

A

SERVE

CONSCIOUS

GUIDE

5 STEPS TO
GIVING
EMPOWERED
SERVICE.

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INTRODUCTION.

This is a list of reminders and tools for anyone in the service industry, or feels like they play a serving role somewhere in their lives. One of our main obstacles to enjoying the act of service is the feeling that we are the lower member of a power dynamic. Especially since so many situations where we serve, we have a professional obligation to tolerate rudeness without retaliating.

This may feel like weakness, as though we are allowing ourselves to be diminished, but it is even stronger to not indulge the “wounded feeling” that fuels a righteous response. And this doesn’t mean being the meek, subservient person you worry you may have to be. In these situations, you can still interact skillfully, without being contentious. You can maintain the higher ground and come out stronger.

INTRODUCTION.

Our success in these situations depends on the truths we can remember to bring to every moment. These truths can be used to shape our perceptions and thinking, which is ultimately what determines whether we are “lowly” or “empowered”. It’s all ultimately about how we choose to perceive ourselves. There is no one outside of us that is responsible for giving or taking this power away - it’s just a question of whether we choose to claim it or surrender it.

The following list is for any service situation, even one where the people you serve are gracious and appreciative. Actually, these tools should be especially applied to that situation. And the first item on the list will elaborate on this:

ONE.

SERVE WITH ZERO EXPECTATION OF SOMETHING IN RETURN.

You aren't serving for people to tell you you're awesome. If you expect gratitude, or even the most elementary of manners in return for something that you do for someone, then you are setting a trap for yourself. This is the trap of expectation. Firstly, this corrupts the good service you want to provide. It takes a selfless act and renders it into something that is ultimately selfish - service in exchange for some amount of appreciation. Now, service is ultimately selfish, because doing it with intention and purpose will always make us feel good. But requiring that the person you are serving provide you with anything more than simply receiving the act of generosity, is selfish.

We all have our own threshold of what would be considered "enough" gratitude, but that threshold will keep moving and keep requiring more if you position yourself in the mode of "expecting something in return". This is a trap, tethering your sense of yourself to the validation of others. It puts you in a needy position, that ends up never feeling good or appreciated enough. Always available to be disappointed, always sticking your head out to be petted and

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whimpering internally if it's not caressed in just the right way. No one knows what you need and are not likely to hit that target. Not only do they deserve a break, but so do you, from this rollercoaster of validation ups and downs.

If you want practice with this, then try wandering around Indian cities, giving money to beggars. They are unlikely to say thank you like they do in America. This will not supply you with the usual sense of immediate gratification. While in India, I spent some time doing this and the process forced me to connect with the act of giving as gratifying in and of itself. The receiver's expressed level of gratefulness had nothing to do with it. I realized that I could also not assume that they were necessarily ungrateful. They would eat that day and be grateful for the food - do they really need to have my image in mind as they chew?

In India they have a practice known as Karma Yoga: doing what you know is right without any attachment to the result. You

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acknowledge life is bigger than you and your expectations, and results will not fit into your very personal (and often highly conditioned) realm of preferences. You may have your idea of what is right (that's what drives your acts of good service), but what the other does with that is not only out of your control, but none of your business.

The “bible” of Karma Yoga called the Bhagavad Gita teaches of this ultimate state of the warrior yogi “who is calm and even-minded during pain and pleasure”. Someone says you're awesome: neato. Someone says you suck: neato. Learn. Move on. Don't waste your energy wishing something different happened. Cultivating that steady state of peace that is “unruffled by these fleeting things” can be explored with these techniques.

If you serve simply because you want to give, then you are free. You will never be taken advantage of because you are only doing what

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you want to do You will always be taken advantage of if you're doing things you don't want to do, but will maybe, if you are lucky, get something back that maybe (but probably won't) hits the fragile moving target of your expectations.

TWO.

CLAIM YOUR PARENTAL ROLE.

So claim it. Service means someone needs you in some way, so already you are in a position of power. Now it's just a matter of managing that relationship responsibly. The dynamic that emerges has been especially evident to me throughout my career in bars/restaurants. It was possibly Danny Meyer, the legendary restaurateur and service thought leader, that first drew everyone's attention to the deep, almost primal, psychological needs of a guest. They come to a restaurant seeking not only a very basic level of social belonging (which means validation of their existence by others), but also the needs of childhood and even infancy. Eye contact, a hug, and a meal are essential to receive from our mothers from the time of our birth (the first two are vital for mental and emotional development).

Whatever they seek, the guest has put themselves in a vulnerable position of needing something. And your ability to satisfy that need quite literally puts you in a parental role. Misstepping in the satisfaction of a need may trigger the same response as a child that

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has been abandoned by a parent - in fact, it may very well be an echo of their own deep abandonment issues. If they take that out on you, then it is important to not take that personally or feel you have failed in some way.

Just view them as a child - not condescendingly, but lovingly. Know that they are speaking from a place of fear that is deep and infantile.

Doing this successfully will render even demeaning words or fire-breathing levels of rage as harmless: you don't fault a child for being rude. True, this is sometimes challenging (parents will admit that it is often difficult to simply view their own child's hostility as simply that of a harmless child), especially since an adult has a far more imposing presence. Angry adults aren't adorable like a child is. But everyone can be adorable. It's all a matter of what you choose to put your attention on. If they are acting hostile, just put your attention on aspects of them that you find charming. People can detect when you appreciate something about them, and may naturally soften without knowing why. Plus it gives them the comfort and validation they are seeking.

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If their hostility feels excessive, like it's feeding itself and not diminishing, it's best to just leave the situation. If you're in customer service, and there is still a professional obligation to meet the guest's needs (hopefully within reason), you can say something like, "It seems that I'm unable to help you any further, so I will get you someone that you might be happier with. I hope they can provide you with what you need. I am sorry for the distress I've caused you." Exit.

If this is a friend, loved one, or private client, say something like, "It doesn't sound like we're able to have an effective conversation. Let's speak when you're feeling better. This will be better for you."

Evacuate.

You may avoid having to evacuate if you simply validate what they are feeling. It's a parenting jedi mind trick. You don't have to agree with them, just agree with the fact that they are feeling what they are feeling.

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Parents (everyone actually) can save themselves a lot of inflammatory situations if they avoided saying things like “There is nothing to be upset about”. This invalidates what someone is feeling and denies the reality of what is happening: someone is freaking out, and saying they shouldn’t be doesn’t do anything, but make them feel like they are having the wrong response. This leads to them feeling worse and probably protesting more loudly until they are heard.

Simply say something like, “That must be frustrating.” You don’t have to say, “I agree, the world is ending.” You’re not humoring them, you’re acknowledging what is happening with presence and compassion.

All the while, it may be hard to see the sweet childlike nature within each of these difficult people. So you’ll need to actually imagine them as a child or even a baby. That they are capable of loving and seeking it in return. I’ve heard of this being used successfully by

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many people: effective while being cow-herded and degraded in an airport, trying to talk diplomatically to someone with opposing views, and endless situations where human compassion is made difficult.

Know that they were once a baby and still embody some of that same childlike innocence (with adult faculties built on top of course).

Most people don't realize that if something doesn't go their way, then being rude will do nothing but steer the situation further from them. So if something goes wrong for them, this is something they cannot be relied on to know

That scared child within lacks the wisdom to know that speaking graciously always brings better results. It's not connected to the wisdom of seeing that they aren't actually going to be abandoned and die as a result of whatever went wrong. In the grand scheme of things, they are doing little more than crying over spilled milk. That place within them that is reacting like this is pure innocence (it's

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even prehistoric). They need a hug. Simple as that. (Unless they are a friend or loved one...probably don't actually give them a hug, though).

You may also resent them because you're annoyed at yourself for failing them. This may either be you feeling like a failing parent, or allowing a dynamic switch, in which you are a child failing a parent. In either case, you aren't failing them.

THREE.

WELCOME A STRANGER: HOW HOSTS HAVE POWER.

“Hospitality” is service applied to making someone feel at home. I believe this practice is broadly applicable and is not only relevant to strangers in a strange land. When serving professionally in a venue (retail, food and beverage, medicine, etc.) you are, relative to anyone who doesn’t work there, at home. And customers/patients/clients are visitors in an essentially foreign land. People entering your turf are generally uneasy. Though regular clients generally feel more familiar (and often the familiarity is one of the things they like best about frequenting your space), they are still there a fraction of the time you are if you work anywhere near full-time hours. Unfamiliar environments require adaptation and the processing of information that can make people feel even subtly disoriented, uncertain, or drained. They are looking to you to make them feel comfortable.

Whether this is a restaurant, clinic, office, or shop, you are the facilitator of this space, and you are their lifeline.

One would generally think that a doctor should feel more empowered in their office than a server in a restaurant (due of course to the esteem that position holds). But within the hospitality

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framework, you each wield a similar level of power. Though a patient in a doctor's office requires great skill since they make the inner workings of their bodies vulnerable to scrutiny, restaurants are bigger spaces with more strangers and noise. This triggers a different level of vulnerability in someone.

Regardless of the venue, you the host has the knowledge and skill for undoing this discomfort and you therefore wield the power. And knowing you have power can make the people you're dealing with much less irritating, since people often trigger us because we think we have a diminished role in the dynamic and they somehow seek to exploit that.

This can also be applied to spaces that aren't work-related - even at home with family or out with friends. In fact, it should especially be applied here. It will mean more to someone if there is no professional or cultural obligation to do so. You can be profoundly hospitable in a public space where you are not the facilitator, but feel more at home there than someone else. How do you feel more

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at home in a public space? It's simple: feel more comfortable in your skin. This requires self-cultivation and the easiest way to catalyze that is meditation.

Taking the opportunity to melt away someone's vulnerability is an act that will never be forgotten – and its power is likely to inspire them to pay it forward one day. A favorite story of any traveler is the friendly group of locals that treated them like their own. Also notice the enthusiasm with which someone recounts a stranger doing something nice for them. If you're like me, you're regularly seeking hope for humanity, or at least embracing it when it shows itself.

Providing that hope puts you in a position of power. Not power to be exploited (remember the earlier chapters - this only works if you are humble, expecting nothing in return), but to embody as an example to others.

If you can get into the habit of being hospitable to those you don't have to be, then doing it when it's a professional obligation becomes effortless.

FOUR.

SERVE AS YOUR VISION OF A BETTER WORLD.

Service is transformative. It upgrades whoever receives it. Someone needing service is anyone that is subject to circumstances where they are not having fullest experience they can have in a situation.

And someone that can be of service to them can provide the tools, knowledge, emotional reassurance, etc. to get them closer to a state of thriving.

For example, with this Serve Conscious project, I think people in a service role are not having the fullest experience of it that they can.

Since I believe that I have tools and knowledge to improve that situation, I am now offering that up in service of my audience. And, having had a teacher role for many years now, I've come to recognize that that position involves a certain amount of power, which must be respected. How I teach requires constant examination on my part, since the integrity in which I do so has a tremendous influence on the person learning. And this influence ripples into anyone they contact in their lives.

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The same goes for anyone providing anyone with something they need. Those that satisfy needs have power, and how they do so affects that person's emotional state, which can shape the entire remainder of their day.

I once saw a talk by Jim Meehan, founder of Please Don't Tell, a bar in New York that is almost single-handedly responsible for the popularity of the modern speakeasy-style craft cocktail bar. The subject of his talk was a sign that the industry leader was in a place of professional maturity: his interest in cocktails had seemed to become secondary, focusing mainly on hospitality. Here he said something really striking: if everyone learned how to live life and do things like a waiter/bartender/customer service representative that loves their job, then the world would be an amazing place.

This is great to apply to serving a difficult client that wields a lot of culturally-defined power - politician, celebrity, business magnate. Your guest might rule an institution or even a country, but you have

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domain over the outcome of the moment on equal footing with them. Your actions also have a knock-on effect, radiating outwardly to greater and greater circuits of person. You may not have influence over your guests major life decisions (who can even control that in someone anyway?), but you are pretty much in control of their feelings. However you make them feel in this moment will determine their behavior thereafter. So if this person you are serving has tremendous influence, it could have a large impact on how they treat others, and how those people then treat others. And on and on.

Don't let this get you neurotic. And if you tend to dwell on mistakes then refer to texts like the Bhagavad Gita, the writings of Swami Vivekananda, or this article, for a brief on Karma Yoga. Act knowing that you can't control the outcome, but you darn well have a vital role in any given moment.

Over the years, Meehan's statement has really had me thinking, providing a constant reminder to serve as the example of the world I

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want to live in. How do you wish people spoke to each other? How do you wish people addressed and solved problems. How to you wish people sought to understand each other? The person that lives as the example of their truth - embodying it, not preaching it - is in a place of personal power. I think about this statement every time my ego gets all knotted up and tells me my service role is “lowly”. I think about this every time I don’t feel like I can be “myself” while I am serving. Serving someone through my vision of the world makes service a virtuosic act - I can’t think of anything more thoroughly stamped with my identity than that.

FIVE.

SERVE LIKE A BENEVOLENT BILLIONAIRE.

Back when I was a squirrely young server/bartender, difficult and condescending guests used to really bother me. On occasion I even butted heads with them, and each time a manager swooped in and graciously handled the situation, making it clear that the priority was the guest's happiness, etc, etc. Was my manager bothered by this guest's behavior? No...or at least didn't show a whisper of annoyance. Why? Because managers (and owners even more so) don't feel as threatened by difficult guests - organizational power tends to do this.

But if you think that a higher position on the totem pole will make you more resilient, you are very wrong. Getting annoyed is a feeling, and it's caused by your mindset. Nothing outside of you controls your feelings, only you do.

I know what you're thinking: "That's the ticket? Really? Why not serve like a Nobel peace prize winner, or someone that helped free a country from a dictator? Or a monk who has dedicated his life to helping the less fortunate?"

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SERVE LIKE A BENEVOLENT BILLIONAIRE.

Sure. It can be any of those things. Any heroic figure works (and by that I mean your idea of heroic). It's a matter of which mentality is easiest for you to embody. What kind of person represents some sort of royal demeanor to you? And by that I mean what kind of person doesn't get bothered by small slights? What kind of person listens more than they talk because they have nothing to prove and everything to offer? And they see interactions as opportunities. What kind of person seeks to elevate and inspire others rather than make them a vessel to fill with their petty grievances?

You know what kind of person is like this? You are. This is you at the point in your life when you are satisfied with who you are and what you have accomplished. Here's the kicker: the reason you want more in life is not simply because those things will make you happy, but because you will be happier with yourself - so a shortcut to that is to just be happy with yourself. Easier said than done, right? Yes, that's why it takes practice.

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SERVE LIKE A BENEVOLENT BILLIONAIRE.

Here's one way to practice:

For the sake of this exercise, let's stick with the benevolent billionaire model. A simple technique to implement this: keep a dollar bill in your pocket, and occasionally touch that dollar bill. Say to yourself: "How would me-as-the-benevolent-billionaire handle this situation?" (If you're in the restaurant industry, maybe use something other than a dollar, because you have to wash your hands after touching money - and if you're anything like me you'd be touching that dollar a lot). Imagine your fully realized, fully-actualized self. Imagine how they think. And when a difficult situation arises, then respond to it as they would. You can polish your temperament in very powerful ways if you continually align your thought-patterns to the person that you want to be (are destined to be) rather than the frustrated, lacking person that emerges unconsciously.

It sounds almost annoying obvious and simple: being the person you want to be is not achieved by anything else but simply being that

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person. It's not going to happen because you're older, or more successful, or approved of by cooler people. It's going to happen when you start practicing at it.

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