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On Hypocrisy

By ALAN JACOBS • February 11, 2013, 9:23 AM



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Rod's [asshat post this morning](#) — um, I mean, his post about asshat behavior — reminded me of an essay I wrote nearly twenty years ago now for the Oxford American. I wouldn't write this essay today in the same way, and I cringe at some of my phrasing, but because I think it's relevant to the conversation I'm posting it here with only minor changes to eliminate its grossest infelicities. It was published under the title "Give Me That Old-Time Hypocrisy," which is one of the things I'd do differently today. But here it is anyway, complete with a reference to one of America's great masters of the short story, the tragically little-known [Peter Taylor](#).

When Jimmy Carter was running for President in 1976, he repeatedly insisted that he would not lie to the American people. To many journalists this seemed a less than plausible claim, and one of them sought out Carter's mother, the redoubtable Miss Lillian, to get the inside story on this honesty thing.

"Should we believe your son when he tells us he won't lie to us?" the reporter asks.

"Certainly," Miss Lillian replies.

The reporter smells blood. "Do you mean to tell me that your son has *never* lied?"

Miss Lillian is not ready to go quite so far. "It may be" — I imagine her saying this in a casual tone, perhaps making a small dismissive gesture with one hand — "that from time to time he has told a little white lie."

The reporter, sufficiently confident of victory to risk sarcasm, asks Miss Lillian if she could explain the difference between a white lie and — what? A black lie? A serious lie?

"Well," said Miss Lillian, "I don't know if I could *define* a white lie, but I think I could give you an example." The reporter expresses willingness to hear an example cited. She nods. "Do you remember how when I met you at the door I told you I was glad to see you?"

I found myself thinking of this story — which Jody Powell told in a brief memoir of Miss Lillian that he wrote soon after her death — the other day when I spoke to a young woman who had recently returned to the upper Midwest after her first visit to the South. "I don't know," she said, with a distinctly puzzled look; "at first I was so pleased with the way everyone treated me. They were all so nice, so friendly! But then I talked to my mother on the phone and she told me that they weren't necessarily being nice because they liked me, that they probably didn't mean it."

I smiled and replied, "Do you think the way strangers treat you should have anything to do with the way they really feel about you? Those folks didn't know you well enough to have an opinion about you one way or the other."

"Well," she replied firmly, "if they weren't sincere then they're just hypocrites."

I didn't push the point, but I said to myself, are these really and truly the choices available to us: sincerity or hypocrisy? I'm not convinced that they are, but this much I do know:

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opinion.” The purpose of manners is to regulate, and limit the frustrations of, social intercourse, and whatever the purpose of social intercourse may be, it is most certainly not (in the classical Southern view) to provide a platform on which people may demonstrate their sincerity. But for people who value sincerity above all else — who need sincerity in order to secure their sense of personal worth — anyone who suggests that there are values more important than sincerity must by definition be a hypocrite. Southern traditions of manners are therefore condemned *a priori*.

The outline of Southern manners, or hypocrisy if you prefer, that I have just sketched applies most directly to people of my parents’ generation or older — that is, to pre-Boomers. My generation of Southerners, shaped by the nationally-distributed culture of sincerity, quick to employ its rhetoric (“Hey, I was just being honest”), and yet half-aware that it doesn’t quite match the way we were raised, tends to be a little confused on this point. Most of us only come to understand just how deeply we have drunk from the well of old Southern etiquette when we leave the South for any period of time and find ourselves in a constant state of astonishment over the way people act and the things they say, right there in front of God and everybody. Anyone might watch, in a kind of horrified fascination, trashy people spilling their guts to Oprah or Ricki or Jerry or Phil, but [no true Southerner](#) would ever dream of doing it themselves.

In this respect I think there is a profound connection between two exemplary Southern traits, the commitment to mannerly reticence and the inexhaustible love of storytelling. Ultimately, gossip, like murder, will out. What we refrain from speaking of in polite company eventually emerges (perhaps altered from its original form) in one of those talefests that any gathering of Southerners is sure to become if it goes on long enough and the hosts are sufficiently free with the drinks. The storyteller can afford to be reticent at first, because he or she knows that nothing has to be kept down forever; it’s just a matter of finding the time and place — and again, often the proper disguise — for some juicy event’s coming-out party. Thus the proprieties are maintained with a minimum of psychological damage. All in all, not a bad system.

But the Southerners who aren’t storytellers, and there are a few, have their difficulties. The profoundest chronicler of such people is the late great Peter Taylor, whose painfully mannerly characters so rarely find an outlet for the struggles that beset them. In one of his finest stories, “Dean of Men,” a father decides he must tell his son about the betrayals and disappointments that have afflicted him and his father and his grandfather, but he is the first in his family ever to mention these troubles, and can do so only in a letter. In another, “There,” an elderly and archetypically voluble Southern talker describes for his young interlocutor a girl he once knew who, unable to speak directly about the moral failings of her family, expressed herself in a false flightiness, in practical jokes, and ultimately, when those maneuvers failed, in death.

No one has delineated the price Southerners, especially the wealthy and the high-born, have paid for their manners better than Taylor; and yet I cannot imagine a careful reader of Taylor’s stories concluding that there was any readily available alternative. Open conflict, or the continual covert picking at raw wounds, are obviously and equally undesirable; while the idealized picture encouraged by our contemporary psychobabblers, in which “honest and forthright discussion” is the universal remedy for all social afflictions, is premised on the hopelessly naïve belief that such openness always reveals common ground, instead of the irreconcilable differences that are, far more often, exposed by such “discussions.” In the relentless mannerliness of Taylor’s characters there is a kind of Stoic resignation to the inevitability of personal and social friction in this

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What Does Atheism Do For
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2 Responses to On Hypocrisy

Patrick Harris says:

February 11, 2013 at 6:17 pm

This excellent take on politesse recalls Burke's complaint that "all the decent drapery of life is to be rudely torn off." As he knew, those artificial checks on human interaction are "necessary to cover the defects of our naked shivering nature, and raise it to dignity in our own estimation."

It's a crucial point that the cult of sincerity requires a view of human nature that is fundamentally at odds with the Christian tradition. That's not to say that less genteel culture are inherently less Christian, but there's something in the moral underpinnings of the Southern "yessir" that a traditionalist must love.

SGT Caz says:

February 11, 2013 at 8:25 pm

Excellent, excellent post. One wonders how many assaults or crimes of passion "Southern etiquette" has really stopped by easing those natural frictions, but it would not surprise me at all to find that there is a correlation between our practice of those manners and our ability to keep families and communities together under certain circumstances.

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