Grumpy

Daphne Loads

Recently I discovered the value of grumpiness. Prickly and dyspeptic with tiredness, I dropped my bag of papers and books all over the floor in the University Main Library. As I bent, grumbling, to pick them up, I caught sight of a portion of text. It was part of a display commemorating female scholars, leaders and pioneers at the University of Edinburgh. Beside the photograph of Brenda Moon, one of the first women chief librarians, was the following unattributed citation:

A slightly built and softly spoken woman who cared about others and was always gentle and supportive. However, beneath this deceptive exterior there was a clarity of thought and purpose and a persistence which moved mountains.

I had read this many times before but now I saw it with fresh eyes. I was struck by the bewildering oppositions it seemed to set up. What, exactly, was deceptive about Brenda Moon's appearance? Why should we be surprised that a short person was clear thinking? Or that a woman with a quiet voice was persistent?

I imagined a parallel universe in which Bill Moon was remembered as:

A big tall man with a loud voice who was uncaring, harsh and unsupportive to others. This exterior was perfectly in keeping with his clarity of thought and purpose and a persistence which moved mountains.

By turning it inside out in this way, the assumptions were revealed in all their absurdity. I pointed them out to a female colleague. "This is manspeak", she declared, and immediately set about finding the source of the silly quotation.

Now, if I had been what I like to think of as my normal self, I would have taken the memorial at face value, appreciating the generosity of the sentiments and thinking the best of the speaker. It was only because I was in a grumpy mood that I saw through the words to the mountain of silly assumptions that Brenda Moon had to tackle in order to get on with her work. And although I believe strongly that it's possible to be both purposeful and caring, kind and determined, nevertheless in this case it was actually quite helpful to be unkind for a moment, in order to grasp an important idea.

Ingredients

- A dash of grumpiness.
- A flash of insight.
- A big pile of leftover assumptions, well past their sell-by date.

Method

1. Take a load of old assumptions (available in all good universities: find them in publicity materials, learning resources and course descriptors).

2. Incorporate a fresh perspective.
The key to success is the perfect amount of grumpiness: too little and you don't notice it; too much and you don't notice anything else.
3. Share with a friend, or in my case a complete stranger, who heard me harrumphing and came to find out why. Her support encouraged me to pass on what I had noticed to others.
4. Enjoy.

Cook's tip

For recipes on what the words we use reveal, see *Be vigilant with your vocabulary* and *Damning with faint praise*. For a quick example in politics, particular differences in language around gender are still prevalent resulting in female politicians being described as 'coldly ambitious' instead of the male adjective 'assertive'.

A forerunner of this recipe originally appeared here: <https://iad4learnteach.wordpress.com/>