

## Choose Your Battles Wisely

*Manners are a sensitive awareness of the feelings of others.  
If you have that awareness, you have good manners, no  
matter what fork you use.*

Emily Post

Waiting in the snake-like coffee line in the Towers' lobby is neither enjoyable nor exciting. What is supposed to be one line that bends only in half, usually bends in threes, even fours, with anxious students too impatient to wait passing by. Yet, today, the room is empty and the only footsteps I hear are my own. Instead of settling for the plain-Jane coffee I typically brew after class, I decide to take advantage of this rare occasion and treat myself to a seasonal drink. As I wait at the counter, the barista says not a single word to me. She notices the presence of someone—I can see her using her peripherals—but continues cleaning in silence. The collection of syrup choices are lined up next to each other like children in gym class waiting to be picked next. Some are filled to the brim, and some are left with just enough for one or two servings. Seven... Eight... Nine bottles... Is a simple “One minute please,” or some type of acknowledgment too much to ask for?

“What do you want?” she suddenly asks in an *I don't really want to help you* tone.

I hesitate, taken aback by the bluntness.

“Hun, spit it out.”

“Tall, Salted, Caramel Latte.”

The lobby is still exceptionally peaceful; the only sounds I can hear are those of coffee being poured, a bit of scuffling, and the deep impatient sigh that escapes my mouth. My wristwatch reads 7:33, even after the third time I've glanced at it. When she reaches over the counter to hand me the cup, I snatch it without a “thank you” or second glance.

A few hours later, a woman backs into me in the Towers' entrance. Her brown hair whips around as she turns with a sympathetic smile and her eyes slightly frowned. “I'm so sorry,” she exclaims, gently placing her hand on my shoulder. We make eye contact. I recognize her face but not the attitude from this morning, and smile politely.

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*Every human has four endowments- self awareness,  
conscience, independent will and creative imagination.  
These give us the ultimate human freedom... The power to  
choose, to respond, to change.*

Stephen Covey

Everyone has settled into their seats. The chairs form a misshapen oval that allows everyone to be both seen and heard during class discussion. Some cling to warm cups of coffee, sipping slowly to return the warmth to their bodies stolen by the early morning's chilly air. Others seem to be struggling to fight off the strong desire to close their eyes and drift back into sleep. The rest anxiously riffle through loose papers and retrieve their work to hand in. We're asked to take a moment to focus on a recent response to Assignment 2—the first complete student essay that's been distributed—and prepare points for discussion. Then the conversation begins.

“Well, I really disagree with their argument because *personally, I enjoy Hemingway's A Farewell to Arms*, which they are criticizing. Maybe I'm being biased but I just don't like where they're going.”

“*I like* things more structured and laid out. So I really think they should have had a statement that outlined what they were going to talk about in their paper.”

*What about the possibility of suspense?* I keep this question to myself, timid to break the flow of conversation.

“Agreed. *I also don't like* how long their sentences are because *I prefer* them to be concise.”

As I look around, I see some students slump a little further back in their chairs. With crossed arms and cheerless faces, it is clear they will not be contributing to the discussion, and will continue listening to and observing our peers. Others quietly jot down notes in every white space possible as our classmates make comments. Spread out among the oval, those who are confident and familiar with the material, carry on the class discussion. I learn more and more about what each individual favors in a paper, as well as their attitude toward Hemingway. I try to envision some modifications by applying their comments but can't come up with a sound change. I'm not sure *what* to change, other than maybe the author's opinion of Hemingway's work? Is it obligatory to change one's viewpoint or style to suit the desires of an *individual* reader or even the *majority*?

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*Learning to read books—or pictures, or films—is not just a matter of acquiring information from texts, it is a matter of learning to read and write the texts of our lives. Reading, seen this way, is not merely an academic experience but a way of accepting the fact that our lives are of limited duration and that whatever satisfaction we may achieve in life must come through the strength of our engagement with what is around us.*

Robert Scholes

I clear my desk of the scattered papers, random trinkets, and flyers that clubs have shoved in my hands as advertisement, and open my laptop to take a minute from this busy day for myself. Sitting down heavily to one of the precious cards postmarked from Afghanistan, I smile at the funny image of a dog leading to a thoughtful message inside. As always, the left is covered in black capital letters—a personal message to me—and the right is marked with the card’s standard “thinking of you” message, the date, and his signature. A “bing” from my computer notifies me that an e-mail from him has come in too. I decide to make some coffee before I read it, slip on my purple flip-flops, and go through the procedure without giving it a second thought. Slowly working my way around the circular hallway to the water fountain, I pass a few floor mates. It’s a busy time of day, so we smile and move our hand in a single wave motion. While filling the coffee pot I stare at the blank wall ahead, waiting. My mind begins to wander and I think of this soldier. I make my way back to the room and close the door behind me.

As I sit in Pittsburgh focusing on my work, trying to stay afloat until it’s time to go home, he sits in Afghanistan essentially doing the same. The time of day that I drink a cup of afternoon coffee and read his bi-weekly update is the time he finally lies down with another day of his tour behind him. My room, set to a temperature of about 75 degrees, is warm and cozy. Pictures of friends, family, and memories conceal the white, concrete walls and provide a sense of home. Soft, orange decorative lights illuminate the room and a pumpkin candle dominates my sense of smell. I pour the water into the coffee maker, press “start”, and sit down to open the e-mail. Immediately I become so engulfed that I don’t break away from reading to focus on the commotion down the hall. I don’t respond to the piercing, beeping signal that my coffee has finished brewing. I just continue reading.

I've kept my knowledge of the war in Afghanistan to a minimum. What little information I have encountered has given me negative attitudes toward its culture. This, plus the occasional typo and odd phrase that I find in areas of his e-mails, provides an unintended sense of imagery. I imagine him rushing back to a small, square, concrete building after his last meeting of the day, relieved to have safely made it back to his room for the night. Though a list of work related e-mails, phone calls, and documents wait for him to complete by the night's end, pictures of his family and an abundance of messages from loved ones remind him to take a few precious minutes to send an e-mail home recapping the week's events.

``ADORABLE``

``... TOOK THE LIFE OF FIVE CHILDREN, WHOSE FACES AND VOICES I  
KNOW``

``... THOSE SAME CHILDREN THAT I PUSHED AWAY DID INDEED SERVE AS OUR  
BODY GUARD AND DID IN FACT PROTECT US``<sup>1</sup>

I had not expected this.

``ALL OF US HAVE BEEN AFFECTED BY THE LOSS OF SUCH INNOCENT LIVES  
BY SOMEONE WHO WAS RADICALIZED AND CONVINCED THAT HE WAS DOING THE WORK  
OF HIS GOD. MAY HE BURN IN HELL.``

I sit in disbelief at what I've just finished.

I hear my roommate swipe her keycard and walk in, but don't bother looking up.

“Hey!”

“Hey...” I sluggishly respond.

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<sup>1</sup> This and subsequent references written in all capital letters refer to the attached e-mail.

“Update 8/9”. 10 Sept. 12. E-mail.

“What’s going on?”

I turn my computer towards her. We sit for a few minutes in silence.

“Wow... when he says ‘THEY RUN UP TO YOU WHILE YOU ARE WALKING AND TRY TO SELL YOU SMALL TRINKETS OR SCARVES’, I instantly picture these little kids running through the gravel along a silver gated fence, reaching out to the soldiers. It’s a pretty vivid image for me.”

I nod.

As she moves to her desk, she quietly adds, “This is what makes me wish we weren’t any part of the fight.”

“I know.” Those are the only words I can think of to say in response.

Unable to focus, I vacuum the room—twice—and sit back down again to start my homework. But, five minutes later, I stand before my closet’s empty hangers and shelves with a pile of colorful clothing on the floor next to me. At first, I decide to organize by color, but then decide it looks too uniform. Or would it be better to organize my shirts by the lengths of their sleeves? The moments spent folding, I think of this soldier’s e-mail, unable to escape it. I begin to feel a sense of shame about routinely fretting over tests, deadlines, friends, and minor pains—all things that, at the end of the day, can easily be escaped from in my sleep. Those children no longer have this privilege, and neither does this soldier. Going to sleep for him includes worrying about what could come unexpectedly in the night when he finally lets his guard down to get much needed rest. Will images of these children now dominate his dreams?

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*Let us not look back in anger, nor forward in fear, but  
around in awareness.*

James Thurber

“Mom’s in the car ready to go, I just have to grab my I.D. card!” my sister exclaims, running past me. I roll my eyes. *It’s always something.* She hurries down the stairs and we run outside, pulling the door behind us so quickly that it shakes the garage door when it slams shut.

“Will you slow down!” my mom shouts in more of a command than a question as the car rocks

and adjusts to the newly added weight on either side.

We pull out of the driveway, moving through the neighborhood and onto the highway. I look out the window. Nice cars. Happy people. The sun. THE TRAFFIC? “Oh you’ve got to be kidding me. We have to make it there by 4:45 and it’s already 4:15!” I scold my mother, as if it will change anything.

Finally, we reach our exit. “L.V.I. Airport, here we come baby!” my mother shouts. I turn and smile at my sister in the back seat who is just about to finish the freshly baked chocolate chip cookie I gave her before we left. She raises the last bite in a toast-like gesture right before shoving it in her mouth.

We veer left and enter the temporary parking section. I’m already half way across the parking lot when I hear the last of the car-doors slam shut and the sound of its being locked. “It’s 4:25! Let’s move!” I yell at them walking—backwards. We hurry up the steps, two at a time, and wait in line to get passes from the woman at the Delta airlines counter. What should have been a five-minute procedure turns into fifteen minutes of waiting for the printer to miraculously work. *Can’t we just use a different printer or something?*

“Okay you’re good to go! Down the hall, take the escalator down, then the escalator up, and make a right. Hurry!”

We grab the passes and hustle through the airport running smack into the end of the security line.

“A line?! There’s never a line!” my mom says exasperatedly.

We show our passes, I.D.’s, and move forward. All is well until...

“Excuse me, ma’m. You’ve been chosen for a random search. It will only take a few moments, please step to the side,” the security guard says to my mom.

“Look, we have someone coming in from Afghanistan that we’re trying to meet. Can’t you just ‘randomly pick’ someone that’s actually getting *on* a plane?!” I argue with the guard and receive a wide-eyed glare from my mother, who is pursing her lips, trying hard not to laugh.

“Please, it’ll just take a minute, I’m sorry.”

I sigh heavily while the guard runs the electronic scanner over our cellphones. “Okay, all done. You guys have a great day!” she says to our backs.

We make it to the gate with two minutes to spare. Every moment that goes by, I find myself wondering what surprise, if any, may come from that tunnel. A man emerges. *Not him*. A few more moments go by—nothing. A military uniform appears from the white tunnel, with the familiar small,

muscular stature. *Dad*. I feel an immediate downward tug on the corners of my mouth followed by tears. Finally, I feel my dad's embrace, having gone six months without it. When we finally let go, I recognize that the entire plane-full worth of passengers waiting at the gate have witnessed a precious moment in my life. I feel almost angry I have forgotten to hide the emotion as I normally do. *What are they thinking?*

A few weeks later, I awake to an extremely bright morning. The sun reflecting off of the patches of snow is almost blinding. I dress in comfortable jeans, a t-shirt, and the sweatshirt my dad gave me from a French group he had worked with in Afghanistan. When I look in the mirror, I notice my attire of the day consists of all black clothing.

While folding my pajamas on my bed, I see movement outside of my room. I see the darkened silhouette of my dad on the wall behind him. His shadow is still for a moment, and then slowly becomes smaller as he makes his way down the steps. I hear the familiar clanging of his dog-tags drifting off. It is a sound I could distinguish anywhere—the bell sounding his return home from work throughout my childhood. But six months ago those dog tags signaled it was time to say good-bye. I recall the conversation we had just a couple days before he left that time; it took place on Father's Day.

The broken-words that had haunted my thoughts and dreams for weeks had finally forced their way out of my mouth: "I... I feel like... *you* feel, you're not going to come... back..."

Heavy silence followed, as I waited, hoping for some sort of reassurance.

"Well, you know... I don't want to be naïve," he said gravely.

That moment, and the moments to follow, walk through my mind at a slow, painful pace. I think of all the other words that I couldn't get myself to speak at that time and find myself on the floor writing.

"Dear Dad," I start.

Before I seal the envelope, I place an Evil-Eye charm inside for him to wear as protection. I'm not sure if it truly protects us, but I can't wait to hear it contribute a soft "ping" to the clang of his dog tags in six months.

"It's not good bye, it's see you later.

Love, Lex"

## Afterword

To properly sum up the creative process that resulted in my composition, I find a quote by William Stafford quite appropriate: “A writer is not so much someone who has something to say as he is someone who has found a process that will bring about new things he would not have thought of if he had not started to stay them.”

The themes and ideas portrayed throughout this piece have evolved with each and every draft. Though it began as a piece about appreciating the style and perspectives of others, it gradually became a discovery of aspects of myself I had never thought about through a narrative voice. I have always written well enough to get the job done, but never considered myself an invested writer. Yet now each time I complete a new draft, I find myself coming back to rearrange, rewrite, and add on. The February 1<sup>st</sup> deadline has approached and I experience the same sense of apprehension I feel before every submission. I am reluctantly handing it over thinking, “[i]f only there were a couple more days, time for just another run at it, perhaps then...” (Murray)



Full Text of E-mail Message Cited on Pages 3-4

Update 8/9

Hello friends and family – it has been too long since I knocked one of these out and since I promised my mom she would hear from me.. I needed to deliver! Where to begin??? There has been no change so far in the Ministerial leadership of the MoI. The Minister having been voted out of office several weeks ago, and then appointed as acting Minister while the President nominated replacements, has officially been announced as the next Minister of Defense. They have yet to select the date to appear in front of the Parliament. I am hopeful it will be this Saturday. We shall see. As to the question, am I going with him if he is confirmed as the Minister of Defense . . . it is still yet unanswered. We cannot put the cart before the horse.

So perhaps many of you heard about the young Afghan man who blew himself up and killed 6 and wounded an additional 4 people. Several of them were small children, who I have seen many times along that road between my base camp and the 4 Star Generals. They run up to you while you are walking and try to sell you small trinkets or scarves. They are all adorable and most people buy something from them. I must be honest though in saying that I have never been fond of the cultures where beggars try and encourage you to purchase something from them. From my earliest days in Iraq, Egypt, and Tunisia and now here, there is just something about a person who is persistently hounding you to death to buy something or give them something that I find extremely irritating. Add to that the dimension of the BBIED (body born improvised explosive devise) where an individual straps an explosive device under their clothing and when in proximity of you, blows it up.

So I have always steered clear of the children and young adults who try and come up to you during the walk for those reasons. So on Saturday while walking to the gym at 11:40, I hear an explosion and assume it is a bomber outside the base who has blown himself up and a gate guard or two, however this was not the case. Instead, he took the life of 5 children, who faces and voices I know. “Mister, Mister, I will be your body guard” is something they always use to tell us as we walked down the street. You would smile at them and ask how is it that a young boy of 7 or 8 is capable of being my body guard you might ask? Here is a quote on the local news as to why no American’s were killed during this attack.

“According to witnesses, the teenager detonated earlier than planned probably because the children around him recognised that he was wearing a bomb-laden vest and began pointing at him, calling out that

he was a bomber. He became nervous as the children continued to shout and security were taking notice, so he triggered the bomb.”

So in fact those same children that I pushed away did indeed be our body guard and did in fact protect us. You cannot believe the effect it has had on the NATO forces here at the base. All of us have been affected by the loss of such innocent lives by someone who was radicalized and convinced that he was doing the work of his god. May he burn in hell.

Well that is about it for this one. Thanks again as always for all the great packages and cards that you are sending. Nothing excites me more than getting an email from our mail clerk letting me know I have a package or a letter. Thanks for lifting my morale!

Take care,

## Acknowledgments

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Lastly, I would also like to thank my dad for providing me with the experiences and exchange of e-mails that have inspired this piece, and for always supporting me no matter the task or how far away he is.

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