

What is Your Social Footprint?

Yesterday while enjoying coffee by a beach, my wife and I watched an enjoyable series of related social interactions. A grandfather and two young granddaughters (or so they appeared to me as an outsider) parked their car and got out. Half the car was blocking an entrance to a parking garage, well over the painted yellow writing "NO PARKING". The grandfather took no notice of this, getting the girls, no older than 5 or 6, out of the car. As he continued preparing for their day at the beach they started to quiz him about where the car was parked. One even paced out the portion of the car that was in the NO PARKING area and challenged him about it. He finally took on board what they were saying and bundled them back into the back-seat of the car, belted them in, and got in the car himself. Just as he was starting his engine, a car across the road in a legitimate car parking space started up and pulled out. Granddad reversed his car back to exit his space when another car came along, indicating it would take the newly vacated park. Granddad had not even indicated he was moving, let alone that he wanted that space, but he put his hands together, as if pleading with the man who

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Abstract

In every interaction with others we have a choice, whether to add or diminish social value, function aggressively or with compassion. Each act of compassion strengthens our freedom and that of those we interact with.

Keywords

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had just arrived to take the space. With a smile directed at Granddad the man granted granddad the space and carried on. Granddad and the girls parked in the legitimate spot and then went off happily to play on the beach. Any number of those events could have played out differently. A few examples:

- Granddad leaves his car in the original, bad parking position and someone is blocked that needs to exit or enter the parking building. Granddad gets towed and possibly fined. Unhappy outcome.
- Granddad could have argued with the granddaughters that they should respect their elders, ignored them, rather than giving them an experience of their own legitimacy, and the beach could have been a less than happy experience. The girls clearly liked their granddad. It was great that they could reason with him and have him take on board what they clearly identified as a problem. Granddad added a lot of value to his granddaughters' self-concept.
- The man in the car, with legitimate right to claim the car space, could have. That would be a neutral result for him, parking and knowing he was justified, but instead he made someone else's day. He added a lot of value in that moment to granddad and the girls with some inconvenience to himself.

Counter that with a story my wife then told me, having watched this episode, of how she was waiting to turn into a car parking space a few days ago, paused and indicating to allow the exiting car the time and space it needed to reverse out. Once the car was out and before she could move in, a man sped into the space, stealing it from her. From an ego perspective he may feel he won the space, battled for or stole it, perhaps feeling smug with himself. It reminds me of a quote from

Nelson Mandela: "I am not truly free if I am taking away someone else's freedom, just as surely as I am not free when my freedom is taken away from me. The oppressed and the oppressor alike are robbed of their humanity" (Mandela, 2013). While not in the same league as the experiences of Nelson Mandela, stealing a car space is to be aggressive, to invade another's space, to rob them of what is theirs, to withhold one's own compassion, and to diminish humanity in that moment.

In every moment where we interact with another human being we leave our social footprint. Does yours add value, or does it leave a polluted mark on this planet. There is enormous concern and attention placed on ecological footprints, and we often hear that as individuals we cannot make a difference. It's a global problem. The social footprint you leave is entirely up to you and the choices you make and the actions you take in the moment with another being. Do you pollute or improve this planet by being here? Do you recognise the impact you have on others? Do you choose to improve the experience of those around you? Are you so focused on yourself and what you want that you fail to miss precious moments of value adding opportunity with another being? If we were to check your social ledger, would your social footprint show you as reducing the net value of social interactions or of positively contributing? Do you experience compassion towards others or do you remain isolated and attentive to your own world alone? Each moment with another is an opportunity to, through even the smallest of choices, make a positive contribution to your life's social footprint.

Reference

Mandela, N. (2013). *Long Walk To Freedom*. Great Britain: Little, Brown and Company (UK) Ltd.