

## Guerilla Manners

Henry Alford has a new strategy in the battle against rudeness: reverse etiquette. Alford, author of the book *How To Live*, writes in an op-ed piece for the *New York Times* that he has taken to apologizing to rude people for their bumptious behavior.

A grocery clerk fumbles an apple to the filthy floor then tosses it into the sack without comment. Alford pipes up, "Sorry about that – I didn't mean for you to drop that." When the kid at the pizza place can't break a double-sawbuck, Alford goes to the next shop over, gets change, and returns with the remark, "So sorry – I hope I didn't keep you waiting." Someone whacks him with a duffel bag at a bus stop and Alford apologizes, explaining to the perp that "I'm saying what you should be saying."

It doesn't seem to be working, but this does not daunt Alford. "No one says I'm sorry anymore, so I do it for them. My idea is that if I say I'm sorry, then at least the words have been released into the universe. The apology gets said, even if it's not by the right person. It makes me feel better. And maybe [the offender] will know what to say next time."

Call it pre-emptive politeness, an etiquette insurgency. Of course, Alford doesn't have the patent on this. Jesus, in the Sermon on the Mount, laid down a similar militant mildness. "But whoever slaps you on right cheek, turn the other to him, also" (Mt 5.39). Other teachers had argued for non-retaliation. "Don't do what you don't want done to you" goes at least as far back as Confucius. "Do what you want done to you" (Lk 6.31), however, makes the giant stride from withholding what someone has coming to him to giving the other what you have coming to you. We still ask the same question, "What are my rights?" We just apply the answer to the very person who has violated those rights.

I wonder what would happen if Christians as a whole adopted the teachings of Christ, at least on this one point: if we embraced an in-your-face graciousness that refuses to leave the offense unnamed but names it only to claim it. Well, as Alford discovered, we probably would not elicit repentance from those who have wronged us. On the other hand, righteousness will have been done, words of peace released into the universe. We'll feel better, and maybe the other person will see how the world ought to work.

Of course, such an action is unfair. I mean – taking the blame for the wrong that another person has done to us? What kind of moron would base his life on that ethic? That kind of thinking could get you killed... even crucified.

I Apologize,

Doug