

# Tips to help Social Security treat others with kindness, respect

This is a true story.

A couple of weeks ago I went to the Social Security Office on West Road in Towson to apply for Social Security and Medicare. I was told that I had to apply a few months before or after my 65th birthday on March 1. (Subsequently I have learned that I can wait until I actually retire at age 70 before I apply.)

So, first, I tried to find the Social Security Office on West Road. West Road is a short road, hardly a mile long. I drove up and down the road three times, and couldn't find the office! Yes, you know I've had strokes in both my eyes, so my vision is challenged. However, I had a fully sighted person with me, and she didn't see any signs either. I actually stopped three times for directions. Each time I apologized to the people whose business I was interrupting, and each time I was told: "People come by here every week. The Social Security Offices are hard to find. They're in a building behind another building!" All along the road there were large, clear signs for Lexus and BMW and Ruck Funeral Home. Private enterprise was very visible. The government was well hidden.

Finally, I found the office. I was greeted by a warm computer! I pressed a button and got a number. A very formal sign read: "Do not approach window until your number is called!"

I obediently sat there for two hours! I looked around at the despairing faces of my fellow waiters! I felt like I was in a Franz Kafka novel. It was a waiting room for hell. We were waiting for a Redeemer whom, it seemed, would never come!

Let me emphasize that the young ladies working the desk or window were very professional and competent. They worked hard. However, never more than one worked at a time. When the second lady appeared, the first lady left! Another person sat at a desk to the side. She may have been security. I didn't see her doing anything.

There were a few old magazines scattered around, left no doubt by former survivors! The television in the room was broken. I was actually grateful for that. I watch almost no television, aside from sports and an occasional PBS special. I've been trapped in other waiting rooms, where the same news casts were repeated endlessly, along with the same mind-numbing commercials. (Don't watch the news. It's mostly bad news, and results in people feeling depressed and angry. You deserve better. Commercials are part of societal conditioning, turning us into robotic consumers.) But I digress.

Finally, my number was called. I felt like I had won the lottery. As I approached, the young lady asked how she could help me. I said that I had come to apply for Social Security. She replied: "We can't take walk-ins today!" I replied: "I've been waiting two hours." "You'll have to wait at least another two hours for help," she replied. I concluded, "Couldn't you have at least posted a sign that said: "Sorry, we cannot accept walk-in applications for Social Security today". She replied: "No, we can't post signs like that!"

Those of you who have listened to my radio show over the past 33 years, or read this column for an even longer time, know I have basic principles: Forgive. Practice gratitude. Focus on the good. Leave things better than you found them. I'm trying to turn my pain into compassion for others. I realize the government pays consultants thousands of dollars to improve 'customer relations'. In this limited space, I offer these suggestions for free: 1. Post big signs on the road. 2. Hire more people, or consider training volunteers to greet people: "Welcome. Here's your number. There's the coffee, fountains, and rest rooms. Do you have any questions I can help you with?" 3. If you must have a TV, show Ken Burns Series on the National Parks - beautiful scenery and commentary. Lift our spirits.

Ron Smith referred to the U.S. as fighting "endless wars". We always have money for war. Can't we spend a tiny fraction of that amount to treat our retirees, and those with disabilities, with respect and kindness?