

Dressing Up

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A graduation ceremony is a moment of pride in which we do honor to our graduates—and congratulations to you all—and to their parents and their teachers who were such a help to them. Of course the school gives the honors, but the school consists of students and teachers, supported by parents. So we are doing honor to ourselves. Why should we take the time to do honor to ourselves? Isn't this a waste of time, effort and expense? Why stop what we are doing to praise ourselves for doing it?

This is a special school because it specializes in the classics. I too specialize in the classics, and I am a teacher. So I will use the time to teach you something, so that we don't waste it. I will teach you something that could be learned from Plato and Alexis de Tocqueville, but I won't refer to their texts and I won't give a classroom lecture. Let's return to what we are doing now, holding a celebration.

A celebration is a formal event, one for which everybody is dressed up. Not just dressed, but dressed up. What does the "up" mean? Dressed up is looking your best for an occasion when you want to look your best, an important occasion. You *dress* in order not to be naked, you *dress up* to show that is not ordinary work or leisure, but an event. Why do we dress at all? To show ourselves and to cover up ourselves. For an event you dress in formal wear, not informal. What is formal and informal wear surely differs in different times and places, but in every human

society there is always a difference. Some people dress up for work or at school, perhaps in uniforms, perhaps by wearing a suit if you work in a fancy office.

Dressing up is done for the sake of society; it is to show yourself at your best. What will others think if you don't dress up? It's a sign of respect for what other people think important, but also for what you think is important. It's a sign of self-respect to dress up for your graduation; you worked hard for your education and you are justly pleased at the result. When dressed up, you *look* different from when you are dressed informally. You try to look different; that's your intention so as to show respect for others and for yourself. Formality is a sign of our social and personal sense of self-importance and self-satisfaction.

Now we begin to see a problem. Isn't it possible that some people may be too self-important and take themselves too seriously? When they dress up, they put on airs. They are not cool, they are what used to be called "phony." (That's from a book of my time, *The Catcher in the Rye*, which I hope is now forgotten.) Not only do they think too much of themselves, they worry too much about what others think of them. People like this are vain, and their formality seems to be the expression of their vanity. They are conceited and stuck up, yet they are also conformist and stuck in a rut. From this you could conclude that informal dress is more honest than fancy dressing up. You appear as you are, not as you wish you were.

This objection says that it is more direct and also more equal to be informal. It follows that democracy, which stands for equality, much prefers informality to formality. Americans, a very democratic people, act accordingly. We are a can-do people; we like to take shortcuts; we don't like to "stand on ceremony." We say

what we mean, and we like to speak bluntly, without flourishes and without diplomatic niceties; we like efficiency and don't like to waste time; we get impatient easily.

All these can be positive qualities, but they also harbor a danger. Too much informality can make you disrespectful of other people's dignity. When you interrupt other people, it may be because you believe you know more or speak better or think faster, but it infringes on their self-expression and makes them feel inferior to you, thus resentful of you. The formality of speaking in turn is more respectful of others. It may slow down the discussion, but perhaps that is not such a bad thing if it keeps you from blurting out ill-considered opinions.

Another example of a formality that protects human dignity is table manners. "Eating like a pig" means that you are satisfying your hunger directly and immediately, without pause or ceremony or prayer, like an animal. A human being eats from a table, or at least off the ground, sociably, with friendly talk, to indicate that eating is not just "feeding your face," as we say. Table manners are a social convention, to be sure, practiced differently in different societies, but every society has some sort of table manners. It's part of human nature to want to distinguish ourselves as being above other animals. We are animals too; we have to eat. But we eat with dignity. Sometimes people overdo dignity, and in emergencies one must set it aside, but even we informal Americans insist on some level of politeness.

To be polite is a formal virtue. You don't have to like someone in order to be polite to him. Being polite keeps you from making enemies of those you don't like or don't know. It's convenient to be respectful in this way even though it's a hindrance

to your free action not to eat like a wolf when you are hungry, just as it is a restriction on your free speech not to tell people what you think of them. When people expect you to be polite, not to be polite is a formal declaration that you don't care about them. Not taking notice of others is not neutral; it's an insult to them. Politeness is a required formality, and if you are not polite, you will pay for it.

Even though informal behavior is private, private behavior with other people is not always informal. Other people watch you, and if they are impressed with how cool you are, they may imitate you. "Cool" is a word that describes people who may start by challenging a more formal custom—for example, wearing jeans instead of pants—but who then set a fashion, so that the new way becomes the formal way that everyone follows. When I was in college, a male student had to wear a coat and tie to be allowed in the dining hall. Then, when the rule was abandoned, nobody wore a coat and tie. To be dressed up became overdressed. This is how democracy enforces many of its rules: nobody wants to stick out from the rest of the crowd. If you want to stick out, and be noticed, it's better to do it with an action that's worthwhile. To dress a little bit oddly, like a man who wears a hat, is not wrong, but it's better to think differently. There is no worse feature of democracy than conformity of thought, not in what you wear but in your opinions. Most people have reasonable conclusions, but most of those conclusions are not well thought out.

Another recent growth in informality can be seen in the use of first names only. When I was your age and the teacher (or anyone else) asked me for my name, I would give both names. Now when I ask as a teacher, the answer is always only the first name. To me, that's not enough; I'd like to know your family name as well.

That's the name I'll use when I grade you. But to students nowadays, the first name is enough. That's the fashion; everybody does it, and anyone who gives his last name would seem out of place, trying to be superior, more important than others. Besides, being known by your family name might make it seem that you are not your own person; you are identified not by what you have done but by the family you were born into. Being on a first name basis is more equal, and democracy, the kind of government we live under, is mainly about equality. Students want to be on a first name basis with their teachers, too; that's more friendly because it's more equal. Friends are your equals, but teachers are your instructors. How come your friend gets to give you a grade? And from the teacher's point of view, shouldn't you always give a good grade to someone who is your friend? What are friends for, if not to give them benefits? Here we see the seed of grade inflation. Everybody is good and everybody is equal, so all get A's.

What is needed is a formal distinction between teacher and student, or between waiter and customer, or between policeman and civilian. While the teacher or waiter or policeman is doing his job, he is not your friend and you should treat him formally, just as he should treat you not with the favoritism of a friend but with good instruction, good service, and the impartial justice of the law. It's good to be personal with your friends, but we also need to have impersonal relations in which there is some distance between individuals, some degree of reserve in the relationship. That's because society requires authority, a certain inequality in useful relationships, even in a democracy. Formal distinctions between jobs allow someone to be your boss but only on the job; outside the job you are an equal

citizen. That means you are not a slave; you obey orders only because it's useful to you to do so. It's not that your boss is a better person than you are, but that it's his job to give orders and yours to obey. This is democracy with equal dignity despite the necessary inequalities required for any successful human society. Those inequalities are equalized, as much as they can be, through formalities such as the use of last names. You can say politely, Mr. Mansfield, you're beginning to bore me.

One last formality I will mention actually affects behavior and is useful. This is the ceremony of marriage. Why is it necessary to get married?, one might ask. Why not just live together and have children and raise them without an expensive ceremony and piece of paper called a license? And why bring God into it? Why all the formality? Today two opposite trends exist regarding marriage. On the one hand, illustrating the dangerous power of informality in a democracy, many fewer people are getting married and many more children are being born out of wedlock. On the other hand, a political movement in favor of same-sex marriage has been gaining adherents and seems to be on the verge of succeeding. The premise of that movement, of course, is that marriage is a good thing, worth having, a sign of success and respectability. And indeed marriage does seem to affect the behavior of those who marry, and for the better. Married people do better in life, make better parents, and stay out of trouble with the law. Most of the time, I add, it's also more fun. The easy way to happiness in life is in finding and making a happy marriage. The hard way is through ambition.

With this homily it's time to close. Both Plato and Tocqueville talk about forms, but I have tried to find them in our daily life, in the difference we make

between formal and informal, and why and how we do that. A formal ceremony shows what we want to be and covers up what we don't want to show. Human life is part show, part concealment. We never show ourselves exactly as we are, but always a little more (when through formalities we conceal) or a little less (when with informality we leave out our self-importance).

I conclude that ceremony is not a waste of time, and I have used my time in this ceremony to reason about ceremony, to show you why. Reasoning, I will add, is both formal and informal. It's formal because a reason always addresses other people, many of whom you may not know and never will know. And it's informal because you can reason in private, for example when the teacher thinks he has your full attention.

Thank you for inviting me to John Adams Academy, congratulations again, and God bless you.