

Dignity.

I noticed my friend sneak another surreptitious glance at the guy at the next table. I was trying to decide what was attracting her attention, without obviously turning around and gaping at him myself. When he got up to use the washroom, I took the opportunity to give him more of a glance-over than the cursory one I had given him when we walked in. I still saw nothing more than a shabbily dressed 30-something fellow who hadn't shaved in a few days, and looked as if the meal he was about to enjoy was going to be his first in as long.

“What are you looking at?” I asked her.

“He's got a hole in his pants, which would be bad enough, but he doesn't appear to have any underwear on, either.”

At this point in the tale, I'd like to say we behaved in a manner befitting two 40 year old school teachers out for a friendly lunch. I'd rather remember that we took the high road, stood on moral high ground, raised ourselves up above our basic instincts. But no, as if we were 2 adolescent school girls snickering and giggling and “Oh My God”-ing all over the place, we sniggered about the state of the fellows clothes, and made assumptions about who he was, and condescendingly wondered what *he* was doing in *our* café.

By the time he returned to his table, we had gotten ourselves under control, and now our better nature did rise up. For though we could be goofy, we were, like all teachers whom I also call friend, we are compassionate.

The server brought his bill to his table, and he started to engage her in conversation. Haltingly, as if he hadn't had a real conversation in a long time, or wasn't a native English speaker. Slowly, though, the pieces of the puzzle fell into place.

What he obviously hadn't had, in a long time, was a Polite Conversation. A conversation rooted in good manners, in social convention, in normalcy.

He asked the server about the seasoning in the sauce, in the popularity of the plate, he asked her to “give his compliments to the chef”, and eventually could he speak to the chef.

I don't, now, in the retelling of this tale, recall if the chef came out, or what transpired, but I remember thinking what a credit to the restaurant the server was, because the sum total was this: The fellow was a paying customer, but he was also of questionable circumstances--possibly homeless, judging by the state of his clothes and the number of parcels he carried. He was missing some teeth, and was badly in need of a haircut, and

obviously some underclothes. But despite our initial, well, immaturity, I was grateful for the lesson.

The fellow hadn't just come in for a warm meal, and he hadn't just been served a tasty plate. He came in for a social contract, and it was fulfilled, and accompanied with a side of dignity.

I, too, got a tasty meal, but mine was accompanied by humility.

Copyright © 2016 Lisa Read