A SHEMARA BOOK

The Trouble with Other Humans

The Ego, the Expectations, and the Everyday Art of Getting Along

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READER SAMPLE



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This book was developed with ChatGPT, including AI-generated draft prose and editorial assistance. Sheila Mathews Raman directs the work and is responsible for its publication. Research sources are acknowledged in the reading notes; no cited organisation endorses this book.

Included here: the prologue and Chapter 1, followed by the source note relevant to that chapter. The full book contains fifteen chapters, a thirty-day practice and reflection pages.

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Prologue — the incident of the missing spoon

There are disputes that deserve a commission of enquiry. The disappearance of a teaspoon is not usually among them.

But on a perfectly ordinary morning, in an entirely imaginary home, Arun opened the cutlery drawer and asked, 'Where have all the small spoons gone?'

Meera was pouring tea. 'How should I know?'

'I am only asking.'

'No, you are asking in that tone.'

'What tone?'

'The tone that says I have stolen the spoons.'

'You are making it an issue.'

'You made it an issue the moment you asked.'

The spoon, wherever it was, might have been astonished to discover that it represented years of accumulated domestic grievance. Within three minutes the conversation had travelled from kitchen utensils to whether Arun ever appreciated Meera's work, whether Meera took every question personally, and whether either family had taught its children basic courtesy. A teaspoon had achieved what several difficult relatives had failed to accomplish: it had united two people in a shared commitment to feeling misunderstood.

Of course, the real issue was not the spoon. It was the meaning attached to the question. Arun heard an ordinary inquiry. Meera heard an accusation. Arun experienced her response as unreasonable hostility. Meera experienced his surprise as denial of a familiar pattern. Each thought the other had introduced the trouble. Each could tell the story convincingly from their own chair.

Now imagine a different version. Arun opens the drawer, notices the absence of spoons and says, 'I can't find a small spoon. Have you seen one?' Meera replies, 'Not today. We keep losing them, don't we?' Arun

laughs: 'Apparently we are supplying the whole village.' They look in the washing area and find three.

Nothing heroic occurred. Neither person completed a twelve-week programme in emotional regulation. They simply refrained from attaching an accusation to a practical inconvenience.

But life is not always so simple. A missing spoon can be a harmless misunderstanding; it can also sit inside a longer pattern in which one person carries an unfair share of work and receives constant criticism. The task is not to dismiss Meera's feelings or declare Arun innocent. It is to investigate the actual relationship before selecting a response.

What follows is not a recipe for avoiding every argument. That would require people to have identical needs, identical memories, identical temperaments, and possibly identical digestive systems. It is an invitation to become more skilful when difference arrives at the door.

For the trouble with other humans is rarely that they are human. It is that we expect them to be human in exactly our preferred way.

CHAPTER 01

Everybody thinks they are the reasonable one

The window and the constitution

At eight in the morning, one person opens a window because the room feels stuffy. Another closes it because the wind is cold. Both are making sensible adjustments to their own experience. Within seconds each is privately wondering how the other reached adulthood with so little practical judgement.

The window is not a moral philosopher. It cannot decide which body temperature is superior. It merely exposes two preferences that had lived peacefully apart until they needed to share one room.

A great deal of relationship friction begins at this level. We make a small leap from 'this is comfortable for me' to 'this is how a sensible person behaves.' Then we make a larger leap from 'you behave differently' to 'there is something wrong with you.' The leaps happen so quickly that we seldom hear ourselves jumping.

Consider the word normal. A family that talks loudly may call quiet people secretive. A family that speaks softly may call lively people aggressive. In one household, visitors are expected to help themselves to tea. In another, doing so would be considered an insult to the host's hospitality. Neither custom is a universal commandment. But when people leave their childhood homes, they often take the local constitution with them and are surprised to learn that nobody else voted on it.

The private headquarters of common sense

We become experts in the worlds that formed us. That expertise is useful; it allows us to predict routines and move through everyday life without negotiating every spoon, towel and greeting. Trouble comes when expertise becomes authority. We stop saying, 'In my experience,' and begin announcing, 'Obviously.'

'Obviously you should call if you are late.' Perhaps. But how late? Five minutes or an hour? Who is waiting? Is there a safety concern? Does the person have a reliable phone connection? The courtesy may be real; the rule may still need to be agreed upon.

'Obviously parents should be consulted.' About what? An invitation to dinner? A home loan? The choice of a partner? A couple can deeply respect parents and reasonably disagree over the degree of parental involvement. The issue is not solved by one person's assertion that respect has only one proper shape.

The mature question is not, 'Which of us is normal?' It is, 'What standard are we using, and did we ever agree to use it?'

How an interpretation disguises itself as a fact

Suppose your colleague replies to a long email with two words: 'Noted. Thanks.' You may interpret the reply as cold, dismissive or irritated. Another person may consider it efficient and courteous. The visible event is two words. The insult, if there is one, is presently a hypothesis.

Research on attributions in close relationships has long explored how people explain a partner's conduct and how these explanations relate to relationship quality [R1]. This does not mean every interpretation is mistaken. It means an interpretation should be recognised as an interpretation before it is promoted to evidence.

A helpful habit is to separate three things: what happened, what I concluded, and what I need to check. 'She ended the call after ten minutes' is an event. 'She is tired of me' is an interpretation. 'Were you busy, or is something bothering you?' is an enquiry. Those three sentences lead to different futures.

The secret pleasure of being right

Being right has a practical purpose. If a bridge is unsafe, someone should say so. If accounts do not balance, somebody must notice. But being right can also supply a private reward: it lets us feel competent, superior or vindicated. The reward may become so attractive that we stop asking whether the point matters.

Picture a couple driving to a friend's home. One insists that the turn was two kilometres earlier; the other continues. The journey is only marginally longer. Yet at the next junction the passenger says, 'I told you.' An announcement has been made. History has been corrected. The nation may now proceed.

What was gained? Perhaps nothing beyond temporary satisfaction. What was spent? A little goodwill. Relationships rarely collapse because of one unnecessary victory. They are sometimes worn away by hundreds of them.

The object is not to become indifferent to truth. It is to ask whether truth is being served or merely used as a decorative sword.

The ethical limit of tolerance

Some differences are matters of taste. Others concern fairness, consent and safety. There is a world of difference between disliking someone's untidy desk and being subjected to humiliating insults. We should not use 'different perspectives' to flatten that difference.

A useful sorting question is: Is this a preference, an agreement, a responsibility, a right, or a safety issue? Preferences invite compromise. Agreements invite accountability. Responsibilities invite fair division. Rights invite respect. Safety issues may require outside assistance, protection or withdrawal from the situation. An intelligent response begins by identifying the kind of problem we have.

A small experiment: the respectable person's rules

Complete the sentence 'A decent person always…' ten times. Then classify each answer. Is it a moral obligation, a practical arrangement, a personal preference or a custom inherited from your childhood? Choose two rules and ask how a fair-minded person from a different household might see them. Do not try to surrender every standard. Try to discover which standards need a conversation rather than a proclamation.

The uncomfortable question is not whether the other person is reasonable. It is whether you have mistaken familiarity for law. Your childhood was a home. It was not an international standards committee.

Source note

[R1] Fincham, F. D., & Bradbury, T. N. (1992). Assessing attributions in marriage: The Relationship Attribution Measure. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 62(3), 457–468. https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/1560337/ . Also: Bradbury, T. N., & Fincham, F. D. (1992). Attributions and behavior in marital interaction. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 63(4), 613–628. https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/1447688/ . These studies identify associations in married couples; they do not prove that a particular interpretation caused a particular argument.

Continue reading

The full book continues with emotional history, unspoken expectations, resentment, listening, apologies, boundaries, practical repair and everyday relationships. It also includes a thirty-day practice and reflection pages. Visit the Writings & Books section of The Human Canvas Academy for release information. This private review sample does not provide a live purchase link.