No one made eye contact with each other; no one was polite to each other. It was like people didn't have to accept there was anyone else there, even though they were on a packed bus, so up close-and-personal to their fellow commuters - their head in someone's arm pit, but speaking to each other would be completely bizarre. Not that we need to speak to these people - who would want chit chat at 8am any way? It's like we don't accept these other people exist.

( Please note that I say 'We' because I was watching people do this a few feet away, whilst avoiding the man standing over me so close that I could see right up his nose out of the corner of my eye.)

But when you are daydreaming and your eyes focus on someone else, and they meet your gaze, something happens. Acknowledgement.

And if you smile at that person, even if they don't smile back, you have still broken the rudeness spell. That person will be unable to barge past you without saying excuse me, because they have acknowledged you exist.

My mate Lucy is brilliant; she is a true extrovert who everyone likes immediately, infectiously. She isn't the worlds politest person but she is amazing at communicating with people.

I was in her car, and we were parallel parked and coming into the flow of traffic on a busy road. Normally you have to wait an age to get out. People can clearly see that she has her indicators on but they purposely keep their eyes straight ahead of them - not looking - not looking. But Lucy has the trick.

She starts waving.

The next driver in the traffic sees her waving and their natural reaction is to look up. When they look up they see Lucy smiling at them, then she mouths 'Can I go?' and points ahead of them.

Every time she have ever done this she gets a positive response. As soon as she has made eye contact she has them, and as soon as they realise she is nice and not threatening they actually don't mind that she is going in front of them, it only takes a couple of seconds anyway.

A bit like when a pregnant woman gets on the train - people sometimes purposely keep their heads down, in a book. Not because they are horrible – precisely the opposite – they know as soon as they have made eye contact with the pregnant woman they will give up their seat, without a moments hesitation. But making eye contact takes confidence and effort, and it's just too easy not to look up.

I was on an over ground train in the summer time. It was packed and I was standing, in the middle of the throng. A woman next to me suddenly bent down to get her head as low as possible, another woman noticed first and spoke to her - 'Are you okay? - Do you need a seat?' The faint woman nodded, and the Good Samaritan speaks - not overly loudly 'Excuse me can someone give up their seat for this lady?'

Feeling bad that I hadn't been the first to ask the faint lady if she was ok, and wanting to redeem myself, I could tell that no one had heard Good Samaritan ladys request, so I belted out in my most cheery, sing song way 'we need a seat for a ill person please!' a number of people immediately got up, smiling and we directed her to the seat.

The Good Samaritan muttered something like 'Gosh! How many times do you have to ask?' she

kind of said this to me, but wouldn't look at me when she said this. I wanted to say 'but they didn't hear you,' but she obviously didn't want to talk to me because she turned away.

I thought about this for a few minutes; she had been so caring to that poor woman, and her sentiment behind it seemed to be that she had to do this because everyone else was so horrible and rude.

Is that what most people think? That they, *themselves*, are polite and everyone *else* is rude?

I think it is - but actually I am not like everyone *else*, none of my mates are like that either, in fact no one I know is actually like that. So who are in the group of '*everyone else*? Who are these horrible people that are down right rude?

Team Nice did a research project recently to find out who these horrid rude people really are.

We went out individually or in pairs in areas in London and approached people for directions to somewhere close by. We monitored their results and the things that we used as markers were the following:

- Did they give us eye contact?
- Did they give us more than a few seconds of their time?
- Did they give us directions and if they didn't know the way did they offer any polite words of apology or suggestion? i.e. 'Sorry, I don't know' or 'perhaps you could try asking in that shop' etc
- Did they smile

We surveyed over 100 people between 14 of us.

The results didn't surprise us at all; no one was rude, only person said 'Sorry I don't have time' and a couple of people didn't speak English. Everyone else was helpful, polite and nice. People were more helpful generally if a woman asked rather than a man, and most of our female researchers had at least one person offering to walk them to their destination. I think this is back down to the fact that they are not intimidated by them. There is no fear from the encounter.

So Team Nice believe that there are very very few rude people in this world, but there are a fair number of good people that just don't trust that the majority of *everyone else* is nice too. If we can just remind them to think of each other then we will live in a nicer environment.

Back to the story of the Good Samaritan on the train. So I am standing, holding on to the same pole as the Good Samaritan and another woman. The other woman starts looking a bit squiffy - the good Samaritan looks at her and says quietly 'Are you okay? - I think you need a seat too' this woman nods and looks very distant. Before good-but-very-quiet Samaritan could say anything I called out 'Ere, everyone, we have got another one! We need another seat'

This time, not only did we get 12 people leaping up offering their seats, but we also got a number of laughs.

Bystander apathy is not about rude horrible people - it's just a natural fear that you may not have heard correctly, or you don't want to look like an idiot, or you may not be able to help properly, or someone else will help.

And on the other side of that there really is no need to be offended by anyone who is too scared to interact with you. Ultimately, if we all understand this then there really isn't any reason why we can't make London a nicer place.