

The Cautious and Obedient Life

Susan Walton

Little herds of people mill around intersections in the morning, waiting for the lights to change. Washington is full of traffic circles, so sometimes you have to wait through several lights, standing on narrow islands of concrete while traffic comes at you from unexpected directions.

Not everyone waits. Some people dash, even when they see the No. 42 bus bearing down on them or some squirrel of a driver running every red light for blocks. The particularly daring ones make the cars stop for them.

I seldom walk until the light turns green. It is part of being obedient, a manifestation of the misbegotten belief that you must do what people tell you to do, and if you do, you will be rewarded. This syndrome of behavior is characterized by a dedication to form at the expense of spontaneity and substance. It is turning papers in on time and expecting to receive better grades than those who turn them in late, even if theirs are superior. It is believing your mother--who probably didn't believe it herself--when she says that boys prefer nice girls. This toe-the-line mentality is not confined to women; men, too, lie awake wondering how things ended up so wrong when they so carefully did everything right. Which is exactly the problem.

Some people are born to follow instructions. They are quiet children who always finish their homework, are never caught being bad, never sneak off and do undetected wicked things. They never figure out that it is possible to ignore what others want you to do and do whatever you like. The consequences of deviation are usually minimal. Nobody really expects you to be that good. If you are born this way, you acquire a look of puzzlement. You are puzzled because you can't figure out how or why these other people are doing outrageous things when the rules have been so clearly stated. Nor do you understand why people are not impressed with your mastery of those rules.

Puzzlement may turn to smugness. At first, when people asked me whether I had completed an assignment, I was surprised: of course I had; didn't the teacher tell us to? After I realized that punctuality was not all that common, I became smug. Yes, of course I turned my paper in on time. I did not see that the people who got noticed were likely to be erratic and late, rushing in explaining that their thesis had not fallen into place until 4 a.m. of the third Monday after the paper was due. Us punctual types did not wait for theses to fall into place. Whatever could be knocked into shape in time was what got turned in. The thing was due, wasn't it?

The message did not sink in for years, during which I always showed up for work, double pneumonia and all. I wandered into a field--journalism--mined with deadlines and populated by more missed deadlines, per capita, than any other. I repeated the process--first the assumption that you had to make the deadline, or why did they call it a deadline? Then I realized that this behavior was not universal. By the time I began working for a weekly, I had deluded myself into thinking that reliability was the way to success.

And it was, sort of. At this job, however, I encountered one of those people apparently sent by life as an object lesson. For every deadline I made, he missed one. Stories that everyone was

counting on failed to materialize for weeks, as he agonized, procrastinated, and interviewed just one more person. Everyone was annoyed at the time, but when the work was completed, mass amnesia set in. Only the product mattered, and the product, however late it was, was generally acceptable.

We advanced together, but what I gained with promotion was the opportunity to meet more deadlines per week and to hang around waiting to edit the copy of those who were late. What he got was the opportunity to linger over ever more significant stories. In my case, virtue was its own punishment. The moral of this story is that you should stop to think whether being good is getting you anywhere you want to go.

The most common and forgivable reason for the cautious, obedient life is fear. It is true, something terrible could happen if you stray. Something terrible could also happen if you do not stray, which is that you might be bored to death. Some people are lucky; what they are supposed to do is also what they like to do. They do not need to muster their nerve. I do not consider myself a nervy person. Rather, I think of myself as a recovering coward. Cowardice, like alcoholism, is a lifelong condition.

The James Boys, William and Henry, are instructive on the subject of following too narrow a path. William James wrote in a letter to Thomas Ward in 1868 that the great mistake of his past life was an "impatience of results," which, he thought, should not be "too voluntarily aimed at or too busily thought of." What you must do, he believed, is to go on "in your own interesting way." Then the results will float along under their own steam. Henry left the classic record of the un-lived life in "The Beast in the Jungle." It is the story of a man convinced that fate has something momentous in store for him, and he sits around carefully waiting for it to arrive. Consequently, his fate turns out to be that of a man to whom nothing ever happens. Better for him had he not listened quite so earnestly to the inner voice murmuring about fate. Better had he been distracted from his mission.

Be bold, my graduate school adviser, Mr. Ragsdale, used to say--his only advice. I see now that he was right. Think again of your future self: the little old lady sitting on the porch of the old folks' home. When she thinks back on opportunities, will she regret the ones that passed unused?

Or find some other device. Myself, I keep a dumb postcard in my desk drawer. It is light purple, with a drawing of a cowering person standing on the edge of a diving board. Beneath the drawing it says, "If you don't do it, you won't know what would have happened if you had done it." Think about the possible headline: "Cautious Pedestrian Squashed by Bus While Waiting on Traffic Island--Should Have Jaywalked, Police Say." Then look both ways, and go.

TOPIC: What drawbacks does Walton point out about the cautious and obedient life? To what extent do you agree with her assessment? To develop your essay, be sure to discuss specific examples from your own experience, your observation of others, or any of your reading.