

On Jerry Lewis' Socks
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At this writing in March of 2011, Larry King has recently ended his nightly CNN interview show. Knowing Larry was in his last days, I found myself watching his program more than usual. One of Larry's guests toward the end of his run was the son of the late American actress Grace Kelly and her, also late, husband, Prince Rainier of Monaco--Monaco being a tiny principality in Southwestern Europe on the Mediterranean Sea (I just looked it up). He came off as an affable, pudgy, early-middle-aged, completely unremarkable sort, whose only claim to fame that I know about besides being the son of Grace Kelly (her marriage elevated her to Princess status) and the Prince of Monaco is fathering an illegitimate child with a flight attendant from Togo. I never picked up his full name because the sign at the bottom of the screen billed him as "Prince Albert II" and Larry only referred to him throughout the interview as "Your Serene Highness."

Watching Larry grovel with this Prince Albert II got me thinking about a possible area of inquiry that might prove profitable to me and perhaps others, including you: 1) How do people who aren't better than other people make these other people think they are? and 2) Why do people, at least some of them, let them get away with it, and how can they stop doing that? My assumption is that some me-over-you tactics along this line tend to work across the board, with the mass of people--this "Serene Highness" hustle being an example--but when it comes down to the level of the individual they have differential effects: what might work big with me wouldn't work as well, or at all, with you. So part of this area of exploration is figuring out how this phenomenon works with individual people. Until recent years, I was a master at feeling less than other people without valid justification. I've unhooked myself to a great extent from that self-limiting tendency, and it is one of the things I feel particularly good about accomplishing in my life.

As I let my mind go where it would around this topic, an image from my childhood came up having to do with comedian Jerry Lewis' socks no less. Jerry Lewis is now in his 80s and best known for hosting the Labor Day telethon for the Muscular Dystrophy

Association. In the 1950s, when I was a kid, he was a huge star in nightclubs, movies, and television with his partner, the singer Dean Martin. I watched tons of television in those years and Martin and Lewis were on the "Colgate Comedy Hour" on Sunday nights and I never missed a show.

Around this same time, I read a good number of feature articles, interviews, that kind of thing, in newspapers and magazines about Jerry Lewis. In a lot of them Jerry let it be known that he never wore a pair of socks more than once. Every single time Jerry Lewis put on a pair of socks, he unpeeled the sticky paper with the label on it that holds the socks together and pulled on a brand new pair of socks. When he took a shower or changed clothes during the day, same thing: new socks. What did Jerry Lewis do with the used socks?--he gave them to charity.

Since this new-socks revelation coupled with a hint of noblesse oblige charity came up so often, I'm supposing now Lewis and/or his public relations people had decided that informing the public of this aspect of his life would get it across that he was on a higher plane than the rest of us plebeians and deserved attention and deference. When you think about it, the socks ploy was a creative way to make that point. I worked with me, I know that: socks alone put Jerry Lewis with all his new socks way up there and me way down here with my two pair, the faded blue dress socks, and the yellow and itchy and saggy from a zillion washings formerly-white sweat socks. Jerry Lewis and me: never the twain shall meet.

Other memories that popped into mind from my childhood had to do with costumes. In grade school and high school, there was the scratchy and jerky old movie footage of WWI military parades and diplomatic ceremonies. These were Europeans, from the Hapsburg Empire or something, or maybe they were British, or French; I never really caught on to who these people strutting around were exactly, but I did pick up on the ornate uniforms, wow! Gold braiding looped over their shoulders, rows of ribbons pinned to their chests, wide leather belts, stripes down the side of their pants, and they had swords, and pointy hats with shiny visors with plumes in the front. As I think about it now, these men had gone out and found a feather and stuck in their hats and paraded around with the feather on, silly really. But I assume it got their point across that they were a big major deal, and I know for certain that in the gross, inarticulate

way I processed the world in those years I felt you'd have to be on a much higher plane of existence than I was to be decked out like that.

And then there were the things other kids said to me: "My father is a doctor and my family has been in this community for sixty-two generations and your father cuts hair and you people got here Tuesday," or something to that effect. "I'm in the Catholic Church and you are going to hell." "We are going to our lake cabin this weekend." (I was going to watch Jerry Lewis on television.) That kind of thing worked like a charm with me: them up there, me down here.

When I was about twenty, this was in college, I remember "Tom Hanson is a super guy." For some reason, other guys kept telling that, though as I remember it was pretty much left at the level of generalization; I don't recall exactly why it was that Tom was so great. Thinking about it now, to a good extent this persistent affirmation that Tom Hanson *was* all that much was probably a way to let me know that I *wasn't* all that much--I don't remember the Tom Hanson adulation ever being paired up with a positive word about me. A contrast was being established between Tom and me that wasn't favorable to me. Part of the Tom Hanson worship, I suspect, was to establish by transference, these other guys' connection with Tom Hanson, that not only was Tom better than I was, so were they.

In any case, I remember vague feelings of being less, or diminished, by these regular "Tom Hanson" exchanges, although I had no articulate understanding of why. I believe now I had been in a subtle little put-down game, or transaction, that didn't help my cause. Growing up, I was oblivious to the subtleties of human thrusts and parries in relationships, and, to stay with that metaphor, came away from my encounters with the world with a large number of puncture wounds that didn't heal for a long, long time, and some of them have never healed.

For the life of me, I couldn't figure out back then what Tom had going for him all that much, except I noticed that he bunched his sweater sleeves up around his elbows. Maybe that's a big part of Tom's magic, I thought to myself. So I started bunching my sweater sleeves, although it didn't seem to have any effect on boosting my

ratings among the guys. This was a half-century ago, and right now typing this, my sweater sleeves are bunched up around my elbows, and so help me I thought of Tom Hanson--wherever he is, if he's still alive--when I pushed them up like that.

I think I have this "Tom Hanson" phenomenon going on now in my life. Every contact I have with a certain person, he fawns over someone who writes in the same area I do at times, all the while saying nothing good about me. Every time he does this--and that is every time he has anything to do with me--I think "Tom Hanson." I've decided that he's not talking so much about today's version of Tom Hanson as he is making a point about me--I'm nothing much--and truth be told, it's getting a little old.

I'm a university professor in education and there's been "I'm getting published in *Harvard Educational Review* and *Teachers College Record* [and you aren't]." HER and the TC Record are two politically correct professional journals that given my outlook on things wouldn't publish me if I wrote the educational equivalent of *War and Peace*. "The committee meets Tuesday [and I'm on it and you haven't been invited to be on it]." One of the ways to handle ideological outliers is to freeze them out of committees. "Students love my classes [and they don't sign up for yours]." One of the ways to go over big with students is tell them what they want to hear and throw grades at them, and I refuse to do either one. Plus, and it's been gratifying to me, the more I have become who I am and let that be known in the world the more students have taken my courses, even in the face of being advised not to, so I'm told by some of them, because I have "bad" ideas on education and race and am sexist to boot. One comment I especially liked is one a colleague made to me about a book of mine I had slaved over for a year and a half to produce: "I could have written that in six weeks." I was far enough along at that point in my life to think "F--- you" in response to that sharing. Perhaps saying that expletive out loud is my next stage of development.

I'm being rather light about this, but you get the idea of what I'm getting at here, and I know you could come up with a load of examples from your own experience. One-up posturing goes on all the time, everywhere: people trying to look better than other people without actually being better. I see three basic lines of

inquiry related to this phenomenon: 1) Identify the various maneuvers people employ to look better than other people when they aren't. 2) Identify what makes some people especially prone to being taken in by it, or at least particular manifestations of it. 3) Identify ways to stop being negatively affected by this sort of thing. I'll speak briefly to each of these three lines, or areas, of investigation to get things started.

With reference to the first one, how they do it, I'll cite the "I'm in a slot in the scheme of things that makes me better than you are" move. With reference to my circumstance in the university, someone gets to be a department chair or dean and they come on as if they know more than I do, have better judgment than I do, can now look down at me, and so on. No, they are still who they are and I'm still who I am. If they were intellectual lightweights and on the indolent side before getting this particular job, nothing has changed and I'm not going to pretend it has. And they are not going to get away with patronizing me. Along those same lines, because some mediocrity gets elected senator--I have someone particular in mind--that doesn't suddenly make him wiser or more worthy than I am, or you are.

With the second one--why people buy "I'm better than you are" tactics--I'll offer negative childhood conditioning as a major cause of it, or at least something to review carefully if you are looking to deal with this issue. If individuals learn early in life that they are unwanted, unneeded, and/or basically worthless in the eyes of the world, or that their people are less because of one reason or another (in my case, the schools at every level demonized my white Southern heritage), or that they better not make anybody uncomfortable or be a threat to anybody or they will get hurt, anything like that, their job is to identify and expel it or they are going to have problems with what we are talking about here. And if anyone has any say in how others see themselves early in life--children, students--the challenge is not to impose these damaging self-conceptions and assumptions on them.

As for getting over the tendency to accept the idea that you should feel less than someone else or people in some group or category:

Wake up. Get off automatic pilot. Be present, awake, alert, here, now, in this instant. Be vigilant to you're-a-notch-below-me-and-mine pitches.

Get healthy. Mental and physical wellbeing are essentials to living well in any area of life, including this one.

Declare to yourself that you are no lower, by any criterion, no less important, than any human being on the planet earth, no exceptions. You will respect those who deserve it, but you kowtow to nobody. You look everybody straight in the eye. Believe in that, feel that, let that pervade your body, your being; make that your posture, your bearing, your stance in the world. Make that part of every breath you take.

Get on your unique path in life and walk it honorably. Do you--the one-and-only you--fully, completely, the best you can within reason (you aren't perfect), forthrightly, and with courage. Make integrity --the alignment of your actions with your highest beliefs and values --your personal standard, not rank order. Stubbornly refuse to compare yourself with other people and use it as the measure of your worth. If others are doing well in whatever it is they are doing, that's great, feel good for them and let them know that, learn from their accomplishment where it applies to what you are doing, but don't get caught up with whether they are better or worse than you are.

I hope this is enough to get us started in this domain of inquiry. One way of looking at the history of the world, and at current reality, is as a series of attempts by individuals and groups to make themselves appear to be on a higher plane, more the action, more deserving, than other people when they aren't and get the perks that come from that. Think about all of this with reference to yourself and those you care about and the world generally and feel invited to let me know what came out of it.

