

“KILL YOUR REPUTATION”

The Reverend Peter F. Walsh
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Emily Post and Etiquette

A few years back, the 16th edition of Emily Post's book on Etiquette was published. It was 75 years after her first book. It was updated by her grandson's wife, Peggy Post. Etiquette by definition is a prescribed code of social manners. It is meant to give us a ritualized structure to set people free so that courtesy can reign.

The 16th edition of Emily Post is 846 pages of courtesy reigning and it includes such things as everyday manners, the formalities of greetings and introductions, travel and tipping and how to plan a wedding.

Emily Post on Being Seated

It also includes how to seat people at a dinner party. Notice the scene: The guests are moving from one room to the dining room; the business at hand is where to sit; it is the job of host or hostess to seat everyone; and listen to the description of the places of honor.

Being Seated

The host leads the way in to dinner with the female guest of honor whom he seats to his right. Other guests walk in with whomever they are conversing when dinner is announced. When there is no particular guest of honor among a group of friends dining together, the hostess might choose the oldest woman or one who has not visited her house for some time to sit on her husband's right. Otherwise she may seat her guests according to whatever arrangement she thinks they will enjoy the most, alternating the men and women and separating husbands and wives. If there is an uneven number of men and women she may try to space them as evenly as possible. She may keep her place at the end of the table unless doing so puts too many women in a row.

Whatever else she may do, she still seats the honored guests at her and her husband's right.

The woman next in importance sits at the host's left, and her husband or the man of next importance, on the hostess's left.

The Gospel

Now listen to the Gospel. Notice the scene: It is likely they are moving from one room to the dining room; the business at hand is where to sit; at stake are the places of honor.

Notice Jesus' advice: Listen to how he sounds like Emily Post. It is the job of the host to seat everyone. Listen to the description of the places of honor. It does not sound as though they have changed in 2,000 years.

On one occasion when Jesus was going to the house of a leader of the Pharisees to eat a meal on the Sabbath, they were watching him closely. When he noticed how the guests chose the places of honor, he told them a parable. "When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit down at the place of honor, in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited by your host; and the host who invited both of you may come and say to you, 'Give this person your place,' and then in disgrace you would start to take the lowest place. But when you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he may say to you, 'Friend, move up higher'; then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at the table with you. For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."

On Why Jesus is not Emily Post

Though it sounds like Jesus is a holy Emily Post, the advice he is giving has nothing to do with etiquette or social convention. It is a parable and therefore a teaching about the kingdom of heaven. It is mystical advice for union with God. The advice is this: Those who exalt themselves will be humbled and those who

humble themselves will be exalted. Those who become as nothing will be full of God. humility is the way. Every deep soul in every major religious tradition agrees.

Kill your Reputation

If we are to become holy people, we need to kill our concern for our reputation. Concern for reputation is an impediment in our relationship with God.

Listen to how St. Teresa of Avila puts it. Let me give you two definitions before I start. The word *punctilious* means attentive to the finer points of etiquette a formal conduct. The word *pestilential* means infected or contaminated with a deadly contagious disease.

St. Teresa:

“If any person wishing to make progress in spiritual matters finds that he is becoming punctilious about his reputation, let him believe what I say and put this attachment right behind him, for it is a chain which no file can sever; only God can break it, with the aid of prayer and great effort on our part. It seems to me to be an impediment on this road and I am amazed at the harm it does. I see some people whose actions are very holy and who do such wonderful things that everyone is astonished at them. God bless me, then! Why are such souls still on earth? How is it that they have not reached the summit of perfection? What is the reason for this? What can it be that is impeding one who is doing so much for God? Why, simply his punctiliousness about his reputation! And the worst of it is that this sort of person will not realize that he is guilty of such a thing, the reason sometimes being that the devil tells him that punctiliousness is incumbent upon him. Let such persons believe me, then: for the love of the Lord let them believe this little ant: for she speaks because it is the Lord’s will that she should do so. If they fail to remove this caterpillar, it may not hurt the whole tree, for some of the other virtues will remain, but they will all be worm-eaten. The tree will not be beautiful; it will neither prosper itself nor allow the trees near it to do so, for the fruit of good example which it bears is not at all healthy and will not last for long. I repeat this: however slight may be our concern for our reputation, the result of it will be as bad as when we play a wrong note, or make a mistake in time, in playing the organ – the whole passage will become discordant. Such concern is a thing which harms the soul whenever it occurs; but in the life of prayer it is pestilential.

You are trying to attain to union with God. We want to follow the counsels of Christ, on who were showered insults and false witness. Are we, then, really so anxious to keep intact our own reputation and credit? We cannot do so and yet attain to union, for the two ways diverge.”

Blessed Emptiness and Nothingness

By the grace of God we need to kill our desire for a good reputation. Sometimes God does this by implanting in our spirits the desire to be empty of ourselves. By the grace of God, we are to empty ourselves in imitation of Christ for as St. Paul tells us in the Letter to the Philippians,

“Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but **emptied himself** taking the form of a servant being born in the likeness of men, and being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on the cross. Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

We are to become empty, nothing. As St. John of the Cross put it, “nada, nada, nada”, “nothing, nothing, nothing, nothing, nothing, nothing and even on the mountain nothing”

Or as Gandhi puts it,

“There comes a time when an individual becomes irresistible and his action becomes all-pervasive in its effects. This comes when he reduces himself to zero.”

Nothing, nothing, nothing. Empty. Zero. It is the state we all desire. For when we are nothing, our heavenly host comes says to our soul, “Come and be by my side.”

Beautiful.
Amen.