



‘Have you ever noticed that guests on NPR never say, ‘You’re welcome?’”

“What?” asks Jenna, my son’s girlfriend.

“I mean, after an interview, when the host says, ‘Thank you,’ the person being interviewed always replies, ‘Thank you,’ and never says, ‘You’re welcome.’”

Both Jenna and my son look at me with blank expressions; my wife, who has heard me rant on this topic many, many times, rolls her eyes. We’re in a North End restaurant, having driven to Boston from our home in New Hampshire to spend an hour or so at the Museum of Fine Arts before going out to dinner with our son. I’m glad that Jenna has been able to join us.

“It happens every time,” I say. “At first I thought that it was some kind of rule, that they were being told that they had to reply ‘Thank you’ or something, but now I think that it’s like a 15-minutes-of-fame kind of thing. You know, everyone wants to be famous, so they thank the interviewer for the privilege of having been on the radio—rather than the other way around, saying, ‘You’re welcome’ for having given the interviewer the gift of their time. It’s a sign of our egotistical age.”

Jenna cocks her head. “I don’t ever say ‘You’re welcome.’” She continues: “I mean, maybe if someone said ‘Thank you’ after I gave them a gift at Christmas, then, yes, I might say, ‘You’re welcome,’

CONNECTIONS

You’re Welcome? Don’t Mention It.

BY MURRAY MCCLELLAN

but otherwise, no. I think that saying ‘You’re welcome’ is rude. It’s like saying ‘You owe me one.’” My son nods in agreement.

My son and his girlfriend are in their late 20s and live in Cambridge. Both work in computery-technical fields that my wife and I, professional humanities types, can only vaguely comprehend. Now we seem to be facing another communication gap, between baby boomers and millennials.

We always taught our son to say “Please” (“What’s the magic word?”) and “Thank you,” but apparently we forgot to give lessons in “You’re welcome.” Now, don’t get me wrong; I am inordinately proud of my son and love him dearly. I am, however, a bit concerned about what seems to me to be bad manners in abandoning “You’re welcome.”

As our meals arrive, we ponder the etymology of “welcome” (I maintain that “well come” was an inviting “you are part of the family”), and we try to

come up with how to say “You’re welcome” in as many languages as we can. My wife points out that German (*bitte*) and modern Greek (*parakalo*) both use a word that also means “please,” and my son notes that in Japanese, the polite answer to “Thank you” is “No, no” and that only a person of very high status—the emperor, for example—could say the equivalent of “You’re welcome.”

What does it mean to say (or not say) “You’re welcome”? For me, the phrase is an attempt to put people at ease by downplaying the gift you have just given them: the equivalent of “Don’t mention it” or “My pleasure.” For my son’s generation, “You’re welcome” is a rude acknowledgment of an uneven balance of power.

A quick search on my phone turns up a reference to motivational psychologist Robert Cialdini, who wants us to capitalize on that uneven power relation by replacing “You’re welcome” with “I know you’d do the same for me.” Blogger Adam Grant (“Why You Shouldn’t Say ‘You’re Welcome’”) suggests, instead, a clumsy pay-it-forward: “I know you’ll do the same for someone else.”

We all laugh, and our conversation moves on. As our meal ends, I insist on picking up the check.

“Dad, you don’t have to do this.”

“You’re welcome.”

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