

THE "SOCIAL" GAP

Al, George and I had been invited to an engagement party at a very posh estate on the Palos Verdes Peninsula in Southern California. Both Al and myself were behavioral psychology majors attending college and, needless to say, were far from being blessed with much extra spending cash. George, a Navy recruit stationed in Long Beach, was equally financially deprived. Thus, the invitation had been received, especially by George, with no less than a moderate amount of concern. None of our wardrobes even approached the standard of dress he felt the occasion demanded. However, the invitation came from a fellow student who happened to be close mutual friend. Therefore, despite George's misgivings, Al and I persuaded him that he would fair quite well by dressing in the same "formal" campus attire which Al and I intended to wear, and he agreed to attend the party, splurging the balance of his bank account on a new turtleneck sweater and dress slack which he topped with one of Al's freshly dry cleaned dark sport coat.

Our trio, with George experiencing a fair amount of discomfort over our mode of dress, approached the front door of the lavish residence and rang the doorbell and, pressing past the maid, were met by the father of the bride to be. Surveying our attire, the tolerant father merely raised a casual eyebrow and politely smiled as he invited us into the main salon.

To George's utter horror, the rest of the gathering were dressed in tuxedos and formal evening gowns. He almost shrivelled and vanished into the lush carpeting, feeling as ill at ease as a turkey at a Thanksgiving Day festivities planning meeting.

Al and myself, on the other hand, being experienced hands at crashing parties, relished

the idea that our mode of dress obviously was unique. On previous occasions, we had managed to utilize that fact to our social advantage by posturing ourselves either as members of the professional intelligentsia or as nonconforming social rebels, assumed roles which, in the rebellious 60s, found acceptance especially amongst the college set.

For his part, the lesser adventurous George, believing that we already had made as big a fools of ourselves as it was humanly possible under the circumstances, decided he had absolutely nothing more to lose and followed Al and I into the salon. As we surveyed the disinterested glances of the young gathering, Al leaned over and whispered, "The party never happened. Everybody looks totally zoned. Maybe, we should check to see if any of them still has a pulse."

With a nod of agreement, I seconded his observation. The gathering, composed of an unbalanced mixture of college age males and females, with the females holding the slight numerical advantage, were loosely scattered about the furnishings and plush carpeted floor.

Apparently, none were acquainted with any other member of the gathering beyond the person or persons with which they had arrived. Thus, none were involved beyond the point of making inane idle conversation with the nearest individual within the room. Moreover, The host and hostess evidently had overlooked even the rudimentary needs of the younger participants and had not provided any form of background music to interfere with the subdued gurgle of conversations taking place in the large salon.

To further compound the gathering's lack of enthusiasm, the prospective bride and groom had left to attend a photographing session in other part of the estate, leaving the several small clusters of total strangers to fend for themselves. Thus, the overall atmosphere of the room was as warm and inviting as an unusual cold snap on a wintry Siberian plain.

Entering the salon proper, Al and I made our way toward the center of the room with the agonizing George in tow about a pace behind, hoping, at least, to find ourselves a comfortable seat. However, the only piece of furniture with enough potential vacant seating appeared to be an overstuffed sofa which stretched against the far wall. A woman sat at one end next to a coffee table which sported an ashtray, casually smoking a cigarette, while, about a foot to her right, sat a tense young man who seemed to be mustering his courage to make an overture to the woman seated to his left.

Wishing to unseat the man and make enough room for our trio and noting the man's uneasy disposition, I decided to accelerate his departure from the sofa by making him feel even more ill at ease.

Accordingly, I turned to Al and pointed to the space between the seated couple and said in a very clinical tone for the man's benefit, "There. That's a prime example of the social gap! It's typical of the social scenario we were discussing today in class. The male subject there," I said, pointing to the gentleman, "is attempting to engage the female on his left. However, he hasn't been able to devise the appropriate opening ploy to begin that engagement. Therefore, he's seated himself next to her, far enough away so as not to infringe upon her personal space bubble, but near enough to not allow room between them for another competing male. Under normal circumstances in civilized society, other males unconsciously recognize such a scenario and oblige by not violating the social gap."

The man startled and looked up at me and, to my quiet satisfaction, drew the eyes of everyone else in the room. It simply was my intent to spotlight the man on the sofa in order to increase his distress on the assumption he then would opt to leave, clearing the sofa for myself and my friends and, potentially, promoting an opportunity for me to speak with the woman seated at the end.

However, Al, who always more than adequately sustained his part in our team effort on jobs, expanded the simple ploy by responding in an equally clinical tone, "I agree, but is that social gap inviolable? In competitive interpersonal relationships, could it not be utilized?"

Stalling to construct a reply, I paused as if analyzing the social setting in question, absently withdrawing and lighting a cigarette and drawing an extended puff. I decided to continue to press the man on the sofa and, moving toward the couple, I turned to Al and replied, "I believe so. Without outraging social etiquette, one could walk over and insert oneself into the space between them, putting one's arm over the back of the sofa behind the female's neck." I accomplished this, appearing to ignore the seated couple; and, pretending to be completely preoccupied with the clinical analysis of the scenario, continued to address my companion. "At this point, the male subject will assume, from your casual intrusion into the female's personal space bubble, that you are an acquaintance of the female subject and, with the social gap violated, will have no alternative but to leave."

I turned and prompted the man with a raised questioning eyebrow and, obviously desiring to exit the spotlight, he arose and vanished toward the back of the salon. Stepping forward to stand about a foot in front of me, Al expanded the ruse by slowly shaking his head and responding, "Fine, that eliminates the potential competition. However, you've moved into intimate physical proximity with the female subject. Surely, at this point, she'll react negatively to that infringement of her personal space."

"Not if you immediately proceed with the second phase of the overture." I replied, again stalling while formulating my thoughts, "The shock of your sudden intrusion into her personal space will forestall any immediate reaction, at least, for several moments while she reaches for the proper social response. However, you must act immediately

before she recovers, preferably in such a manner that further overstimulates her conscious mind."

"Such as?" asked Al, noting the gleam of an idea reflected in my eyes.

"Such as, the ashtray on the end table and the cigarette in my hand could be utilized to that extent." I announced, exhibiting the cigarette and, leaning forward across the woman to my left, pointing to the object on the table, "I could reach across to douse my cigarette in the ashtray, bringing my face within inches of hers as I leaned across, and establish eye contact for an extended second as I extinguished my cigarette. This would imply that the purpose of my intrusion into her space was my need to extinguish the cigarette, a socially proper act. And, faced with that potential, her conscious mind would be pressed to reevaluate this new data, forestalling action until you effected the coup de grace."

"Which would be?" prompted Al.

"Placing a friendly kiss upon her cheek before I quickly withdraw." I responded, effecting the described actions, before I again returned to look at Al.

Apparently absorbed with the conversation between Al and myself, the woman did not negatively react and simply waited for me to continue to explain the evolving ploy. Satisfied with the moderate success I had achieved to this point, I pressed on, "At this point, you must immediately exit the subject's personal space before she can react. This will return the social setting to its norm; thus, forestalling any intended negative response on the subject's part."

Al pensively stroked his flowing red beard, alternating his gaze between the woman and myself. "But, what has been accomplished?" he asked, providing the prod I requested with a subtle dip of my eyebrows.

"The essential phase of the procedure." I announced, "On a subconscious level, you have breached the fundamental barriers which inhibit an intimate relationship. You have entered the subject's intimate sphere of being and engaged in an intimate act, the kiss. However, by immediately withdrawing in response to her unspoken desire for you to cease the intimacy and permit her to reestablish the integrity of her personal space, you have implanted, within her subconscious, an element of trust. The intimacies rendered no harm to her physical or mental being and, instead, provided a certain measure of tactile gratification inherent in all intimacies. Therefore, the subject is now subconsciously primed to continue to render a favorable response."

"And?" encouraged Al.

"And..." I said, pausing for effect, "You now proceed with the accepted social protocol. You offer a warm pleasant expression and properly introduce yourself." I turned and smiled my cooperative subject and, offering my hand, said, "Hi, my name is Tony."

Still a bit uncertain about the entire proceeding but obviously grateful the brief interlude in her apparent boredom, the woman returned my smile. "I'm Beverly." she replied, shaking my hand.

I again turned and looked up at Al, continuing, "And, if the subject female reacts favorably, as Beverly so graciously did, you continue to structure the revised scenario and proceed to engage the subject in whatever mode you deem appropriate depending upon the way she responds." I again smiled at Beverly and said, "Thanks for cooperating as the subject in our discussion."

"You're welcome." she cordially replied, asking, "What college do you attend?"

"Cal State." I answered.

She nodded, acknowledging her familiarity with the name. "You study this social gap stuff in class?" she asked.

"In a way," I responded, "We study human behavior in general which could be expanded into social ploys like the social gap. However, under the circumstances, I decided upon something more effective."

"Like what?" she asked.

Smiling, I winked at Beverly and replied, "Like explaining the social gap." And, elicited an appreciative laugh.

Lowering my voice to a confidential whisper, I ventured, "Looks like the party died peacefully in its sleep. Would you like to go and check to see if life still exists somewhere else?"

Beverly nodded. "Yeah, definitely, I was about to split."

"There's three of us." I announced, shrugging, "And, I'm driving."

Momentarily studying my two companions, Beverly grinned. "That's a convenient number." she replied, "My two roommates and I came up here in my car."

Elated over the unexpectedly perfect pairing, I suggested, "How about meeting at the Plush Horse at the bottom of the Hill?"

She agreed and beckoned to her roommates to join my companions and I and, after a brief round of introductions and the approval by consensus, we left the engagement party in our separate vehicles to reunite at the designated rendezvous.

To say that George was elated as we entered my vehicle would be a gross misstatement of the fact. He marveled at our ability to secure dates for the evening at a gathering where he felt so ill at ease and spent the entire trip down to Torrance and the Plush Horse, audibly memorizing every element of the impromptu "social gap".

A week later, as Mary, an ex-wife, and I were having a moderately cool visit in the living room of my apartment, George appeared at my door. I bade him to enter and, upon seeing her and I seated on the sofa with a comfortable space between us, George exuberantly yelled, "AH HA! THE SOCIAL GAP!" and, immediately, sprang across the room and pressed his buttocks to the sofa between myself and my completely astounded female friend.

Frantically groping about his pockets, George jiggled with enthusiasm. "Quick!" he anxiously demanded, "Give me a cigarette! I need a cigarette for the social gap!"

Mary stared at me with those plaintive 'Is-he-a-psycho' creases crowding her eyes and I convulsively burst into laughter.

"Nevermind!" yelled George, spotting my pack of cigarettes on the coffee table, "I'll get one!" He wheeled his head in my friend's direction. "Don't move!" he commanded, "I'll be right back!"

George shot across the room and hurriedly retrieved a cigarette and lighter and rushed back to plop his carcass between my friend and I. Shaking with excitement, he lit the cigarette and glanced over at the end table next to the sofa. "Damn!" he rasped, "No ashtray!" And, again bolted across the room to secure the ashtray.

At this point, Mary had all but crawled into the arm of the sofa, bewilderingly alternating between glaring at George who had zipped back with the required prop and myself who was now hanging over the other end of the sofa, uncontrollably laughing.

George leaned across my female companion and extinguished his cigarette in the ashtray and then sat upright, offering her his hand.

"Hi, my name is George." he said and, before Mary could timidly grasp his extended palm, slapped it against his forehead and dejectedly announced, "Damn, I forgot to kiss you!"

"No way!" wheezed Mary, jumping to her feet and rushing to my front door. "I'll speak with you later!" she growled, menacingly shaking her index finger at me, and left.

George stared at me with that look a child evolves when first told there is no Santa Claus, and sighed, "I guess I screwed up the social gap."

Even after I regained my composure and for the balance of his stay in Long Beach, I never attempted to explain the failure of the ploy to George. In fact, the subject never again came up in our conversations and, I believe, George, wherever he may be at this moment, still shudders each time he is confronted with the ill fated Social Gap.

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