

## The whole truth

By Ruth Ostrow

"AND how are you today?" says the checkout chick in a Sydney supermarket. "Good," I say back. "That's good," she says, continuing her false smile.

"And how are you today?" says the secretary on duty in a professional practice I need to visit. "Good," I say, and the whole scenario plays out again – as it does with a waitress in Byron Bay, with a bus driver in Melbourne, even with a couple of the blokes manning the railway ticket-barriers as we travel about the east coast over the school holidays.

All that can be heard over the din of traffic around the country is the new fave greeting: "And how are you today?" with the inquirer ignoring your reply.

I was immune to this new trend until my daughter pointed it out. "Why do people keep asking how we are everywhere we go?" she asked. "It's not as if anyone cares. They don't even know us. Like, what if you told them the truth?"

She had picked it correctly. Without even knowing it, we have turned into an American sitcom. These social niceties belong to US culture; the plethora of obsequious utterings was something I really hated while living there.

And the ultimate plastic-fantastic mantra, "Have a nice day", hasn't just crept into Australian lexicon – we have even improved on it.

I've had people I don't know turn to me and say with a big, sincere smile: "Have a really, really beautiful day!" as if they give a damn. Or one dress-shop assistant who asked me recently: "Are you having a beautiful day?" as I tried on some tight pants.

I wanted to say: "Actually, I'm premenstrual and that makes me really hot and cranky, and it makes my skin hurt so it's difficult to try clothes on, and I bloat which makes me go up a whole size, so if you keep smiling at me in that nauseating way I will probably commit an act we'll both regret." Instead I just smiled back and drawled: "Yeeeeees, thank you."

There are many things we have inherited from other cultures that make life worthwhile – cappuccino, pizza and European outdoor dining; Asian cuisine; English architecture, and the American TV series *The Sopranos* and *Six Feet Under*, to name a few. But the false, indifferent mantras of Ken and Barbie doll are not something that should be imported or encouraged.

So the next time you have someone ask: "And how are you today?" while looking the other way, take your revenge by telling 'em.

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