

Character and the Shorter Man

by
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On Oct. 11, 1996, Bill Clinton proclaimed National Character Counts Week, declaring, "Individual character involves honoring and embracing certain core ethical values: honesty, respect, responsibility, hard work, fairness, caring, civic virtue and citizenship...."

It seemed a fitting backdrop as I was in D.C. during the anniversary of that speech this year. A group of business executives had just completed a day of intense discussion as we planned the curriculum for a business school. Integrating technological leadership into the curriculum was a new direction the school wanted to take.

After the meeting, a business dinner was on the agenda. Although we were headed for one of D.C.'s finest restaurants, I was a little uncomfortable. It is sometimes difficult for me to socialize with new people because loyalty to my Christian values inevitably clashes with the values of the world.

When we arrived for dinner, the normal business banter began. The leader invited everyone to share their perspectives on what had been accomplished. It seemed to take forever for dinner to arrive and as we waited, the conversation became less educational. This was the part I dreaded. One by one, someone was topping the next story of the next story.

The stories were mostly about middle-aged men acting like college-aged kids during their time away from the wife and kids. As I disinterestedly looked down, putting knots in my napkin, a taller gentleman told a story of how he had gotten so intoxicated he ended up in a Philadelphia hotel room without any clue on how he had gotten there. I noticed a shorter man sitting across from him wasn't amused. The taller man's eyes engaged the silent eyes of the shorter man sitting across from him. "Isn't that wild?" he asked rhetorically. In a moment where time seemed to stop, the shorter man replied, "that is a crazy, senseless act. Getting so drunk you don't know where you are is ridiculous and irresponsible."

I must have looked like a deer caught in headlights. That was one of the more startling comments I ever heard at a business dinner. The shorter man had taken a risk by leaving himself open to be vulnerable. I was waiting for a chorus of dissenters admonishing him to "lighten up" but the words never came. "Would he get invited back next year," was my first thought. "Perhaps someone close to him was killed in an alcohol-related accident," was my second thought. And "why didn't I have that much courage to say that" was my last thought.

After what seemed like an eternity of silence, the shorter man then began talking about his two daughters. His eyes danced as he told us about riding on horses with them. In one of life's finer moments, the taller man began to share how much he loved his daughters and what they meant to him as well. Wow!

One by one good family stories began to circulate around the table. After about 10 minutes, the conversation reverted to football but the shorter man had managed to make an impression that stayed with everyone. He was a leader. He was a man of tremendous character. But more importantly, he made a positive difference, however small in the lives he touched that night.

After dinner, I caught up with the shorter man and began talking with him privately walking back to the hotel. "Let me ask you something. Did you expect a different reaction when you made that comment" I began. "Should it matter," the shorter man asked. He paused and then continued, "there is a great divide in this world between what is right and just and what is politically astute. But my faith doesn't give me options. It is difficult to be true to oneself but it is the only way to be."

"Your daughters are very fortunate to have a father like you," I replied. "And I am no longer going to look down and put knots in my napkin," I thought to myself.



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