My One-Man Band

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If my father ever worried about social niceties, he's long since lost the capacity to observe them other than perhaps on state occasions (and even then we have reason to be nervous). He unabashedly could not care less what people think of his attire, personal habits, language, or politics. He doesn't give even part of a damn if his hair is combed, what's hanging from his mouth during dinnertime, who might be put off by the color of his conversation, or when he gets around to tucking in his undershirt.

He's not offensive, mind you, nor intentionally discourteous. When his less than elegant habits are brought to his attention, he'll usually take corrective action, and quickly. And I don't ever get the impression that he's consciously flaunting social convention. His mind is just on matters other than what Mrs. Diamond down the palm-lined street might think of his faded short pants with the torn rear pocket or his impossibly unattractive tennis hat with the red, white, and blue stripes. Her opinion about his manner of dress or conduct doesn't register on the radar of his consciousness.

There was a time when my father was more concerned about such matters, if only to keep my mother at bay. She, being European born and bred, attended closely to appearances and would scream unmercifully each and every time my father would belch sonorously in public places or show total disregard for other such aspects of basic etiquette. Her usual reaction was to yell, "Jesus Joe, you're impossible!" to such an extent that I wasn't always sure during my earliest years if his full name might actually not have been "Jesus Joe."

My mother died recently; with her went the last remaining governor over my father's behavior. That piercing voice of propriety once embedded into his head is now silent, or at least receding in its power and sway. And so Dad is left alone in this world, largely uncensored and with only the thinnest of brake linings to hold back the less refined of his natural urgings.

I am actually full of questions about the whole issue of my father's care-free approach to social convention, but I've also begun to wonder why I care that

a well-adjusted, bright, highly-educated, and still competent 74 year-old man should have decided to invest as little energy as possible in observing niceties. Part of me thinks that I should just hope that I get to the age of 74 so I too can decide not to give a damn about things which, in reality, aren't worth giving much of a damn about anyhow.

But before I fall into a morass of over-analysis and speculation, let me tell you about the week I just spent traveling with my father and my younger son, Joshua, through what had been the nicer sections of the Southwest. Let me also make it clear at the outset that we had a wonderful time being together, warts and all. But we did spend a lot of time both in enclosed spaces and public thoroughfares, both settings being conducive to my father, well, being my father.

You have to understand that my Dad is a one-man band of body sounds. Actually, he's more like a full symphony of noises that are extraordinary in their breadth, number, and tonal splendor. He routinely produces an endless variety of snorts, yawns, grunts, groans, sneezes, coughs, throat clearings, farts, yelps, and moans that all have remarkable acoustic properties. His most consistent sounds arise from a stunning array of belches, some unmuffled, others emitted in a duet with other types of sighs and sniffles. Coming in a close second are his grunts of ecstasy when he likes something he's eating. When Dad enjoys his food, everyone knows; he broadcasts his delight for miles around.

These nonverbal expressions of body status are often accompanied by a torrent of verbal assaults on the ear: a recitation of every road sign and business placard for miles on end, an endless loop-style description of his sleep patterns, and a tendency to express in vulgar terms the size of his dinner proportions, as in "That's a lotta fucking fish" or "Wow, that's a shitload of potatoes." The degree of linguistic color is typically tied directly but inversely to the ages of young children in proximity.

If the panoply of distasteful auditory stimuli fail to offend sensibilities, my father offers a full range of unsightly visual outrages sufficient to send a Martha Stewart into a full catatonic state. His shirt represents a living record of every meal he's consumed over the past four days. What had been simply a wrinkled but high quality garment becomes the final resting place for sauces representing world cuisines, the drips of egg yolks, gravy and tea stains, jelly smears, and the assorted remnants of fruit juices, both tropical and domestic. His pants usually catch a fair share of mealtime detritus, typically the heavier materials or those mobile or solid enough to roll down his shirt onto his lap. Tomato-based sauces, salsas, and ketchups have a powerful, almost magnetic attraction to anything and everything he wears including, believe it or not, his socks.

Dad's posture at the table and his unique approach to food consumption account for most of the splotching that decorates his clothing. He likes to

lean far back in his chair and stretch his feet to their full extent under the table, regardless of whose feet might be in the way. By adjusting his body to a lumpy 45 degree angle, he therefore exposes the full top surface area of his clothing to airborne assault.

Dad is more apt than most to lose food between plate and mouth because of his often unsuccessful efforts to vacuum in the food, rather than place it into his mouth and chew. If he doesn't suck hard enough, you see, the food will usually miss his mouth and land squarely on some unsuspecting garment (usually, but not always, his own).

What bothers me is that I can't fairly judge in real terms the level of social offensive my father can achieve so effortlessly. As best I can tell, the natural state of children is to be embarrassed by their parents' display of character. We might not comment directly or try to modify what can easily be regarded as a hopeless state of affairs, but I think many of us cringe either inwardly or otherwise when our parents comment too loudly about the length of someone's hair or complain to everyone who'll listen that the restaurant lighting is too dim to read the menu. I'm always hearing grown children criticize a parent's choice of clothing or bemoan some lack of paternal couth.

To help resolve my questions, I consulted sixteen year-old Joshua who, after all, observed the same behavior I did over the course of the week. I figured if anyone would agree with me it would be Joshua because he seems to harbor the capacity to be thoroughly humiliated by absolutely anything I say, do, or even think, no matter how seemingly innocuous. Indeed, I am convinced that, if I were in a coma and barely clinging to life, he'd find a way to be mortified by the faint sound of my heart beat. Of course, when you're sixteen and male, your only wish is to become a well-funded orphan with a car, so I don't take his criticisms to heart too often.

To my surprise, Joshua let me know that Grandpa was "cool" precisely because he didn't seem to give a damn. In fact, he rated his grandfather's overall performance as more spectacular than most of the national parks and natural wonders we visited during the week. At dinner Joshua would wait for some new impropriety, turn beet red when it inevitably occurred, laugh uncontrollably under his baseball hat, and then rush back to his journal to record this latest insult to common decency. During one (obviously uneventful) road trip, he even kept a list of the various noises Grandpa made over a five-minute span.

Come to think of it, the grandchildren have always found Grandpa amusing. Years ago we took a trip to Disney World during which time we spared little expense or effort to experience every opportunity for fun that sprawling theme park could offer. Afterwards, we visited my parents for a few days before returning home. If you ask my kids now about that vacation, they won't remem-

ber anything about the exotic roller coasters or the oversized yet charming rodents that paraded before them. However, they will tell you in exquisite detail about when Grandpa took them to Service Merchandise to buy a rice cooker.

At that time, customers placed orders by a computer dubbed Silent Sam. Unfortunately, when my father entered the order number for a rice cooker, the system reported that the item was out of stock. This news led my Dad, to the shock, wonderment, and wholesale appreciation of his young grandchildren, to type "Well then, fuck you, Sam" and walk away. Our kids, to this day, can't believe that someone with white hair could be that cool.

Because nothing is more entertaining to young boys than unexpected bouts of flatulence, Grandpa has served as an inexhaustible source of amusement. Sometimes I've gotten the impression that they've volunteered to go on boring errands with him just on the not-so-off chance that he'll serenade them and whomever else might be nearby. You can actually watch the grandchildren keep an eye out for when my father might be leaning toward one side or another in anticipation of another opportunity to destroy the ozone layer.

In case you're wondering if I'm just some prissy, overly sensitive sort, you need to understand that no one who knows me would characterize me as uptight. My shirt is untucked and only partially buttoned most of the time. The chances of my fly making it all the way north aren't high, nor is the likelihood of my tie staying clean throughout the course of a meal. As for my language, well, I've sustained deep bruises and other contusions as a consequence of my wife kicking me under the table for some off-color remark I've made in the company of close friends and new acquaintances. Like my own children, I also find crusty, irreverent, and carefree sorts to be joyous and intriguing company. It just seems to be more comfortable when that sort is someone other than my own father.

I do admit to one peccadillo that, because it may be part of the equation, I should explain. Despite my laid back and accepting nature, I can easily become homicidal when someone eats an apple too loudly, smacks gum, or crunches on potato chips with an open mouth. I know it doesn't make sense, but my whole personality changes; this dark gloom descends, and I begin imagining punishments for the offending party. Somehow, those noises trigger something deep in the reptilian portions of my brain and make me miserable. (I used to feel even more ashamed of this tendency until my grandfather let slip that it's a family trait that reaches back many generations, at least to his great grandmother. I may be nuts, but I apparently come by it honestly.)

I think what we must be talking about here with my dad is something different because I am far more sensitive to his quirks than to most others. So perhaps what we've got is some generational phenomena whereby everything I do embarrasses my kids and everything my father does can embarrass me and so on.

Evolutionary psychology being all the rage now, maybe I can offer this instance up as an example of adaptation of the species that better prepared us to be more proficient hunters and gatherers. I have to figure out, though, how oversensitivity to parental immodesty had adaptive value other than giving ancestors a good reason to mingle with others outside of the home.

But help me out. Am I just shamelessly universalizing one more aspect of my arrested development, or have you too moaned when one of your parents said in nothing approaching sotto voce something like, "Can you believe that someone would wear shoes that ugly?" or "I've got to pinch one off so I'll be right back?" If a waitress asked your father whether he wanted soup or salad and he went into a two-minute oration in which he tells her that he had salad for lunch and it was a big damn salad with all the croutons and those olives he really doesn't like and that he doesn't want to fill himself up too much because he's eating like a goddamn pig but that he'd really like to try the soup although he probably should eat the salad because it's better for him especially since the soup is creamy and it's really hot outside to be thinking about soup but, what the hell, bring the soup and maybe it won't be too bad, do you immediately lose thirty years of hard-won maturity by reverting dead square to 16 again with this overwhelming impulse to whine, "Daaaaaaad, for the love of God, could you just tell the lady whether you want the frickin' soup or salad?"

I just need to know.