

Do gentle people need to toughen up?

Being wise as a serpent doesn't mean having a hard heart.

by [Peter W. Marty](#) in the [July 17, 2019](#) issue



Photo by The-Tor, Getty Images

My coworker's daughter Emily recently graduated from preschool. Emily's teacher told her beaming parents that day that in all her years of teaching she had never met as sweet a child. "She is an absolute angel, full of kindness toward others, always generous." The teacher then attached a caveat: "For her own good, I will say this: you two have to toughen her up. If you don't, she'll get eaten alive in her [Chicago public] school."

The parents were taken aback by the blunt warning, unsure of what they were supposed to do with such advice. Yes, bullying starts as early as kindergarten these days. Mom and Dad are well aware that many of Emily's five-year-old classmates will come from family systems and social circumstances quite different from their own. But are they supposed to enroll her in martial arts classes? Is it time to start a

neighborhood rugby team for tykes?

I know Emily. She has already established in her young life “a reputation for gentleness,” to borrow a phrase from J. B. Phillip’s translation of Philippians. I imagine that someday she’ll be the sort of driver’s education student who will brake for butterflies. I want her to find a vocation other than security officer lest she be reprimanded like the woman in Viera, Florida, who was found to be “too courteous, caring, and giving” for her courthouse security assignment.

Emily’s preschool teacher offered her own prescription for how Emily should deal with tough kids in her future. “If they hit her, she needs to learn to hit back,” she told the parents.

That’s exactly the wrong advice, and the parents knew it instantly. We ought to be teaching our kids to treat their peers not on the basis of what is worst in those peers but on the basis of what is best in ourselves. Gentleness is hard enough to come by in this tough and unbending world. We should be helping someone like Emily hang on to her caring self, not encouraging her to forsake that very quality on which a thoughtful society depends.

A 1959 sermon by Martin Luther King Jr. may offer a helpful word to my colleague and her husband, who cherish the sweetness of their girl but know that sweetness must fit into a world that admires toughness and roughness. When Jesus sent his disciples out as “sheep in the midst of wolves,” he attached a formula for action: “Be wise as serpents and innocent as doves.” In his sermon, King suggests that those who want to lead good lives must simultaneously blend “markedly strong opposites” within themselves. “We must combine the toughness of the serpent and the softness of the dove,” said King, “a tough mind and a tender heart.”

Soft-minded people fear change, King argued, and hard-hearted people never really learn to love. But those with tough minds learn to be incisive and realistic, and those with tender hearts discover how to embrace the world with grace and mercy. In King’s estimation, God is neither hard-hearted nor soft-minded. “[God] is tough-minded enough to transcend the world, [and] tenderhearted enough to live in it.” Learning to cultivate such markedly strong opposites might be just what will allow a beautiful kindergartner to be able to hold onto her caring self in a rough and tumble world. Let’s hope so.

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