

*That Name Would Not Have Occurred to Me*

When I was nineteen I moved to Plainfield and rented an apartment down the street from Plainfield Friends Meeting where I began to attend meeting. Jim Wilson was the pastor. The Catholic priests I had known as a child were kind, but reserved, and Jim was outgoing, which I appreciated. He also didn't ask me to confess my sins to him, which at that period in my life would have taken a good portion of his day, so that was a point in his favor, too.

I had been there a few months when I was invited by several people to stay afterwards for a meal and the monthly meeting for business. That was a foreign idea to me, the notion of authority resting with the people, not with the church hierarchy—the priests and bishops and Pope. I was curious about what it might look like, so accepted their invitation. We ate, then went upstairs to the library. The clerk of the meeting sat in front and said a prayer and we sat quietly for a time, then began discussing the business of the meeting. Someone had moved, a position had been vacated, so the clerk asked if anyone had any suggestions for a replacement. I remember it was a position in the Meeting that required some sensitivity, wisdom, and patience.

We sat quietly, thinking, looking around to see if anyone was absent we could nominate, someone not there to defend themselves, when someone suggested a person for the vacancy. The person recommended had a volatile temper, had a habit of demanding his way, and was often intimidating. It was clear many of the Quakers in the room were uncomfortable entrusting the man with that position. It was also obvious they were too kind to say anything, so no one spoke. We just sat there very quietly for several minutes, until an elderly woman said, in a kind voice, "That name would not have occurred to me."

"That's a nice way of putting it," I thought to myself. So much better than saying, "Are you crazy? Have you lost your mind? What in the world were you thinking?"

We've been talking about Quaker sayings. At the start of this series, I said I wouldn't be talking about this specific saying, but I've changed my mind. I've changed my mind, because this saying illustrates the importance of tact, of tact not just as a social lubricant that helps us live with one another, but tact as a spiritual gift

"Tact," Henry W. Newton said, "is the art of making a point, without making an enemy."

I was reading an article in *Newsweek* magazine this week about President George Bush, the father, the first Bush president, and it recalled how, when he was president in November of 1989 and the Berlin Wall came down, he had been heavily criticized for not celebrating that moment with more enthusiasm. What his critics didn't know is that President Bush was concerned that a jubilant response might appear arrogant and cause hard-liners in the Soviet and East German government to react with violence against those fleeing to the West. Believing their freedom to be more important than his political standing, President Bush decided not to unnecessarily provoke the Soviets just as their society was moving toward greater liberty. He went on the air, commended the Soviet President, Mikhail Gorbachev, and didn't gloat. That is tact. The ability to make a point without making an enemy.

It is a poor reflection on our culture that tact is seen as a weakness and outspokenness as a virtue. We praise the person who speaks his mind, who brooks no nonsense, as if bluntness and brusqueness are the highest forms of communication and worthy of praise. We even have a saying for it—*the truth hurts*. Isn't that a curious phrase—*The truth hurts*. I have never found that to be the case. I have found the truth helps. What hurts is when truth is spoken with no regard for the feelings of others, as if telling the truth somehow releases us from the responsibilities of courtesy and kindness.

Tact is a spiritual gift. It permits us not only to say difficult things in tender ways, it teaches us when to be silent, it gives us respect for the feelings of others. Tact helps us, when we absolutely must speak, to speak with helpful words, sensitive to the occasion and people involved. The Lebanese-American poet and writer, Kahlil Gibran, said, “If indeed you must be candid, be candid beautifully.”

Isn't that a wonderful definition of tact—being candid beautifully!

The woman at Plainfield Meeting said, “That name would not have occurred to me.” She then went on to affirm what the man did well—he was a hard worker and very responsible—but suggested the open position required another type of gifts. Another name was suggested and quickly agreed upon, and the meeting moved on with no hurt feelings. There are times in our lives when we must be candid. But let us learn to be candid beautifully, with high regard and profound respect for all involved.