



Photo: Allison Gerrard

## Why am I so offended?

**By Allison Gerrard**

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I walked into band practice certain that I was going to hear criticism. Our summer concert had been scheduled for the following Saturday and I'd missed several practices because of my travels for the Moral Courage Project. Mind you, I'd kept up with practicing. Still, I imagined that my absence made a few people resentful.

Arriving early, I saw the teacher sitting at his desk with his back to me. "Hi Scott!" I chirped. "Don't worry, I've got the songs down!" Without turning to me, he responded dryly, "Uh-huh."

'Great,' I thought. 'He's mad.'

I placed my phone on a tripod to record our session. That way, I could watch the video later in the week to ensure I was playing the right arrangement. Waiting for everyone else to stream in, I sat down at my drum set.

Our band has two drummers so that more of us get the opportunity to play. At the end of each song, the drummers raise their sticks high in air, preparing each other, and the rest of the band, to hit the final note. But on one of the songs, my co-drummer, Katie, didn't do this. Which meant I played that final note late.

“Katie,” I whispered, “you’re supposed to look over at me.”

She faced me and laughed, “Not on that song.” Then she looked away.

‘What? How dismissive,’ I thought. ‘I know the song well, so I don’t deserve that!’ Just as I suspected, she was irritated with me and it was oozing out in passive-aggressive ways.

‘Whatever,’ I told myself. ‘What. Ever.’ From that moment on, I gave Katie the cold shoulder. In the parking lot afterwards, she tried to strike up a conversation. I engaged. Superficially. It was a short chat.

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The next day, while practicing along with the video that I’d recorded, I saw that it captured my interaction with Katie at the drums. Except, what I picked up in the video was nothing like what I experienced. Katie didn’t look or sound like she was dismissing me. Her laugh was playful and polite. She didn’t direct any irritation at me. Again and again, I watched the video, detecting not one ounce of condescension or animosity from her.



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I sat still for a moment, then I shook my head. My perception at band practice was dead wrong.

Looking back, I realize that my thoughts and feelings before practice – what I’d brought into the room – shaped my “reality.” I don’t like letting people down and I was angry with myself for missing too many practices. I expected my bandmates to be upset with me, just as I was with myself. I expected them to think less of me, just as I was thinking less of myself. I expected that they’d give me the silent treatment, so I gave it to Katie. My expectations framed my experiences.

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How often do human beings indulge in some version of this, be it at work, at home, or, like me, when collaborating with others for fun? Let's be honest: We do it a lot. In fact, we're wired for self-deception.

Our brains exist to ensure our survival, largely by helping us save energy at every turn. That means the brain doesn't interpret the here and now as a unique situation. Just the opposite. The brain decides what's happening by judging it based on patterns inherited from our past.

If your facial expression or tone of voice reminds me of someone I don't like, my brain will instantly tell me that I shouldn't like you, either. To give you a chance is to "waste" precious energy. (No wonder the word "prejudice" is rooted in "pre-judgment"!) Likewise, if I pre-judge a situation because that's what I'm expecting it to be, my brain will find for me exactly what I'm seeking. To seek something new is to expend precious energy, which the brain would rather "protect" me from doing. It prefers that I stay comfortable by deluding myself than get out of my comfort zone by challenging my preconceptions.

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These delusions run rampant in my profession of diversity, equity and inclusion. Take microaggressions, for example. One thought leader describes them as the “everyday slights, insults, put-downs, invalidations and offensive behaviors that people of marginalized groups experience in daily interactions with generally well-intentioned people who may be unaware of their impact.” I can understand why the question, “Where are you from” amounts to a microaggression if it’s repeatedly posed even though the answer, “I’m from here” is repeatedly given.

But there are other situations in which it might need to be asked — just once — to clarify context; for instance, a nurse asking her patient’s advocate so that the right translator can be found. In that case, is it really the question that’s harmful? Or is it the story told about the question that’s harmful?

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Which brings me back to the drama that my brain created about Katie, my co-drummer. Since that day when I treated her as a player in my pre-fabricated drama, I’ve cleared the air with her. Thankfully, she didn’t notice my unfair behavior. I’m so glad that it didn’t hurt her.



What I'm not thrilled about is how easily I, a teacher of Moral Courage, forgot to practice it in the moment. Moral Courage means looking within before lashing out. When we experience someone as offensive, it's healthy to ask ourselves, 'Why am I so offended? Might I be missing something about myself? Or about the other person? Can I clarify the situation by asking a question instead of jumping to a conclusion?'

Because I'm human, there will be times that I react rather than respond — even when I know better. But if I can't show Moral Courage then and there, I can always show it afterward: by sincerely owning what my brain has contributed to the situation.

It's a lesson that I'll bang the drum about all week long.

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