By ignoring others, we lose our own humanity

by Sandi Dolbee

The plane had barely come to a halt at the gate when a passenger in an aisle seat popped up, snapped open an overhead compartment and jerked out his suitcase. A metal cane came tumbling with it, whacking the woman next to me on the head.

Stunned, she grabbed her head and sat back down. Others around her started buzzing about what happened.

"That man pulled out his suitcase and the cane was in front of it," one passenger reported.

The man, standing just inches away from the struck woman, hunkered forward, his back turned squarely to the commotion. As a flight attendant fetched an icy pack, the man hustled off the plane without saying a word.

What makes us behave that way?

"The problem is we're not even admitting to ourselves that we've done something inappropriate. That's where the issue begins," says Joseph Grenny, co-founder of VitalSmarts, a leadership education institute in Utah, and co-author of "Crucial Conversations."

Grenny calls it heading down the path to self-justification. The symptoms: You don't make eye contact, you get into a vigorous internal debate about how it wasn't your fault and you may even seek reinforcement from a sympathetic friend.

The cure: "One of the first questions you have to ask yourself is: 'What am I pretending not to know here?' And when I use that as a cue question, I pretty quickly can become conscious of the inappropriate thing I've done and the action I need to take."

What should the guy have done to make it right?

"You put your bag back up on top and you kneel down next to her and you say, 'I am so sorry.' And you run and get the ice and you wait there while the flight attendant is taking care of her," Grenny says. "You go exactly the opposite direction of what you've done to over-solve the problem."

Ken Blanchard, a longtime leadership consultant, says what happened on that plane sounds a lot like what he calls false pride ("when we think we are better than we are").

"We have a number of people who don't value other people's lives or other people's needs or other people's concerns," says Blanchard, whose books include "The One Minute Manager" and "Lead Like Jesus."

"What he should have done is be the first one to say to the steward, 'Can you get some ice? God, I just feel awful,'" says Blanchard.

It was clearly an accident, Blanchard points out. But what happened after that was in this man's control.

And for whatever reason, he chose to leave.

We're supposed to learn from our mistakes. I hope I learn from his.

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