

Why Do Old People Frown?

by Stephen DeVoy

Bobby and his dad took a trip from Boston to New York by train. They had a wonderful day. They visited many places, saw all kinds of people and had a fun time. On the way back, the two sat side by side on the train bench. In front of them, facing their bench, was another train bench. An old man sat on that bench facing Bobby. He wore a suit and tie and was old enough to be Bobby's grandfather. The old man looked very tired. His eyes looked very sad and he had a frown.

The old man's frown frightened Bobby. From time to time the old man would smile at Bobby and ask him a question with a very friendly voice, but Bobby would try to hide behind his Daddy's jacket, snuggling close to him and hiding his face. After a while, Bobby got hungry and asked his Daddy for something to eat.

The two walked up the aisle and passed through many cars of the train. They were heading for the dinner car. Bobby enjoyed walking between the train cars. It was warm inside the train but very cold outside. Each time they reached the end of a train car, Bobby's Daddy would open the door and the two would pass through the enclosed gap separating the two train cars. The clicking and clanking of the train wheels over the steel rails was much louder between the cars and the burst of cold fresh air was exciting.

After passing through four cars, the two arrived at the dining car. The dining car was small. There was a little kitchen with a woman dressed in a train uniform. Bobby and his Daddy looked at the menu. Bobby wanted pizza and his dad bought him a slice.

The two found a small table inside the dining car and sat across from each other. After eating the slice of pizza, Bobby looked up at his dad and asked, "Why are old people so very angry, Daddy?"

This surprised Bobby's Daddy because he never thought about that question before. He looked at Bobby and asked, "What do you mean? Why do you think that?"

Bobby was thinking about the man with the frown and so he said, "When we were sitting on the train bench, the old man across from us had a frown. He looked so sad and angry, even when nothing was going on. I was scared to look at him."

"Bobby, the old man was very nice to you, wasn't he?" said Bobby's dad.

Bobby nodded and then replied, "But why do so many old people have a frown?"

Bobby's Daddy thought for a moment. He was having difficulty finding words that Bobby would understand.

"Bobby," said his dad, "when you are young, the world is new to you and you feel excited about each new thing you learn. The love you receive from Mommy and Daddy is absolute and unconditional. You do not worry about where you will sleep at night, whether you will have food at mealtime or what will

happen to you tomorrow. Life is not the same for older people.

"You see, as you get older, you are expected to do more and more things for yourself, things that you rely upon others to do for you now. Doing these things for yourself, when you can do them, is sometimes rewarding, but it often causes lots of worry. Older people need to work in order to earn the money they need. If they have no work, they have no money. Without money, they cannot pay for a place to live, for clothes or even for food. Finding work is not easy. Even when someone has work, they fear losing their work. All can be fine one day and then lost the next."

Bobby interrupted, "If someone works hard, why would they worry about losing their job?"

"Well, in a fair world, people would only lose their jobs if there was a good reason, for example, if they failed to work, or did a poor job or if their company simply could not afford to pay them any longer. But the world is not fair, Bobby" Bobby's Daddy became silent.

"Why isn't the world always fair, Daddy," Bobby asked?

"Well," said his dad, "there are many reasons why the world is not always fair. First of all, in the world of humans, we value certain things more than others. For example, we value life, friendship, love and freedom. However, the things of life are also physical things or involve physical things. Physical things obey the laws of nature and sometimes, though you value something greatly, nature values it only in terms of its physical characteristics. For example, to me you are the universe. I love you dearly and if anything were to happen to you, I would be crushed. To the universe, on the other hand, you are just a 50 pound chunk of matter. Nature will treat you not as a person loved by his Daddy, but as a thing. Sometimes natural events befall things. We have storms, accidents, illnesses and so on. When we lose something we value because nature treats it as a thing, we feel that something unfair has happened.

"But, you know Bobby, these natural events are less troublesome emotionally than the injustice one man or woman imposes on another. If lightening hits someone you love, you will feel grief and loss but you will not blame the lightening, for the lightening is doing what it does by nature and has no evil intent (or any intent at all for that matter). Humans, on the other hand, usually act with intent, so when one human hurts another he or she does so intentionally and the feeling of injustice can be great. One becomes ever sadder and ever more worn down by each injustice he or she experiences.

"People do all sorts of terrible things to one another. These things are not necessary, but they do these things anyway..."

"What kind of things do people do, Daddy?" asked Bobby.

Bobby's dad seemed uncomfortable. Inside he was searching for words. Finally, he broke his silence and said, "Some people hurt other people they work with. They lay traps to cause them to have trouble at work. They interfere with their work, secretly, while pretending to be a friend..."

"That's mean!" said Bobby.

"You're right," said his dad. "It's terrible what people do to each other. What is worse is the damage they do to the family members of their victims. It's one thing to harm someone that you don't like.

While this is bad, it's even worse to harm people you don't even know. When a person loses his or her job, if he has a family, the entire family suffers. If the job was lost because someone intentionally interfered with the person's work, that is very evil. Why should a young child, for example, go without food or go without a place to sleep just because some other person can only move forward in life by harming those who are more talented or do a better job than themselves?"

"That makes me angry. I feel sorry for those boys and girls whose daddies or mommies lose their jobs because of evil people," blurted Bobby.

"You should be, Bobby, because you are one of those children. Your life would be much better if Mommy didn't lose her job to just such an evil person."

There was a long silence. Bobby's dad continued.

"Remember last Christmas?"

"Yeah," said Bobby. "Santa Claus didn't bring me the gifts I wanted. I was very sad."

"Well, Bobby, it wasn't Santa Claus' fault. You see, Mommy and Daddy bought those gifts. When Mommy lost her job, we could barely pay the rent. We had to choose between giving you a place to live and giving you those gifts you wanted. We did the best we could, but we know you were disappointed. That anger you felt should be directed at the cause, not at Santa Claus."

Tears welled up in Bobby's eyes.

"Remember when we visited Mommy at work, when she had a job. Do you remember that woman with the smile, the one who gave you candy?"

"Yes," Bobby replied. "She was nice."

"She only seemed that way, Bobby. While she was pretending to be nice, she was saying nasty things about your mommy, going through her desk, stealing her work and lying to your mommy. She is one of those people who cannot move forward when someone more talented is around, so she found a way to get your mommy fired. It wasn't your mommy's fault, it was that woman's fault."

"I'm going to remember her," Daddy. "She'll get what's coming to her."

"Now, Bobby, don't say that. You are too young to be carrying around anger like that. I wouldn't want you to turn into that frowning old man at eight years old."

Bobby smiled, he was beginning to understand.

"It is OK to hate her, but it is not OK to waste your time thinking about her. Hate is natural, but when it consumes you, it harms you in return. Hate her and forget her."

The two sat and listened to the wheels of the train clicking over the tracks. After a while, Bobby's dad began to speak again.

"So, you see, Bobby, older people have a lot to worry about and they carry the scars of many sad times they have passed through. Usually, when they have a frown, they don't even know they have a frown. They have been sad so long it just seems natural to them."

Bobby looked sad. He thought about this for a while and then asked to go back to the train bench across from the old man. They walked back through the cars and found their seat. Bobby sat next to the old man, smiled and said, "Hi, I'm Bobby. Do you want to play?"

The old man smiled very widely. His eyes sparkled and the two spent the rest of the train ride telling each other stories, drawing, and playing. Bobby felt a warmth for older people that he did not feel before. The old man seemed to forget his troubles and became lost in his conversation with Bobby.

Bobby's dad smiled.

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