

24 January 2021

Dear Friends of Elmwood,

This eve of the 'Feast of Robert Burns' puts me in mind of the morals and manners of the Table. A Burns Supper has more than the whiff of whisky hanging the air, though it certainly has *that*. If you squint hard enough at a Burns Supper, you could almost believe you've been transported to the sights and sounds of a Chieftain's Hall in the late Middle Ages. Almost. Maybe.

Scots Wha Hae...

A bagpiper 'pipes in' the haggis. And although "rank is but the guinea's stamp", a special procession of 'worthies' enters the hall. They take their places at the Head Table. Then Someone of Stature commissioned by the Host ceremoniously stabs and 'slaughters' it (the haggis, I mean, not the piper; but who knows what atrocities happen at these things?) while 'addressing' its 'sonsie face' in the earthy words of Burns' poem, 'Tae a Haggis'. My father, having been appointed to this task on one occasion, could recite it from memory forever after.

Then follows the 'Selkirk Grace', which predates Burns, though it's often attributed to him.

*Some hae meat that canna eat,
And some wad eat that want it;
But we hae meat, and we can eat,
So let the Lord be thankit!*

(My spell-checker isn't broken, by the way.) I've never liked this grace. It strikes me more as a rude celebration of Scottish Parsimony than Divine Munificence, a football chant in place of a prayer. "Can't both be true?" I hear you ask. OK, good point. But I'd rather hear *this* grace before a meal:

*O thou in whom we live and move,
Who mad'st the sea and shore,
Thy goodness constantly we prove,
And, grateful, would adore.
And if it please thee, Power above,
Still grant us with such store,
The friend we trust, the fair we love,
And we desire no more.*

This grace *was* composed by Robert Burns.

Once these solemn words have been solemnly said, copious feasting may properly begin. It always does, punctuated by festive toasts, boisterous songs, and witty stories. It's best to take a taxi home.

Eating with Grace

All feasts and formal meals have a cross-cultural family resemblance. Weddings have 'head tables' too. The wedding party may 'process' into the hall. Toasts, stories, and cake-cutting ensue. It's best to take a taxi home.

If the guest list for a formal meal is small enough – as at a typical Canadian Christmas or Thanksgiving – all may gather at one long table, extended by the addition of an extra leaf, or maybe a 'card table' stuck at one end. And though "rank is but the guinea's stamp", the seating will probably reflect one's place in the social order. (Seniors never get the 'card table'.)

I grew up, as most of us did, in a benevolent 'patriarchy' with a strong matriarchal presence, making for a 'balance of powers'. My father sat at the 'head' of our long dining room table. Only *his* chair had 'arms', setting it apart as if it were a throne, which in a way it was. My mother sat at the opposite end, nearer the kitchen, the hub of domestic power, which was considerable. She rang a small 'dinner bell' to summon us. I and my siblings, and any friends who were with us, sat in chairs along the sides of the table.

An air of greater formality descended on Sunday evenings, and our supper was somehow more 'special' on those nights. It called for clean linen napkins, a fresh tablecloth, even candles if the day were special enough. We didn't 'dress up', though, unless grandparents were also there, in which case we'd wear the same clothes for 'dressing up' that we'd worn to Church that morning. Was this to trick them into thinking we dined this dressily when they weren't there?

Everyone's eyes would follow the journey of a roast of some kind as my mother carried it from the kitchen on a platter and placed it before my father, though this entrance was never as ceremonious as the haggis at a Burns Supper. My father would wield the bone-handled carving knife he'd sharpened that afternoon on a whetstone, and he began the work of carving. So began the 'distribution of the elements'. One by one, we passed the plates holding portions of the roast placed there by father to the waiting hands of my mother, who dished out vegetables, before passing each place to its recipient.

Only when everyone had been served would anyone be allowed to eat anything. This caused me agony, as, with stomach rumbling, I was often served first, being the youngest (a rare instance of the 'the last shall be first'). I had to exhibit a self-control I didn't yet have. How tempting it was to stab at a salad leaf with my fork or sneak a surreptitious morsel from a dinner roll. But still, even after everyone had been served, no one was allowed to begin eating until my father had said the Grace, which was sometimes called, 'Asking the Blessing'.

He had two simple and widely used versions. The first was this: "For what we are about to receive, O Lord, make us truly thankful. Amen." (My late friend, Chris Vais, called this the 'outry-bowtry' Grace, for that is how his boyish mind interpreted *his* father's way of saying the words 'what we're about'.)

My father tended to trot out his second version on 'State Occasions', like Christmas, New Year, or the Visit of a Relative. "For all these, thy bountiful blessings, we give thee thanks, O Lord." My mother, noting the change, would inevitably say, "*Bountiful* tonight!"

These simple, daily rituals did their work on me. To this day, I feel all anxious and 'wrong', even in restaurants, if someone begins to eat before everyone has food placed before them; or if someone leaves the table before everyone else has finished their food.

In the same way, I find it impossible to begin an evening meal unless there has been some formal word or ritual sign, however simple or brief it may be. If not a real 'Grace' or 'Blessing', then let there at least be a happy word of '*bon appetit*' to each other.

To say Grace or not to say Grace, that is the Question

The dining rituals my childhood may as well have happened two hundred years ago. Who behaves this way anymore? Eating together is a coarse utilitarian deed now, and far less civilised. Our daily meals have been drained of ritual. People eat lunch at their desk, or while walking down the street, or standing in a parking lot. When they're at home, they may scoff their supper in front of the TV, or more likely in thrall to their phone, all alone together.

We're deeply ill-at-ease with rituals now. We call them 'fake' or 'forced'. (Baby boomers are the source of this. They have a *lot* to answer for.) But to be ill-at-ease with ritual is to be ill-at-ease with ourselves and each other. When they're done truly and well, that is, naturally and meaningfully, rituals make us more

civilised (in the true sense of that word), more at home with our human nature and at peace with each other.

The best rituals are as instinctive as breathing. We need them. Yet they mustn't be forced upon us too harshly or imposed too stringently.

A scene from a novel by David Lodge, *Deaf Sentence*, jumped out at me this week. I've always enjoyed this author. He's a keen observer of social life, the hazards of unspoken etiquette, and our vast potential for Embarrassing Moments in each other's presence. It's easy to believe that he has drawn on elements of his own experience.

'Cecilia' is Desmond's formidable mother-in-law. It's Christmas Day. The extended family have gathered and it's time for the festive meal. Here's the scene, reported in Desmond's voice:

"By the time people were seated there was some danger that the main course would be tepid rather than hot, so I suggested that they should start eating as soon as they were served, but Cecilia asked plaintively if we weren't going to say grace first, so we had to stop serving ourselves and adopt suitable expressions and postures, while Cecilia closed her eyes and joined her hands and intoned a grace – all except Dad, who hadn't notice her intervention and carried on cutting up his dinner. This happens every year: we forget that Cecilia likes to say grace before Christmas lunch, and she deliberately doesn't remind us until the last minute so that she can make everyone feel chastened or edified or otherwise put in their place."

The character of Cecilia in this scene could stand for what clergy – or rather, people's *ideas* about clergy – are really like. Clergy are people who want to make everyone else feel "chastened or edified or otherwise put in their place", right?

No. Most people haven't a clue what clergy are *really* like. Only clergy do, and it's our little secret, which I betray here now, in a very small way, by admitting that, in this instance, I would side with Desmond.

Yours in the faith,
Andrew