

Manspreading

A Sermon by Rev. Kate Braestrup

In the *New York Times*, recently, I saw the following analysis of the present crisis in the relationship between men and women in the workplace:

The problem is people in authority not understanding or not caring about boundaries, not seeing those under them or around them as human beings deserving of respect, and losing any reticence or hesitation about abusing their power over them.

My first reaction was to snort: "Boundaries? What boundaries?" When I was coming of age, back in 1979, the intellectual's favorite movie -- it won all sorts of prizes -- was one in which Woody Allen played a middle-aged guy having a full-blown affair with a *17-year-old*. That film was playing in America's theaters right around the same time that a younger future Senate candidate, Roy Moore, was dating teenagers. Scoff all you want about Alabama, but the movie was called *Manhattan*.

Last spring, Vice President Mike Pence was broadly and loudly mocked in the press and Twitter sphere for his practice of avoiding potentially compromising situations with women. Back then, pundits were confidently asserting that "colleagues and employees engage in a relationship between grown-ups who ought to be able to have an appropriate work-related conversation or a meal together."

Well, yah. Yet here we are, a mere six months later watching as more grown-ups from more places - - NPR, CNN, CBS, Hollywood, the sports world, the halls of Congress and the past and present White House -- are being accused by other grown-ups about variations on the theme of meals and work-related activities being turned into...traumatic ick.



I do believe whole, squawking flocks of pigeons that have been flapping around for decades are now limping home to roost, with predictably messy results. In the midst of a stinker of a crisis, we aren't having trouble understanding boundaries; we're doing a search-and-rescue operation for them, if only so we can more plausibly insist that men (always men) abide by them.

Though the outraged commentators at NPR, the *New Yorker*, the *Washington Post* are unlikely to agree, the Bible could be helpful. One might characterize it as a book in which, with the help of God, human beings establish boundaries...dwell happily and peaceably within them...begin to take happiness and peace for granted... dismantle the boundaries and then? Well...read the prophets.

Back in seminary, my Old Testament professor lectured on the Levitical laws, of which there are lots and lots. Most of these seem, to modern eyes either cruel or completely unnecessary, but my professor explained that that the Jews regarded these not as ends in themselves. The Levitical laws were seen as a series of protective ramparts thrown up around the really sacred things, the fear of God and the love of neighbor.

Following the laws trained the people to pay attention to how they lived their lives, to notice small things -- the fiber their clothing was made out of, or the way food was combined on the plate. To follow the rules was to continually practice attention and self-discipline and, as the saying goes, *how you practice is how you play*. Attention and self-discipline are useful attributes to have anytime, but especially when times are tough and temptations are everywhere.

Were I a Jew in Ancient Times, and I blundered through the outermost boundary -- I ate shellfish, say, or mixed linen and wool in a single garment -- my neighbors would have the authority and confidence to swiftly and probably painfully judge me, reminding me of God's expectations and nudging (or shoving) me back to the practice of following God's way.

Without such well-established, strongly supported rules, what human beings -- Jews, Americans, women, men -- naturally tend to practice is *inattention* and self-indulgence. The chances are good that sooner or later we will do something much worse than eating lamb cooked in its mother's milk. The neighbors would have no standing to correct us -- who are they to judge? Especially if we've got power! How easy it is to just keep blundering on, doing what comes naturally until somebody gets hurt.

The *New York Times* didn't provide a map of the boundaries that persons in authority were supposed to understand and care about, nor a list of the rules that might train strong men to see their subordinates -- especially the female ones -- as human beings deserving of respect. They did not name the established social norm meant to inspire reticence or hesitation in a boss man tempted to abuse his power over women.

Do these exist? What would they look like?

When my niece fell in love with a young Californian my brother and sister-in-law threw a wonderful wedding at a resort in South Carolina. I officiated, and it was beautiful, and everyone was happy, and we all cried and clapped, and then dashed to the reception because there was an open bar and...I kid you not...a *grits* bar.

So there I was, glass of champagne in one hand and a glass of buttered grits in the other, feeling blissful, when my niece's godmother, a woman I'll call Shirley, approached. She was elegantly dressed in a frock with a tight waist, a crinoline and a jewel-bespangled décolletage of the sort you seldom see in Maine. She was very Southern, and annoyed.

She gestured with her champagne glass at the crowd coming in.

"Look at those boys," she said, of the young male guests. "Just pushing on in here, and taking all the seats. Now, in our day, a young man would've hung back, let the ladies go in first, given an arm to a gal in high heeled shoes. It never would have occurred to him to take a chair before all the women had been seated. That's what made it reasonable to wear high heeled shoes in the old days. You knew you wouldn't have to stumble across a gravel courtyard, or wrestle with a heavy door all by yourself. Nowadays, ladies still wear the high-heeled shoes, but the men don't even think about looking after us. It's a dang shame. Chivalry is dead, even in the South."

Well, I thought. Of course, high heeled shoes are a handicap. And it's true that young men don't know how to provide manly assistance. When officiating at weddings, I always have to instruct the groomsmen: "Look, guys, don't just go galloping up the aisle when the service is over but wait for the

bridesmaid and give her your arm...no, not that sloppy, floppy arm, Son! Think of your arm as a firm bar for her to hold onto."

Women don't *have* to wear high heels and, speaking personally, I'd be quite happy if formal attire for ladies demanded a nice pair of Uggs. Given that most bridesmaids now sport visible tattoos -- a form of self-decoration formerly practiced only by men -- and given that women and men are now said to be so similar that switching genders is as easy as changing your shirt, why should a man open doors for women or give her an arm to lean on, let alone wait until the women are seated before plunking his buns in a chair?



This was more or less what I said to Shirley through my mouthful of grits. Everyone should wear Doc Martens and open their own dang doors. And this was more or less what the feminists of my generation pushed for: expanded opportunities, comfortable, functional clothing and equal treatment... but it didn't really "take." Oh, the opportunities have expanded, but women's clothing has become more revealing and incapacitating, and women's media has taken the attitude that liberation, for women, really means doing...whatever... with your body, with birth control, abortion and antibiotics in place to mitigate the consequences.

The consequences, however, may be more than we women bargained for. Indeed, they may include the sort of boorish, mindless behavior Shirley noticed: young men manspreading and letting the women stand.

"Manspreading" is what it is called when a passenger on a subway or bus allows his knees to splay outward, taking up more room and impinging on the space of people -- apparently especially women -- around him.

Radical feminists have been after manspreaders for years, in New York, Boston, Chicago and on the West Coast, for a behavior they believe results from "toxic masculinity" and a male need to project status and power, particularly against women.

I don't know. I think the radical feminists are giving the manspreaders too much intellectual credit; they could just be really rude.

By what standard are they rude, though?

Podcaster [Andrew Klavan](#) said something helpful the other day about rules and human nature:

Human beings are human beings -- fallen and flawed, and thus saved by grace. So, left to their own, perfectly natural devices, boys will be puerile, undisciplined and self-centered, because human beings do tend to be that way, at least when we can get away with it.

Back in the old days, said Klavan, the rules of behavior that decent boys were taught not only made life easier for women but actually served to *train men to be mindful of the people around them and especially mindful toward women* -- to focus their minds, to notice women's existence and presence, and adjust their behavior accordingly.

Obviously, even a modern manspreader (if he's straight) will notice the presence of a bodacious babe and adjust his behavior accordingly, but gentlemanly behavior was not to be offered only to the attractive.

All women -- young, middle aged, elderly -- were to be noticed, offered a strong arm, an opened door and signs of masculine respect.

A gentleman didn't curse around women, or tell salacious stories. He stood up when a woman entered a room, and he would not take a seat while a woman remained standing. This was the standard, by the way, that the abolitionist, feminist and former slave Sojourner Truth was holding Southern men to in her *Ain't I A Woman?* speech.

That man over there says that women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud-puddles, or gives me any best place! And ain't I a woman?

I doubt the bigoted white men that Sojourner Truth was mocking had gone out of their way to offend her or demonstrate their fairly obvious power over her. Instead, the regime of gentlemanly manners they observed simply did not extend to black women, and so they ignored her.

We could have been content to demand that gentlemen treat black women with deference too.

Instead, we seem to have gone the other way, and decided that the answer is to treat women just like men. What Shirley noticed at my niece's wedding wasn't hostility toward women, just mindlessness about them.

And why not? After all, these are modern times; it's not as if anybody dies from having to stand up in the subway. And isn't giving a woman your seat implying that she is weak? There are women who bawl men out for opening a door, and nobody forced Shirley to wear high heels.

A woman is equal! She makes her own choices! She's strong! She is invincible!

Or, as Sojourner Truth put it, "I have ploughed and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ain't I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man -- when I could get it -- and bear the lash as well! And ain't I a woman?"

Isn't it an improvement now that all women -- except, again, the bodacious babes -- are as inaudible and invisible and unprotected as Sojourner Truth?

How you practice is how you play.

Perhaps the arbitrary and apparently unnecessary manners we inculcated into little boys (and girls, too) back in the day were, like the Levitical laws, a form of practice for the test that was sure to come. Would a little boy who learned to stand up when a woman entered the room, to open doors or make of his arm a strong bar for a woman to lean on...would a boy trained to be a gentleman be quite as likely to grow up to harass a secretary, or proposition an intern?

Would a young woman brought up around well-mannered men feel quite as confused and ambivalent as today's #MeToo victims seem to have been about the behavior they were subjected to?

Would men be more likely to call out the transgressions of other men if the boundaries of what was and was not acceptable, gentlemanly behavior were clearer?

I don't know. There have always been creeps and sexual predators, but in a way, that's exactly the point isn't it? That's why standards for gentlemanly behavior, like Levitical laws, were established and enforced: precisely because human beings are fallen and flawed. Love, if it is to be real, full love, requires our attention and our practice, so *that a man may not be carried away by the error of the lawless and fall from his secure position*. Wouldn't you say that Charlie Rose and John Conyers have fallen from their secure positions, not just professionally but morally?

Maybe we should rebuild some boundaries, teach our children and each other to practice love daily and mindfully, in small ways so that we may be ready for the test when it comes and so we may “grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ,” strong and secure in love.

Amen.

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