

THE ATMOSPHERE WE SHARE

A sermon preached by the Reverend John H. Nichols to the First Parish of Wayland,
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There is a Cape Cod restaurant I particularly enjoy and when I am in the area I frequently stop in. I've been going there often enough that some of the servers greet me by name. A glass of my favorite wine rushes to my table and often it gets there before I do. I look forward to being recognized there.

I enjoy the ritual. And to show my appreciation I leave a generous tip. It has occurred to me that my generous tip and my warm reception may be related to each other. I don't care. It means a great deal to me to be treated with courtesy. I think it means a great deal to most of us.

Before the gas crisis, when I needed gasoline in the Wellesley area, I drove to one particular gas station in Needham. I could get cheaper gas out on Route 9, but then the only human being I would deal with would be some kid in a glass cage who took my money in on a tray and then, without speaking, pushes my change back out.

At the station where I did go, the attendant and I had the same conversation every week about the weather and the Red Sox. He washed my windows, thanked me for my business and left me with the impression that we were old friends. I know this is not true, But I did appreciate his pretending that it is true. In fact I will go out of my way to deal with people who treat me with warmth. Many people will go out of their way for warmth and civility. The last time I used this example, preaching in Wellesley; six people asked me where the station was.

In the market where I shop there are two cashiers. One is a young woman whose basic affect when any one approaches is, "Why are you interrupting my life?" And there is a woman whose affect is, "Wasn't I lucky that you came to my cash register today?" I will go to her register no matter how long the line in front of me.

These are rituals of civility, and the fact that we mean nothing deeply intimate by them shouldn't trouble anyone. A genuine smile from someone we meet adds something special to our lives. If we get smiled at two or three times in a day or a week, we notice it, and it makes a difference. Even a smile – just a smile – can be a ritual, and these little rituals of recognition add up to something that is life affirming.

The opposite is also true. Rituals that are demeaning or reflect indifference deteriorate the climate in which we live. The clerk who invites me to "Have a Nice Day" in a way that reflects he couldn't care less what kind of a day I have always

irritates me. If we meet that sort of indifference everywhere, we have to work to fight off the corrosive negativity in our lives.

Some folks do encounter indifference or hostility everywhere. There are entire communities where coarse, crude or hostile human interactions – rituals in their own right – breed their own form of inhumanity. Most of us live with what we must, but as insults to our personhood pile up our outlook on the world and other people changes. Much depends on whether the rituals of our lives reflect civility or incivility.

Consider the handshake as a ritual. I'm told its origins are Medieval. The extension of an open right hand signified to someone else then that there was no sword or dagger in it. The gesture said, "I will not attempt to hurt you," which was no small promise in those days.

Let us consider the handshake today. Most children resist it at all costs. I did too when I was a child, until I was admonished to look someone in the eye when they shook my hand. We, as adults, often, take it for granted. Still, the handshake is not only a ritual, but also a status report between two people. It is a letter of reference we send about ourselves often to a complete or relative stranger.

A bone-crushing handshake conveys a message that is unmistakable and unpleasant. It says, "I am a powerful person, and that should give you something to think about." A limp handshake says, "Take my hand. Please. You can have it. I am no longer attached to it. In fact, I'm not really here at all." And a handshake without eye contact says, "I am here, but you are not. To me your hand is just another doorknob in the way of my progress." And some handshakes say, "Please! Let's just get this dreadful moment over as quickly as possible." Is the handshake a trivial gesture? A social nicety? Or is it an extension of our life's spirit into the world of other people?

In Wellesley where I was a settled minister for 23 years, when I had done greeting parishioners at the end of a service, I had received impressions of friendship, agreement, appreciation, joy and contentment from people I had come to know. I also received impressions of distance, sadness, concern, disagreement and hurt from some. And I would have received those impressions had not a word been spoken. Their handshakes were the single most communicative pastoral experience of my week.

On the walls of the chapel at Stanford University these words are inscribed, "Thought and works travel just as God's life travels. They do not travel like an individual, but you breathe your spiritual life out into the atmosphere as you do your breath, and someone else breathes it in. Those not present still receive of it, for it permeates space, and all live in it and receive from it according to their unfolding."

In other words, everything we do creates the atmosphere in which other people live and work. We are affected by the world other people create for us. Without becoming rich or famous or powerful or even popular you and I can alter the feeling tone of the place where we are. In fact we do this all the time. The good news is that we can change the world we share with others for the better. And, of course, we can change it greatly for the worse.

Many years ago what I have just said would sound like a truism – hardly worth a sermon. For generations, civility was a way of life. It was an expectation that one entered the world of other people by learning certain rituals. Let me give you an example. Over a century ago, shortly after Leland Stanford hammered a golden spike into a Utah plateau, a transcontinental railroad connected our coasts. Previously only the rich could travel anywhere, but now everyone with some money could travel in a week the distance Lewis and Clarke traveled in the better part of a year.

Railroad travel was pretty primitive then. You had to sit on hard wooden benches in carriages that had no shock absorbers. We would have considered it a crude form of transportation eliciting a crude response. In those days the railroad was the great miracle of the Nineteenth Century, and their response was, if it was that important, of course there should be a book on the manners that would dignify this new form of transportation.

The book was written. It was published. It became a best seller. It was titled Politeness on Railroads. The book included passages like the following, “Whispering, loud talking, immoderate laughing and singing should not be indulged by any passenger... Passengers should not engage one another in embarrassing way...” The book also reported that conductors would crack down on passengers who “indulged personal preferences at the expense of other passengers.” Can you imagine any Twenty First Century author writing and selling a small book on Appropriate Behavior on U.S. Air? Or Mass Transportation Manners? How about a book titled Proper Cell Phone Etiquette?

What intrigues me about this is that for all of their innocence, many Nineteenth Century Americans, people who lived in a world that seemed so much larger to them than our world does to us, still understood one thing very clearly. We are all passengers on the same train or boat, and the only way for us to get through this journey is to allow each other an equal amount of space, freedom and dignity. Perhaps they learned this because they often found themselves in groups they would not have chosen but could not avoid. After all strangers arriving at the same Inn at the same time often shared a bed. Their rituals of civility enabled them to get through the experience.

We do not have as many rituals of civility now, because the idea of our being passengers on the same journey would be very difficult for many to accept. In truth we are all intensely involved in our own individual journeys, and if there is

any public connection between us we tend to assume it is purely coincidental. Instead, we drive around our communities in our own gasoline powered bubbles. We travel in self ordered, entirely enclosed worlds. When we do share public transportation many of us recognize grudgingly if at all that others are actually on the same trip in the same vehicle.

Examples are so easy to come by. The person who races through airport security causing flights to be delayed two hours and more along the entire Eastern seaboard. The person who has a loud cell phone conversation in a restaurant or on the train. They are all in their own small bubble.

In small ways and large everything that wells up inside of us – our frustration and anger, our pain and sadness, our happiness and love, our greed and our generosity – everything we feel and are permeates the atmosphere in which other people live. They breathe our lives in and we breathe theirs. There is no way out of this interconnected web of human lives and spirits. The only meaningful choice we have is whether what comes forth from our lives is supportive or harmful.

Think for a minute about the language we use so casually. We talk about “being in your face” as if it were, in some way, an admirable quality as is “kicking butt.” People describe others who make bad decisions as “having their heads handed to them.” If they make too many bad moves in business their companies may become the targets of “hostile takeovers” which may lead to “dismembering” a company unless defeated by a “poison pill.” And if you are really part of a dismembered company you may have to send your resume out to a “headhunter.”

I know these phrases seem innocuous enough to people who use them frequently just as in an army barracks most men don't recognize that the language they habitually use is laced with illusions not merely to sex but to sexual violence and exploitation. Taken as a whole, the language we use and the rituals we employ permeate the atmosphere in which we live with other people. Regardless of what we think we mean, our language and rituals do suggest that, as we also say, “It is a jungle out there.”

But civilization is not a jungle, because if it is a jungle, it is not civilization. At the very least, civilization is a recognition that together we create an atmosphere in which each of us must live. It should be a place where people can meet without fear. It should be a place where none but the social outlaw is truly indifferent to the helplessness or the pain of another person. It should be a place where people might even be expected to help one another out if the occasion demanded it.

The ethics most of us have grown up with actually come from the Biblical tradition, and they speak a great deal about welcoming strangers and giving

them what we, today, would consider incredible liberties with our hospitality. These strange rules reflect customs that come from the ancient Middle East. In a climate that is harsh and unforgiving, when a traveler comes to your door you take him in. He may or may not stay. You may or may not like him. But you never refuse him hospitality.

Of course, it is difficult for us to understand these customs. Many of us do not always answer our phones, let alone open our doors to strangers. Many of us have so much personal, private space that we barely need to share anything even with the members of our family let alone the rest of the world. We take our forays out into the realm of other people in our own personal vehicles. Little by little, year-by-year, it becomes easier to retreat from the public realm where the stranger may be encountered.

Yet as we become more isolated we feel helpless to affect the drift of our society toward indifference, callousness or cruelty. We're not sure there is anything we can do: the forces arrayed against the world we want to see are so great.

There is something each of us can do, and it is a very simple something. We can practice the rituals of civility and do so regardless of many provocations to do otherwise. And those rituals will minutely but importantly alter that part of the world that is ours to alter. There are times when we feel truly helpless to alleviate the pain, injustice and unkindness of this world, but there is one thing we can do and it is very significant. We can treat everyone with civility and warmth. It makes a big difference.

My theology for this morning is very simple. What we breathe out into the atmosphere, others breathe in. If we breathe out indifference, if we breathe out hostility, and others do the same – we will poison a portion of the world that we need to be caring. If we bring kindness, compassion and hope – even if only momentarily – to the people in our world, we shape the quality of their lives for that moment and perhaps for a lot longer.