Suffering Fools Gladly
By DAVID BROOKS

Recently I was reading a magazine profile of a brilliant statistician. The article mentioned, in passing, that this guy doesn’t suffer fools gladly.

I come across that phrase a lot. I’ve read that Al Gore and former Representative Barney Frank don’t suffer fools gladly. Neither, apparently, did Steve Jobs, George Harrison, Pauline Kael or even Henry David Thoreau.

The phrase originally came from William Tyndale’s 1534 translation of the Bible. In it, Paul was ripping into the decadent citizens of Corinth for turning away from his own authoritative teaching and falling for a bunch of second-rate false apostles. “For ye suffers fool gladly,” Paul says with withering sarcasm, “seeing ye yourselves are wise.”

Today, the phrase is often used as an ambiguous compliment. It suggests that a person is so smart he has trouble tolerating people who are far below his own high standards. It is used to describe a person who is so passionately committed to a vital cause that he doesn’t have time for social niceties toward those idiots who stand in its way. It is used to suggest a level of social courage; a person who has the guts to tell idiots what he really thinks.

Sure, it would be better if such people were nicer to those around them, the phrase implies, but this is a forgivable sin in one so talented. The actor Ed Harris’s “penetrating gaze signals that this is a serious, somber man on a singular quest,” a writer observed in The Toronto Sun. “He doesn’t suffer fools gladly, if at all.”

This sounds fine in the abstract, but when you actually witness somebody in the act of not suffering fools gladly, it looks rotten. Once I watched a senior member of the House of Representatives rip into a young reporter after she nervously asked him an ill-informed question.

She was foolish about that particular piece of legislation, but, in the moment, he looked the bigger fool. He was making a snap judgment about a person with no real information about her actual qualities. He was exposing a yawning gap between his own high opinion of himself and his actual conduct in the world. He was making the mistake, which metaphysical fools tend to make, that there is no connection between your inner moral quality and the level of courtesy you present to others.
Smart people who’ve thought about this usually understand that the habits we put in practice end up shaping the people we are within. “Manners are of more importance than laws,” Edmund Burke wrote. “Manners are what vex or soothe, corrupt or purify, exalt or debase, barbarize or refine us, by a constant, steady, uniform, insensible operation, like that of the air we breathe in.”

In his extremely French book, “A Small Treatise on the Great Virtues,” the contemporary philosopher André Comte-Sponville argues that “politeness is the first virtue, and the origin perhaps of all the others.” Politeness is a discipline that compels respectful behavior. Morality, he writes “is like a politeness of the soul, an etiquette of the inner life, a code of duties, a ceremonial of the essential.” (I told you it was very French.)

Jane Austen is the novelist most famous for advocating this point of view. In her novel “Emma,” the lead character is rude to a foolish and verbose old woman named Miss Bates. Emma’s friend George Knightley rebukes her.

If Miss Bates were rich or smart or your equal, maybe this rudeness would have been tolerable, Mr. Knightley tells her, but “she is poor; she has sunk from the comforts she was born to; and, if she live to old age, must probably sink more. Her situation should secure your compassion. It was badly done, indeed!”

I don’t give myself high marks on suffering fools. I’m not rude to those I consider foolish, but I strenuously and lamentably evade them. But I do see people who handle fools well. Many members of the clergy do, as do many great teachers. In my experience, Midwesterners are more likely to treat fools well. Natural politicians do so, too. Joe Biden is effective because he loves humanity in all its shapes and sizes.

G. K. Chesterton had the best advice on suffering fools gladly. He put emphasis on the gladly. When you’re with fools, laugh with them and at them simultaneously: “An obvious instance is that of ordinary and happy marriage. A man and a woman cannot live together without having against each other a kind of everlasting joke. Each has discovered that the other is a fool, but a great fool. This largeness, this grossness and gorgeousness of folly is the thing which we all find about those with whom we are in intimate contact; and it is the one enduring basis of affection, and even of respect.”