

Manners

Debby and I were invited to a party by people we hardly knew and did not particularly care for. We went out of curiosity more than anything else.

We arrived at the old money neighborhood and were relieved when our best friends turned up. In the mixing part of the evening, we ended up in separate rooms. Just before the buffet opened my friend John came to me panic stricken: “There you are, I thought you had abandoned me.” My job was to be a buffer between him and our host. You can see why we liked each other so much.

Each of us has a justifiable fear of the Pharisee who is “watching us carefully”. Someone, usually self-appointed, is poised black marker in hand ready to grade us as “unsuitable”. Life is an endless series of dinners with potential in-laws fraught with traps for the unwary. Unwritten is the assumption that the grading is not pass/fail, but how far below the salt we might be relegated.

I subscribe to an on-line bloggy kind of site called: “Oldster”. It features interviews, essays and other observations from people of a certain age. A recurring theme in answer to the question “What do you like best about this stage in your life?” reads: “I don’t have to care what other people think of me. I am finally grown up.” They often say this profound truth using Anglo-Saxon nouns that all of you know.

Jesus quotes from Proverbs 25 saying: “Do not put yourself forward in the king's presence or stand in the place of the great; for it is better to be told, "Come up here," than to be put lower in the presence of a noble.” Even though the text says Jesus is giving a parable he isn't: He is giving a sermon on avoiding setting traps for ourselves.

I am convinced to this day that my call to the Cathedral in Honolulu was due in part because I was more adept with chopsticks than the other two finalists. At a parish meeting we were asked to make a self-introduction. As a profoundly shallow extrovert this was my kind of event. The test was to see if we knew how to stop digging when we fell into the hole we had dug.

Clearly Jesus is modeling what humility looks like. He claims that using social occasions as a means to an end misses the point. Jesus is recommending humility as a way of life for its own sake, not as a device to avoid a social faux pas. Humility is about being right-sized, fitting into our own skin, not too tight nor too baggy. Alan Watts describes trying to send a paper bag full of water to someone. The problem of getting the water into the bag, of keeping the water in the bag, and making the bag look like something someone might want to open is an insoluble (pun intended) problem. OOF, what a lot of work for well, nothing. Watts satirized the social conventions which have been calcified into laws. Passing laws is one of the last resorts of scoundrels!

A person once said to me: “I suppose you think you are funny!” I wasn’t surprised by the rudeness. My response: “Serious people are not amused, but I enjoy being me!”

One summer’s eve my high school girlfriend’s parents invited my dad for dinner. My dad showed up with a bottle of 151 proof Jamaican rum just in case his hosts had not stocked up a sufficiency. This potion freed my friend’s father to go off on how terrible it was that our private swim club had voted to allow anyone who could pay the fee to join. My parents had said we would have to resign if the club did not move towards full inclusion.

My dad listened patiently to this tirade. He replied in his best whimsical Boston Irish voice: “Dick, I am so interested in your social theories. Just the other day I read in “Psychology Today” that if you immerse brown people in pool water the color comes off.” It was 85 degrees on their front porch. It got freezing cold in a nanosecond. I was so proud of his courtesy AND his refusal to co-sign nonsense. Racism is wrong because it tries to make the immutable fact that people are all different into a problem. Finding ways in which we are all human together is not a solution either. It is gospel living!

Life challenges us to rise above the scrutiny of social mavens, and to joyfully carve out a sense of ourselves that allows us to entertain angels unawares.