

The Kitchen Table

We had engaged in another of those kitchen-table debates, after reading the snippet in the *Mary Jane Times*. An editor, whose tense might have read, I was, I am, I will be a Grower, had achieved some calling to Social Conscience, the circumstances of his own life having changed from rebellious youth to a rapidly closing middle-age, surrounded by a new family and the entrapments of 'ill-gotten gains'. The family and the things seemed to demand some fixative, a security in their own right, something one did not wish to lose - hence the admonitions appearing in the *Times*. Oblique, to be sure, not involving the morality of growing, but more, some cautioning with regard to the exposure of youth to mind-altering (and implicitly, body-altering) substances.

The one who sat adjacent to me had scoffed unforgivingly, loudly proclaiming "Hypocrisy!" to my rather artless remark about "reform".

She who argued with me, strongly felt the author of the article ought suffer retribution (the eternal fires of hell) for the sins of his youth which involved the abandonment of his first family, and the growing of substances which, in their manner of marketing, trickled down indiscriminately to the very populace for whom he now avowedly pretended to seek protection.

Some people are born with all they need to know about morality; but deeper than morality, 'love', a bond of tenderness and affection, for one's offspring, let's say, which one simply does not transgress. That is, one is prepared psychologically, as well as morally, to forfeit his own life, way of life, and his (or her) own assumed needs to the greater good of the offspring.

Others are born without this all-they-need-to-know, or without this morality-love. They merely are what they are. They commingle, they obfuscate, they seek to wallow in ease, pleasure-dream, floating above the morass of ordinary being. Offspring possess only the reality of creating a disturbance, that suffers to make noise, that needs to be fed, to be cared for in a way that pulls one down from the stonedness into the morass of being from which one had sought disentanglement.

Both observe the traditional motions, following certain conventions, one with purposeful love and dedication, the other as one warily conscripted to do things of which one is only barely necessarily aware, following a mechanical proscription of a doing that satisfies some engine of social law and ethics; obliging that which is always implicitly threatening.

The eventual awakening of the latter to some form of 'decency' is not heralded and greeted with a marked enthusiasm, by the antagonist who is "suspicious of easy conversion, of the waiving of one's culpability

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which he ought feel the full brunt, and the associated stigma of public censure.

"To have the gall, the audacity to admonish others, while in character (in caricature), without the whole story, the absolute confession of his deeds and perpetrations, besides being grossly misleading, a purposeful misrepresentation, and such an obvious pretense, is purely and simply 'trash', 'trashiness', and ought not be allowed into every household with such ease".

I had suggested a rejoinder in the Times, to which she replied, "I'm staying out of it."

The kitchen table has been seared on many occasions to no good purpose except to stir the bile of those who purport to involve the table in their futile disputes. The table, in its physical configuration, serves to sever a critical proximity between the disputants, the OH Yeahs!, at least kept beyond arms reach; as one's lower limbs entangle meaningfully with table and chair legs. One must not forget the chairs upon which one is seated. All one has at his immediate disposal to articulate and persuade are his bare hands and his voice. If one had been standing, hoeing in the garden, a considerable amount of persuasion might be evinced through posturing, more or less absent across the table, lest one fiercely knit his brow and bare his teeth, and pound the table with his fists.

She had wanted to declaim against this sort of nonsense, this disturbance. "Why Here?" "Don't give me that 'Rebel turned Reformer' stuff".

"Ah, but what if he had said nothing. Perhaps by saying something he runs the happy risk of eluding your condemnation of him. Is a man always condemned, even after he pays his debt to society? Surely I intimate a hypothetical upon a situation you care not to view as equating with all other debts one owes to his fellow man. He has violated the innocent when he should have known better; from this there can be no exoneration - "NEVER!" The Fires of Hell! Suppose the ultimate forgiver forgave, what then?"

"Forgiveness is not an equitable solution to this transgression - only punishment. It is in kind. This eye for that eye. It must never be forgotten. Forgiving is like forgetting. One must never be given the slightest hope that he can elude culpability for such transgression. To violate the innocent, even with unconcern, is so vile that it must never be tolerated; forgiveness represents tolerance of the perpetrator, where, what he has done, is intolerable."

"'Tis human to err"

"We can do better than that, it is our duty to do better than that."

"Who, pray tell, assigns duty?"

"I do. I do it for myself. We all do it for each other."

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"Is nothing to be forgiven? Are you forgiven because you do not take the editor of the Mary Jane Times to task? I realize you are not the perpetrator of his crimes. You are not responsible for his crimes. We are merely engaged in table talk like some people get into booze talk, or pot talk. I have no right to burden you with dealing with his persona. But you cannot just view him objectively, nor can you chuckle to yourself. The dimension of the pretense is appalling; it irritates you, it disturbs your sense of equitableness, fairness, justice. It flaunts your sense of these things - these notions. Unwittingly you read, you became involved in debate, now you suffer with an impasse. Your peaceful 'co-existence', your equanimity has been disturbed. The space in which you live has been invaded by the untoward and unwanted. It will pass; the less exposure, the less debate, the sooner it will pass. It is time for something else."

The kitchen table is abandoned to its inert non-being once again, the rings of coffee droolings left to dry, or await the merciless sponge, as the vessels are gathered from atop and away, the participants weighted heavily with argument, leaving behind the same vacuous silence as had existed before they had presumed to fill it with noise; she having disappeared into the living room to seat herself at the piano and Bach in hopes of quelling the awful disorientations of reality, while he strode to the out of doors to escape the charged irresolution, the never-ending problematic nature of existence, to walk off some knowing presence. While, still, the other who listened, saying nothing, ambled to some other preoccupation, perhaps the soup makings begun earlier, simmering at the rear of the stove, or the gathering of some more wood to feed the cozy flames, or perhaps a trip to the crescent of the moon in broad daylight - not without certain meditations - another moment has past. Have we filled it with still more of nothing, of something? Time, that unknown, unaccountable, perseverance, had been eclipsed; one was relieved from having to contemplate the awful fatalism of Time; the proximity of the end.

The incessant radio had been silenced during the debate. I salute thee, Mary Jane Times.

Very often, in the classroom discussion of Philosophy, one encounters the objective fact of 'the table' as an illustration of otherthanness, as non-being, innocuous non-being. All part of a circumstance; heterogeneous with oneself, something also taken for granted, as well as occasionally accounted, because it is relied upon.

"Let's have a cup", the farmer declares, after some moments of activity in the outer world.

The table once again becomes something special at that moment. One imagines his place at the table with the cup. The table becomes the center of the Universe, Tableocentric. The cup is not carried to the porch, or the

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barn, or to some favorite hang-out, but centers itself upon the table, the table with the chairs near the stove upon which the kettle gurgles.

It could not be concealed.

It was news - BIG news.

That couplet: Joe and Mary, those names conjoined together upon all lips, synonymous, inseparable; relied upon, and accounted no differently than the kitchen table. Then, one day, it was if "Let's have a cup" had been cast down into oblivion, when it was discovered the table had simply been removed, and in its place was an empty space. So it came to pass in our thoughts when it was learned Joe had left Mary; NO!, not because of the Immaculate Conception; not because Joe had been cuckolded, although many might have jokingly, maliciously, perceived it as the same.

I'll change their names at this juncture to preserve their anonymity. Joe will become Kabala, and Mary will become Karma. These two, like all lovers, young and old alike, when they first bloomed into romantic union promised each other the moon and all the planets. Kabala and Karma had had others in their lives, Karma had even been married once before. But this was the real thing; they took vows, vouchsafing a whole host of things with their own free wills. They were childless; it was known that Kabala had decided early in his young manhood not to sire offspring. Long before he met Karma he had gone under the knife, that he might freely sow his; Karma had known.

Their marital bliss suffered its share of traumas as do all our unions, through all the whims and pricks of fate, testing their devotion, their commitment, weathering all the inclemencies so that indeed every lip had said inseparably Kabala and Karma. This remained true, even up to, or until, and after, Karma had conceived and given birth to a child whose sperm had been acquired from an unknown donor to an AINS sperm bank; impregnated mechanically when her body temperature became elevated; while she was in heat, like a cow.

From the beginning Kabala had not been in favor of the idea, but he loved Karma, and believed at the time her happiness was important; he would not have raised a paternity issue, or cuckolding, or polyandry; he would not oppose her with an ultimatum; but he was not in favor; in point of fact, he often referred the whole episode as 'Karma'a aberration'.

Well, it became a HOT news item when Kabala left Karma. While the child slept and wailed alternatively in the manger, Kabala took to other parts of the barn, until the day he could no longer live with the Ill-gotten Conception.

Everyone seemed to have an opinion; they were varied, and all were not sympathetic to the mother of Angela.

"When the baby came along, Karma gave all her attention to it; Kabala had to play second fiddle." "Aw now, she's not that stupid or insensitive."

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"Well, to hear tell it, before the AINS idea had arisen, he was already talking about adventuring on the high seas without her, a latter-day Odysseus."

"So it came as no surprise when he characterized Karma's pregnancy as 'her little aberration', her 'laboratory indulgence', as he often termed it." "Yes!, she took a risk."

"All I can do is hold their hands; they are my neighbors; I can't take sides; I love them both." "Kabala is an idiot!"

"Oh!, they are both pretty stubborn."

"His ego is pretty tender; being macho and all; he doesn't want to be the laughing stock."

"This ain't Melanesia; he isn't going to tie himself down to somebody else's kid; furthermore he ain't goin'ta become no eight to fiver just to - naw - can you blame him?"

"Didjou hear about the baby shower for Hannahs twins where somebody went up to Kabala's mother an' congratulated her on 'her' grandchild? Well, she let it out loudly that 'It was no grandchild of hers'. Surely that must have cut Karma to the quick." "She's strong; she isn't going to let the Wardens get to her."

"Well, I can't stop sayin' Kabala and Karma; maybe there will be a reconciliation with time." "Karma thinks not; she says Kabala is affectionate - but cool."

"Well, wait until he has been alone for awhile."

"You don't think she's just gonna welcome him with open arms after all the trauma, like they do in soap operas; all that hurt, all those tears; maybe even the humiliation and the embarrassment? Besides she is already making plans, she has already converted the wine shed into shelving and storage for her things. She ain't no Penelope; she'll not wait." "Besides, Kabala has other options."

Thus, the table patiently endured the severance of Kabala and Karma, as perhaps it will share in the gossip (news) (happy event) of a reconciliation, of a new Kabala and ?, or a new, ? and Karma. People have assumed their own identity without any objections from the table, "No Comment."

"You know, the same was true of Scrath and Yesca. Though not married, a hunky dory pair, whose names crossed lips frequently enough until nuptials were finally announced to affirm their conjugation. Then one night a trauma; the proverbial sky had fallen during a drunken-druggie abandon, almost like Teddy and Merry Jo in Chappaquidick; only the 'she' this time survived, although, once again, not particularly through the good offices of her lover." "Somehow it all stuck in someone's craw, his out of guilt, her's out of the realization he didn't really love her enough; anyway, the Scrath and Yesca thing became another 'has been' like so many others have on this Island; now its

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Scrath and Chloe, heh!, once again registering their entanglement in a formalized, promised avowal.

Happy Times! God Bless!" "Scrath is suspect. He seems devious, furtive, although charming and engaging. His mother apologizes for his affluence which many believe is counterfeit. People speculate, reluctantly, because, whether legitimate or counterfeit - it pays; it redounds to the benefit of the Island."

"Sure, let's speculate; if the tree in the forest should fall when no ears are present to hear of it, can it be said it has happened? If one does not question the source, or is not aware of the source, cares not to know the source of the medium of exchange, can it be said ones hands become dirty in the accepting of unlaundered money?"

"Heh, More like Gold Bouillon; no records for the Revenue Boys."

"Besides, he throws parties - Bashes!; really. A benevolence is amongst us; the will to do good; a fair exchange; who would find fault?"

The kitchen table is relentless in its pursuit of debate; whereof she who sat adjacent to me, once again seared its surface declaiming, **"Cheaters!!!!"**

Her anger startled me, the raised voice, the intensity, the unforgivingness, the vehemence. But I dared risk more, as the table shook - probingly asking, anticipating something down the road a piece, "Do we have the right to impose our morality upon someone else?" She had risen from her chair.

As she was doing so, the silent one, the listener ventured, "No, I think its great, what we need are entrepreneurs, the more the better; Morality, and all that stuff just hinders the process ---"

As soon as she heard this kind of rationale, she looked at him, grinning - she knew he was funning, humoring the combatants.

Looking at him fondly, she coyly uttered "You can't believe everything this guy says."

Without answering the question she repeated and stressed her displeasure with the Cheaters!

"We abide the rules because we choose to not believe in anarchy. If we all did as they do, where would we be? You can't have it both ways."

The silent one interjected again "Sure you can, just don't tell anybody.; and don't get caught." He plays with scruples, his private amusement.

But once again the kitchen table held its place stolidly as my antagonist sat down once again with her newly lighted filtered Player, placing in front of her the home made ashtray, resembling a sawed off bean pot, all rumped on the edges with squeezing fingers before it was glazed and fired, a bastion of a receptacle for all the offal devoured in heated argument and in the desperate nicotine fixations of this world.

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Once again, the opportune silence allowed me to venture, "I don't question your position; I realize what 'cheating' does to undermine the social fabric, the basic understanding between men (and women); something we rely upon. But before I have had a chance to say something, or pose a question, I am immediately put in this position of defending something in which I have not taken part - I have become a straw man in your futile endeavors with things that annoy and frustrate you." "You cannot accept the cheater - fine - mostly I am in agreement - cheating however founds a large category of semantic variations, big scoundrels and little scoundrels, as you will readily admit." "For instance, you have said, you do not object to people growing their own, for their own private consumption - you feel the law or convention ought not extend itself so intimately with our lives. You sense a real potent danger there also. So in essence, you are obliged to define 'cheater', restating your position in terms of exceptions." "And I'm not just splitting hairs - there is a significant difference in the two positions."

She nodded some assent - believing that hard and fast rules were almost as bad as none at all - but only marginally believing this last, for she recognized the need for order as a vital ingredient in human society, but that we often got the bad with the good. Her liberal conscience argued for things in spite of themselves, perhaps only as a device to permit latitude in her own aberrant thoughts and behavior, seeking a tolerance for individuality, for idiosyncrasies, sensing the evils of conformity; she knew she was obliged to live with the problematic nature of things created by the generosity of thought. Each situation becomes unique, different, heterogeneous. When we draw the line, we necessarily end that process, we seek homogeneity; a-like-ness - conformity.

The silent one had come to the Island to escape some other condition in life that had become unacceptable. The intensity of the conforming principle became intolerable. The Island represented space, a place to expand physically, spiritually, even intellectually, being less hampered and hindered by the daily barrage of codified responses emanating from the myriad mouths. She had accompanied him *To The End Of The Road* out of love and devotion, as his partner for life, her self having become his self, hardly giving a second thought to the better or the worse.

In the end the Island became more clearly what it was; besides a place in which one coped with the lack of basic western civilizational entities or conveniences, like Hydro, as it came to be known (since it was non-nuclear one might suppose), or running water, or vehicular transportation from the mainland to the Island. Yes, and in addition, the Island eventually became neighbors, other individuals; and political entities with whom, and with which one became involved, and entangled almost as though inevitable as inevitability itself.

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As a matter of fact it intruded upon oneself, it opened, and passed through one's gates, it knocked upon one's door, defining its own rights of passage, demanding its own conformity; it demanded involvement on the pain of fiat.

In coming to the Island one had sought redemption, as well as relief.

Literally and figuratively one had burned his bridges. One had accepted something, on the one hand, and had it foisted upon him on the other. One needed to become acquainted with his own dubious elan, the impulse to Paradisiacal notions. One needed to test his theses. They could not rest in a stupor; proximity to otherthanness would not allow one such luxury.

The silent one exclaimed "Good God, not more eternal vigilance-HOLY SHIT!"

The impasse always resolves itself in a kind of cynicism, 'This is the best of all possible worlds'.

It was my privilege to be forewarned. I cannot claim ignorance if this little Island episode in my life should come to naught for some obtusity, involving, of all things - people, other beings, homo sapiens.

The kitchen table had served its purpose; it had become the vehicle for exposing and disposing of reality. No illusions.

Still, most of what was revealed was attempted without partiality, despite the vehemence toward some. Fairness of assessment was meant to accompany the liberal accounting of things. Yet one was warned of his naiveté - in his glassy-eyed view.

Truly, one ought suspect (automatically) as a learned reflex that there cannot exist on this earth, in this world of humanity, a Paradise. Truly, after all one's exposure, one's suspicions are seeded in fertile ground. One ought not allow his yearning to prevail over his better sense. The silent one preorated:

*"Planners, Potheads, Pushers, Pilferers, and Philanderers!"*

We hadn't been long on the Island, making the rounds of some of the notables, before we were exclaiming our appreciation of the "Rock", which we dared quite openly appraise as "Paradise".

E'er too long, and too often mentioned, it appeared those with some experience of the place thought Paradise too strong an expression, and that other P's in the alphabet more accurately stated the Island's Proclivities, so rife and overrun had it become with "Planners, Potheads, Pushers, Pilferers, and Philanderers!"

Some also cautioned not to become involved in the Island's Politics, or its factions, if we intended to derive some enjoyment from so dubious a Paradise.

After nearly twenty years, it has become evident the latter admonition has had proven value, as it would have had in any other place 'up for grabs' by various hominid interests, good or bad.

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It is nearly always wrong to make judgments from 'hearsay'; but heard often enough, one does tend to believe some of what he hears. Often enough mentioned, I recall the summary meeting at the Community Hall dealing with Harmony Heaven's image following the Media Exposure of one of the Island's more notorious industries. Annual raids by the authorities verify the continued existence of the trade, a *fait accompli*, and the understood status quo stand-off between the Yeas and the Nays.

Unfortunately, the 'hearsay' also links Pot with Drugs, Pot with Pushers, and with Planners, the latter who wish to Protect and Preserve the growing Fields from the Intrusions of People and Progress, AND to freeze our assets. The Philanderings may not be attributable to the trade.

One always yearns for the hopeful Prospect, for the message of the voices to 'change', as he or she might have ten or twenty years ago. "Change" has become synonymous with Political Campaigns. "Change" contains the implicit Potential for bad as it does for good, as any wise Planner knows or suspects.

So, for the next ten years lets work on Paradise; put the 'Genie back in the bottle'; run the video backwards, so to speak, wherein Adam disgorges the Apple, the Serpent snatches it from Eve, slithering away to become transformed into a harmless branch of the Proverbial Tree; as the Heavenly Glow of Eden returns once again.

Do I then now proclaim Islandness, or the Island as no better than any other place. Can I say, because of its fewerness, in its accounting of number, that mere encompass of number, as representing a limit, a knowledge of only so many; do-gooders, planners, pushers, pot growers, that the Island is a better place; will the ledger reveal what cannot be apparent in other ways? Can I not allow what else the Island is, that some other place is not, prevail over what the Island contains, that very much resembles what I would avoid elsewhere? Does the Island, in its intrinsic self differ in some significant way, just by being physically non-contiguous with something else - surrounded by the 'magic' of water. Should I not meditate upon water or The Water as much as I would upon Island, or The Island?

Was it the hope of returning to one's Island that led the Greek emerging from the battlefield with Darius to exclaim Thalatta!, Thalatta! - the Island surrounded by the Sea, surely not to return only to Athens. Perhaps!

I, alone upon the water surrounded by a vast expanse. We hear of those who go about on the desert on order to consult with their Gods - to seek revelations - to become purified - and to escape their own desperation.

We had brought it all to the Kitchen Table, leaving something unresolved.