

# Physician, Heal Thyself: A brief manifesto on kindness in academia and the tyranny of legitimacy.

 [blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2014/09/19/physician-heal-thyself-manifesto-kindness-in-academia/](https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2014/09/19/physician-heal-thyself-manifesto-kindness-in-academia/)

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*Under the rouse of rigour and seriousness, professional norms in academia often preclude kindness. Jason Laker looks at the issue systemically in an effort to uncover why being kind and supportive to each other should be seen as surprising. He wonders how much of this contemptuous rhetoric is authentic, or rather, a performance used to socialize academics as a signal of legitimacy. He argues this incivility blights the profession and serves those who are looking to dismantle the academic purpose.*



Earlier this week, I received an email from a lecturer at a university in another country. She had submitted a book proposal for an international series I am editing. The proposal is currently receiving external review, and she was enquiring about its status. While she has an impressive CV and publication record, this would be her first book. So, the normal anxious feelings associated with that are exacerbated by limited experience with the timelines and details of book proposal decisions (and production processes).

I was quite happy to explain the review process in more detail, particularly adding that external reviewers sometimes (often) take longer to respond than their initial agreement indicated. I estimated that another month would likely produce an answer. I also explained that beyond the yes/no question, external reviewers often have valuable suggestions for refinements, conceptual or literature gaps to be addressed, and so forth, and suggested this would make the wait worthwhile whether or not this publisher ultimately agrees to publish the book (in which case I would help her to identify another publisher). Having been on the receiving end of such decisions, I am greatly appreciative of the feelings associated with writing, hoping, waiting and contending with decision outcomes. After all, our writing is not only a work product of our curiosities and research enquiries; they are also forms of expression of our relationships with and beliefs about things that are very important to us personally. For many of us, our livelihoods hinge on producing scholarly output despite our limited control over achieving that.

She responded to my email with her own: “*Many thanks for your reassurance – as always. You are a very kind person.*” This short, simple, and polite message was a lovely response, and it simultaneously reactivated a frustration that simmers in me. I continue to be caught off guard by receiving affirmations that are disproportionately generous for the efforts I simply regard as “good manners” and “doing my job.” Of course we should customarily say please and thank you for the routine requests and provisions associated with doing business. However, a standing question for me in Higher Education is why being kind and supportive to each other should be seen or experienced as remarkable or surprising.



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I regard my work as relational, and providing encouragement and developmental feedback means a great deal to me personally. Because it is so entwined with my temperament and values, I forget sometimes that in Academia these characteristics are not as common as they should be. This is not to suggest that most people in our business are unkind per se, but rather that our professional cultural norms often conspire to preclude kindness, justified by invoking (implicitly or explicitly) the importance of rigour. I have witnessed many otherwise good-hearted people act horribly toward each other, especially when they are not communicating face-to-face. For that matter, I have encountered horrid personalities that I imagine were kind-hearted prior to being subjected to cumulative professional trauma. We see withering book reviews, contemptuous online semantic debates, mass emailed negative rants and manifestos, and nasty retorts in social media contexts. These are in addition to the obnoxious and undermining manipulations, passive aggressive and withholding treatment of colleagues in our own departments, and the litany of other dysfunctional behaviours infecting our institutional and disciplinary homes.

I will mention that I hold an M.A. in counselling and a Ph.D. in the study of higher education. As such, I routinely consider intimate and systemic perspectives and experiences simultaneously. When someone shares a difficult personal or professional experience (distinguished rhetorically here for clarity because I view these as entwined), I believe it is important to respond with sincere interest, sympathy, solidarity, and advice (if they want it) while also examining the conditions that enabled their experience. When possible, we should look for ways to interrupt the causes for these negative experiences. When that is not possible, we should try to mitigate their impact through substantive or symbolic means.

For instance, when I am counselling doctoral students or junior faculty (i.e. my “ministry”), I often use humour to ease their stress. One of my jokes is, “*the worse they treat you, the more prestigious your degree [or post].*” Embedded in this joke is a persistent “elephant” in our collective “academic room,” which is that the very dynamics that terrorize so many of us are also the ones that underwrite our professional standing. As well, they are often maladapted attempts to work out personal problems we should address in more healthy ways, or in more appropriate venues. It is too easy to find people with whom to commiserate about this, with our requisite nodding together about the seeming impossibility of changing it. The exponentially growing fixation with impact factors (see [this](#) Impact Blog post for an excellent treatment of that subject) further entrenches this learned helplessness, threatening any possibility of achieving (would “restoring” be ahistorical?) the Collegium that our recruitment into this business so seductively promised.

To make matters worse, many academics are annoyed or even contemptuous of undergraduate students and teaching in general, as if they are distractions from our “real work.” This is unacceptable and cancerous. Like many of you, I enjoy my research very much. It is an opportunity to engage deeply with questions I have about certain phenomena. But, I LOVE my students...yes, I said it! I am a tenured, Full Professor who mainly teaches graduate seminars, and I have resorted to taking adjunct posts at nearby universities to have opportunities to teach first year introductory courses. It is one of the most wonderful honours to me to be able to introduce young students to the questions I am exploring in my research, and their reactions are both affirming and instrumental to guiding my inquiry. I have heard very scornful remarks or sarcastic jokes at academic conferences about the “chore” of teaching, or colleagues regarding students as “nuisances.” I wonder how much of this rhetoric is authentic, or the extent to which colleagues’ jokes are a performance we collectively socialize into each other in order to signal seriousness and legitimacy.

Courage is, by definition, not the absence of fear, but rather the decision to do something despite that fear. Frankly, I am not afraid to share what I have written here, because it remains very puzzling to me that these things happen in the first place. As a critical social theorist however, I understand that these dynamics serve a purpose, but I am arguing that the purpose is short sighted. I would argue that our incivility blights our profession and serves those who decimate academic funding by invoking the Ivory Tower trope and pointing to our bad behaviour as evidence. In my view, one can gain even more satisfaction—and eminence—by being both good at the work, and a great person with whom to work. Rather than droning on about the impossibility of changing the Academy, I will ironically (because I am Jewish) invoke Luke 4:23: “Physician...heal thyself!” and suggest we all start with the courage to be kind.

*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the Impact of Social Science blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please review our [Comments Policy](#) if you have any concerns on posting a comment below.*

## **About the Author**

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