

On Embarrassment (And Other Unpleasantness)

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In these web site thoughts, I've identified topics for study--perhaps even academic, scholarly, investigation--for others with more energy than I have in this last stage of life to take up. An example, impressiveness from a particular angle: how individuals who don't really deserve it impress people. See the thoughts "On Jerry Lewis' Socks" (March, 2011), "On Unimpressives" (March, 2012), and "On Pseudo-Self-Effacement" (May, 2013); and now that I think about it, the 2007 writing "Ken Burns' Show Business" gets at this topic too. This thought invites explorations into the phenomenon of embarrassment.

No matter what topic I get into, there's always some personal connection I have with it. In some part at least, I'm trying to understand what's going on in my own life and to use that understanding to direct my way forward from here. My read on myself is that I'm particularly prone to being embarrassed and stewing over it.

To illustrate, I'm hearing impaired and can't hear in groups and generally tend to speak too loudly because I can't hear my own voice. Last week, I was in a faculty meeting at the university and I couldn't hear a thing and I leaned over to say something to the person next to me in what I thought was sotto voce. Well, it obviously wasn't. The person I was speaking to leaned toward me and put her index finger to her mouth and said "Shhhh." I was embarrassed for the rest of the meeting and the rest of the day--actually, I haven't gotten over it completely yet.

Of course the question is, why was the embarrassment, why is it still, such a big deal for me? I can't hear, everyone knows that. What I did was understandable. The "shusher" was doing the reasonable thing and wasn't trying to put me down. Without a doubt, the only person

thinking afterwards, including right now, about that episode was/is me. So what's going on? I don't have a ready answer to that question. I hope writing out this thought will help me some in that regard.

What I'll do here is free associate about embarrassment and see what, if anything, it adds up to for both me and you.

The first thing that pops into my mind occurred decades ago. As part of my training to become a secondary school teacher, I was assigned to teach a single lesson to a class of high school juniors. I had never taught before, so this is an account of my very first day of teaching.

My job that day was to instruct a class hour, fifty minutes, on the Civil War. What I knew about the Civil War, as my mother used to say, you could put in your eye. The lesson was to be on the war's causes—slavery, economic issues, state versus federal prerogatives, and on through a list. I went to a history textbook chapter on the topic and essentially copied down what it said. In the jargon of teaching, lecturing that material was my lesson plan for the day.

I was nervous about this upcoming teaching assignment. I had never been in front of anything but a television set in my entire life. Standing in front a group of high school students? It gave me the shivers. Now that I think of it, neither the supervising teacher—the teacher whose class it was, the regular teacher—nor anyone else, say on the teaching education program's faculty, gave me any assistance at all. I'm pondering now why, back then, I didn't think to ask for help or even expect anyone to help me.

Came the day for my Civil War lesson. The regular teacher—I still remember his name, Mike Rockler, Mr. Rucker—stood in front of the room and said “This is Mr. Griffin” and rapidly proceeded to the back of the room

and sat in a student desk. It strikes me now—it didn't then—that Rockler's introduction could have been a little more detailed. You can't get more perfunctory than "This is Mr. Griffin"—four words total.

Onto the stage comes Mr. Griffin—as far as I know, I'd never been called Mr. Griffin in my entire life—in a cheap blue dress shirt and a poorly knotted tie carrying the paper with what I had copied from the textbook. I was soaked in perspiration. I later noticed huge circles of sweat staining the armpits of my shirt. The students had to have been distracted by them.

I furtively glanced at the class—I've always had trouble looking at people. The class had the stunned look of passersby who had come upon a bad car accident.

With speeded-up motions that must have looked like the jerky movements of an early silent movie, I darted the few feet to the rear to the blackboard. I'd rarely—ever?—used a piece of chalk and held it the wrong way and it screeched as, my back to the class, I wrote "Cival War" on the board and turned, paper in hand, tightly rolled up it turned out, I hadn't noticed I was twirling it into a tight coil, and traversed the short distance to the front of the class.

There I stood and there they sat. Silence hung heavy in the high school classroom with the door closed. I noticed the clock on the back wall, but it didn't come into focus.

I unfurled the piece of paper. Throughout the lesson, I had trouble keeping it open; it kept rolling back into its curled-up position. Without looking up beyond fleeting and furtive glances, I read through what I had written up/copied on the causes of the Civil War. I had practiced my lecture a couple of times in the messy small apartment near the university campus where I lived alone. Shortly thereafter, the landlord evicted me for not keeping the place up ("Get out!"). I figured getting the students into

their seats and the introductions—I had assumed Mr. Rucker would be a bit more expansive in his remarks than he turned out to be—would take about ten minutes, so that left forty minutes for me to occupy. If my lecture took thirty minutes and there were ten minutes for student comments and questions, that's it, I'd get through the hour.

The practice session lectures took up thirty minutes, so I thought I was set on that part of the lesson. I was a little distracted while I was doing the run-throughs by the football game I was watching on television at the same time, plus the potato chips I was munching took some time, reaching into the bag and all and occasionally wiping off my salty fingers with a crumpled-up towel, and I later realized I should have subtracted some time from my calculations to account for that, but still, at that time anyway, I was pretty sure—thirty minutes for the lecture, got it. I had concerns about the comments-and-questions period at the end, because everything I knew about the causes of the Civil War was what I had in my lecture. But I told myself that it would be just ten minutes, and that no matter what students said or asked I'd just repeat something I said in the lecture; good enough.

So here I am in front of the class. The thought/feeling flashed to me, this is really *it!* There they are, the students and Rucker in the back of the room, and they're looking at *me*. I'm the looker in life, not the lookee. I watch television, read sport magazines, go to the movies, and read Sid Hartman's sports column in *The Minneapolis Star and Tribune* (this was in Minnesota). But now I'm actually *doing* something, me. Damn. How'd I get into this?

I desperately wanted to go right back to my cluttered apartment and devour *The Sporting News* magazine, but that didn't seem a viable option, so I started reading my lecture, all the while trying to keep the pages from rolling up. Evidently the pressures of the occasion speeded me

up quite a bit because when I was done and looked at the clock on the back wall, this time it came into focus, it had taken up a little over twenty minutes, not thirty minutes. That left—in my panic, I didn't know exactly how much time was left in the class, but a lot of time anyway, what seemed like an eternity.

I glanced up, eyes darting from here to there like a pinball in action.

“Does anybody have any comments or questions?” I choked.

The class, Rockler included, looked like a blown up photograph. Nothing.

“Well,” I gasped, “let me review the points I want you to remember,” and from the beginning I started reading back through the lecture. When I glanced up now and again, I saw what I would describe now as sober incredulity. Nobody laughed or talked, there was nothing like that.

Right near the end of my lecture's replay, I sensed motion and heard shuffling, and when I looked up students were proceeding toward the door, some talking to each other, none of them looking at me--the class hour had ended.

Mr. Roker was among the departing. Just before he got to the door, he turned back toward me and pointed his finger at me and smiled and then walked out the door, which I took to mean “Good job”—or did it? I wasn't sure.

There I was, suddenly standing alone at the front of an empty classroom. It was at this point that I noticed that my pants were unzipped. I quickly zipped them. Erasing “Cival War” from the blackboard surfaced the concern that there may have been a problem with that spelling—sadly, I wasn't sure. Later, when I checked it, my spirits took a dip. I rolled up the lecture notes—easy enough to do--and put them in my back pocket, no

briefcase, or even a file folder, in those days, and left the room, closing the door behind me, click. I bought a newspaper from a vending machine and walked a couple of blocks to a McDonald's and sat alone reading Sid Hartman's column while I wolfed down two Big Macs and a large order of French fries and drank a small Coke in a paper cup.

Yes indeed, I was embarrassed. And a lot of other things too—humiliated, isolated, frightened, revealed, and overwhelmed, and feeling out of place and worthless and a nobody. Embarrassed was just part of a mix. Perhaps embarrassment never exists alone; perhaps it's always one element in a conglomeration of feelings/thoughts/images in reciprocal interplay, each one contributing to and being affected by the others. That's something I need to think more about, and perhaps you could too.

As I think about it now, why didn't this Rockler—he was supposed to be my supervisor—give me any help in putting the lesson together? And why didn't he take the time later to sit down with me and critique it—he didn't. What was going on with him, and/or me, that accounted for his lack of investment and concern for what I was doing, and for the fact that I didn't make anything of it at the time?

“Rockler” episodes, to make a metaphor out of what happened on that occasion—doing something with no help and no favorable response and feeling alone and out of place and embarrassed, where can I hide, how can I numb myself out—have been frequent to the point of typical in my life all the way through. Although I'm not sure how, I think I have unknowingly contributed to this pattern. I'm at the end of my career and my life and I suppose it doesn't any difference whether I analyze it and do something different now, but I wish I had taken the time in the past to understand and change things in this regard rather than, as I did, cope with whatever happened, endure

it, hurt over it, and without protest or even comment and with a slight obsequious and frightened smile on my face. Hamburgers, French fries, and Cokes make life better for a few minutes, as does sport reading and games on television, but they are palliatives, they don't solve life's problems. `

Other embarrassing moments for me that come to mind sitting here in front of the computer screen:

Invariably, I'm the one at the dress-up conference table or family get-together at a restaurant who knocks over the water glass. Nobody says anything. I sputter, "I'm so sorry." Other than rapidly putting the glass upright, I do nothing. I stand, or sit, I'm flexible about that, frozen. Someone stands up and with her, usually her, napkin, and bending over, dries the table. Things revert to normal, except there is a big water stain on the tablecloth, a lasting reminder of what has happened, and it seems people are talking around me and I've become persona non grata. Or maybe that's not really going on, or it is and I'm contributing to it by sitting there mute and withdrawn and, yes, embarrassed.

Another dinner table moment, I was cutting into a grape fruit at a professional conference dinner table amid strangers and juice squirted from my grape fruit onto the dress of the formidable-looking middle-aged woman sitting next to me.

Do I say anything to her about it? Yes I do, I decide. "Excuse me, I feel dreadful about this, but I was cutting my grapefruit and, well, that stain on your dress is from my grapefruit."

"Where?"

"Right there."

"Oh."

Without comment or change of expression, she dabs at it with her napkin and turns back to the woman on the other side of the table from me she had been talking to.

I decide no more grapefruit and in the process of setting it aside I knocked over my coffee cup.

Many more examples are flooding into my consciousness, but you get the idea. Embarrassment and me seem to have been joined at the hip.

The Wade Boggs incident comes to mind. This has to have been twenty years ago. Boggs was a Hall of Fame caliber third baseman for the Boston Red Sox and other teams. He was married with a bunch of kids. He got caught taking this woman who was not his wife along with him on road trips, for four years as I remember. Big scandal. Headlines not only in the sport pages but on the front pages as well.

What I found intriguing about the Boggs case is how Boggs responded to it. He refused to play his part in the drama. He didn't come off embarrassed--or shamed, a cheat, or humbled, diminished, contrite, or apologetic, none of that. No groveling from Wade, no apologies, no extended explanations. In a few sentences, he said that he had watched an Oprah show the day before about sex addiction and that it had fit him, he was a sex addict, that's it, case closed. Was he going to do anything about his sex adduction? No, he didn't have any plans in that direction. What about his wife? He made a mistake, he acknowledged, but what she did about his transgressions was up to her. As they say in sports, Wade Boggs had moved on. The media could pound away at the story for as long as it liked, but it would do it without his participation. As far as I know, Boggs' marriage prevailed.

At the time, I coined a term I used privately, "boggling." That meant refusing to be whatever you are

supposed to be—embarrassed, remorseful, shamed, diminished, whatever it was. Just get on with your life. I can't honestly say I've ever actually employed this strategy, but it seems as if it could be useful.

Bogging seems to have been used effectively by former President Clinton. Could there be a more embarrassing, humiliating, whatever the best term or terms for it, story on the front page of *The New York Times* than Clinton and Monica and a cigar? I won't go into details about its particulars. If you don't know about it, you can look it up. If there was ever a time to be embarrassed and hang one's head in shame that was it. And yet, there was Clinton smiling and standing tall. I'm not contending that was all he did, but it looks to me that a good part of his response to the Monica business was to bogg it, and that could have contributed to the fact that he's doing very well in public opinion at this writing.

To get at what I'm talking about, contrast Clinton's response to the Monica affair (and several others in this same basic category) with evangelist Jimmy Swaggart's self-flagellation when his extra-marital dallying came to light. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yWkVa-_sd24 Although it must be kept in mind that Swaggart's approach may have worked better for him in his situation than bogging would have. It's important not to get locked into just one way of doing business in life. Do whatever works for you. Have a wide variety of responses to circumstances of this general sort ready to go—including bogging and self-flagellation—and employ the one or ones in combination that best get you where you want to go. (Don't do as I do, do as I say.)

Over the years working at a university, any number of faculty members would unthinkingly hit “reply all” to a mass email and inadvertently announce their private business to the entire college or university. Though I

came close a couple of times, I caught myself, I have had the good fortune not to have done this, but if I had it would have been so embarrassing to me that I would have immediately headed out to the nearest convenience store for biggest bottle of cheap red wine I could find.

One thing I have had to deal with in the university is flap over my writings. As anyone who has perused this web site or looked over the list of my books on Amazon knows, I have written with respect and concern for the status and fate of European heritage, white, people. That is a cardinal sin in the contemporary American university and grounds for being pilloried and excommunicated as a heretic. When my ignorance and evil were brought to light, I have been, yes, embarrassed about it. As I think about it here, what was I embarrassed about? I had every right to be proud of what I was doing. Given the relentless ideological and political preaching in our time, I can understand the converted shrieking, "There's an infidel among us!" I get that. But what accounts for my embarrassment? Why didn't I stop and think, "What exactly do I have to be embarrassed about? Nothing. So knock off the embarrassment!" And where was my outrage? I hope others in positions similar to what I've gotten myself into around my writing do better than I have done responding to the attacks by today's inquisitors.

I think of former congressman, and appropriately named, Andrew Weiner, who late one night pushed the wrong button and sent a sexting message with his private part on it to his entire mailing list. What must it have been like for him when it dawned on him what he had done? Speaking of embarrassment. Here's a good topic for study: the moment it hits you that you have made a horrible, and irredeemable, mistake.

A great example of that moment in someone's life was a segment of a show on NBC television some years ago

called “To Catch a Predator.” The producers of that show would bait adult males, always men, to show up at a house expecting a sexual liaison with a twelve-or-thirteen-year-old. It doesn’t get any seedier, or embarrassing, or personally and professionally damaging, than this. The classic episode in that show was with a rabbi named David Kaye, who sauntered into a kitchen unannounced thinking he was going to have sex with a young boy. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xt6MmzRRYk0> If you watch the YouTube, note how the smile comes off Kaye’s face. Priceless.

The Kaye example appears to show that every hit in life, even the most embarrassing—or devastating, or life transforming, or regretful—can also be a gift. My understanding is that having his long-standing issue revealed to the world helped Kaye come to grips with the reality of his life, and that, while he has paid an enormous cost for what was exposed on national television, he has achieved greater peace with himself than ever before. Perhaps that is also true of Bill Clinton and Jimmy Swaggart—and Eliot Spitzer, the former Governor of New York, if you are familiar with that case.

I realize I’m been all over the place in this thought, which nominally anyway has been about embarrassment. Or maybe it really has been about embarrassment, and what’s come out of this is that actual, experienced, embarrassment never exists alone—there are always other feelings, thoughts, inner pictures, memories, and external realities occurring along with it, and that these other phenomena need to be taken into account and understood as co-products or byproducts of embarrassment and contributors to it. And maybe too, what has come out of this is that the cause of embarrassment and the responsibility for doing something about doesn’t just reside with the person embarrassed. Yes, it is my, your, embarrassment, and we have to go to work

to understand it and take action to deal with it. But that doesn't let other people off the hook. Like this Rockler character, or the cruel people trying to hurt me for invoking my right to freedom of speech in America; shame on them

How about if you see what sense you can make of what I have offered in this thought and take it from here to make better sense of your own life and the lives of others? Perhaps as a start, you could think of a time you were terribly embarrassed—or caught, revealed, humiliated—anyway, knocked for a loop. Figure out what went on and why. That might be a good start.

While you are at that, think about the gift for you, the positive possibility for you, that was inherent in that painful situation, even though you may have missed its presence at the time. Such as you were someplace, with some people, you shouldn't been; you need to get with better people. Or were carrying some baggage from your past that you need to dump in a trash bin. Or were treated in ways that weren't kind and right, and you need to get those people off your case or get yourself away from them. Or you need to learn to control what you focus on in your life and get on with that business and drop the rest, including whatever it is you're embarrassed about. Perhaps you need to practice doing what Wade Boggs did: moving on.