

## On Trying to Charm the Uninterested

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In her recent memoir, Tina Fey shared that she spent a lot of her early years trying to, as she put it, "charm the uninterested." I can personally relate to that, and unfortunately I didn't restrict that pattern of thought and action to my early years. For one thing, I've been teaching all of my adult life, and I'm sorry to have to report that teaching can come down in large measure to trying to charm the uninterested, and until very recent times it did for me. My charming attempts go back to my earliest memories: my parents were good people but, bless them, for a lot of reasons weren't much interested in me and--of course, I didn't think this through consciously--I wound up chasing them, trying to catch their attention, get a stir out of them, however best to describe it; charm will do, I think you know what I mean. Without going into details, my charming efforts--mixed in with withdrawals into television and sports reading and munching on junk food and generally hiding out--has continued throughout my life: in school, with friendships, in love relationships, at work, and in avocational involvements.

Anybody taking in what I was doing all those years would have been left wondering what was going on with me--all the smiles and placating and fawning and shuffling and performing and tail-wagging--though I doubt that I have had enough salience, took up enough space, in anybody's life, or in the larger world, for someone to put effort into doing that: nobody I can think of has ever talked about this pattern with me. I never thought much about it until late in life and, this has been gratifying, put an end to it; or just about put an end to it anyway, it still rears its ugly head from time to time. It always felt--literally felt, it was a gross, inarticulate, undifferentiated inner reality that provided the basis for what I thought and did--the right approach, strategy, tactic, at a particular time, my only option given who I was and the possibilities in my context. At times it seemed to be working for me and gave me some hope: they are coming around, they like me, they respect me, they want me around, that sort of thing. But staying with Tina Fey's line of work, I can attest to the fact that giving yourself over to trying to charm the uninterested is like doing stand-up comedy or improvisations: they may attend to you for a time, laugh at your

jokes, or at you, but then they return to their drinks and what they really care about and you wind up sitting alone in your dressing room feeling empty and alone and somehow not OK.

I have concluded that getting a good life going, for some people anyway, involves putting an end to attempts to charm the uninterested. Even if you get really good at it things still aren't really right, because while it has its payoffs--your own TV show, a promotion at work, getting invited in for a drink, and so on--something is still off in your life; too much energy is going out and it's draining your well and not enough of what you really need is coming in, and that leaves you in a deficit, or incomplete, state, and that circumstance can you can turn you to drink or, in my case, bags of pita chips washed down with Caffeine Free Diet Coke.

It seems to me that the challenge, at least for some of us, is to do two things at the same time: 1) stop trying to charm the uninterested (which includes the disrespectful, disdainful, and outright antagonistic or hostile), and 2) start playing our lives to interested *and interesting* people, and figuring out what is in the way of doing that if it isn't happening and doing something about it. For sure, that isn't easy to accomplish in a lot of cases, but it is worth giving all we have in us to create that arrangement even if it turns out we aren't up to the job. Trying and failing at that good task will make us happier than tap dancing to the distracted.

Making our lives work in this regard often begins with a negation: declaring to ourselves "No more of that" and meaning it, feeling it, from the top of our heads to the bottom of our feet. We may not be in a position to make YES--a personally fulfilling state of affairs--a reality in our lives due to limitations in ourselves and/or our situations, in this area or any other, but at every moment in our existence on this earth we have the power to make a very important kind of NO a reality. At every instant--now, and now, and now, and now--we have the capability to shift our posture, our stance in the world, our being, mind and body, to NO. "Enough!" "I'm not being that way anymore!" "I'm not doing that anymore!" "I'm not going along with that anymore!" "I'm worth more than that, I matter more than that!" "I've had it with caring about what you think of me!" "Do what you want, I'll sell shoes or sit alone with the best book I can find at the library before I do any more of that!"

Ironically, NO--negativity--is an incredibly positive possibility, potentiality, we all possess. It can be the start of making things

really work in our lives; and even if it doesn't lead to that, it is a way to be honorable, and being honorable feels really good, and it is not a surface and fleeting experience, a sense of honor permeates our being and it lasts all day, and through tomorrow and the next day and the next.