ESSAY
Hanging Out
In the Age of Indiscretion

"My dear, I don't care what they do, so long as they don't do it in the streets and frighten the horses."
– Mrs. Patrick Campbell, British actress, circa 1910

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Mrs. Campbell, nee Beatrice Stella Tanner, thus defined the Edwardian England of the early 1900s, or at least that laissez-faire upper class devoted to bedroom-hopping house parties in grand country estates, and scandalous flirtations a la "Masterpiece Theatre."

Her famous quotation described the amorous adventures of fashionable beauties like Lillie Langtry and Jennie Churchill, mother of Winston, whose penchant for high-profile romance after the long and tightly laced reign of Queen Victoria nonetheless presupposed a certain discretion.

Whatever mockery one might make of the marriage bed, it must not rupture the social or political fabric. Gossip was one thing, but one kept one's adventures out of the news columns, and at all cost out of the courts. Divorce was the one unthinkable scandal.

That sort of discretion, of course, presupposed that the misbehaver was invested in society and thus had something to lose, if only dignity. Nearly a century later, in a culture of tell-all memoirs and talk shows (not to mention as many as 60,000 pages more grand jury testimony about to be released), the concept of discretion itself -- not to mention dignity -- appears moribund.

With l'affaire Lewinsky we're not only frightening the horses, we're stampeding the elephants.

Might our society have something to learn from the Edwardians?

"Well, it certainly should," said Judith Martin, a k a Miss Manners. "Wasn't it Bernard Shaw who said that hypocrisy is the tribute vice pays to virtue?"

Actually, it was La Rochefoucauld, but never mind. We are indeed stampeding the elephants, Martin says, and "it has tremendous negative ramifications for society, which I think people are beginning to understand." The current public revulsion against all aspects of the Lewinsky scandal, she says, is really "the society that thought it wanted everything out in the open belatedly discovering what it means to live with the consequences of that."

From Monica Lewinsky's compulsive blathering to friends about her sex life to the prurience of Kenneth Starr's report to the media's fixation on thong underwear and cigars, the current presidential scandal was spawned

by "the extraordinarily naive idea popularized by psychiatrists and pop psychologists in recent decades that it's always healthier to get everything out in the open," Martin says. "It's not. There are reasons for discretion and privacy. It's one thing to get in touch with your feelings. It's another thing to smear them all over everyone else."

Stephen L. Carter of Yale Law School agrees. Carter, author of "Civility: Manners, Morals and the Etiquette of Democracy," says a democratic society like ours depends on our ability to recognize our common humanity and restrain our impulses for the common good.

Previous generations, of course, understood that. A decent reticence in manners of discourse, public and private, was what elevated -- even dignified -- those who practiced it. They understood that privacy is a two-way street: It avoids confronting others with information or behavior they might find offensive and it avoids subjecting one's own affairs to the evaluation of others.

"You close the door when you go to the bathroom not because you're doing something bad in there, but because others might not care to share the experience," Martin says.

Carter cites the work of Swiss sociologist Norbert Elias, whose 1939 book "The Civilizing Process" sought to study the development of manners against larger trends in social history. In particular, he sought to puzzle out why human beings who had for centuries performed bodily functions openly in the street and had eaten almost everything with their fingers instead of tableware, suddenly in the 1500s and 1600s became concerned about appearances.

He found that the development of manners directly accompanied restrictions on impulsive violence over small disputes, even as power, particularly the power over violence, was increasingly centered in the state.

"The result was a set of rules for the expression of everything from anger to sexual desire," Carter writes. ". . . Membership in the community . . . was symbolized by the willingness to abide by those rules, even when one's needs or wants led in a different direction."

People, in other words, became less interested in signaling their ability to control or intimidate others, and more interested in advertising their ability to control themselves and thus rank as responsible members of society, subject to its controls.

William Strauss, who argues in his co-authored books "Generations" and "The Fourth Turning" that cyclical patterns of behavior show up in succeeding generations, sees the present in-your-face attitude of personal disclosure, from Monica Lewinsky to Jerry Springer, as a more extreme form of a similar social exhibitionism that showed up in the 1920s.

"The Twenties are remembered now nostalgically as a kind of harmlessly frivolous time of flappers and raccoon coats," he says. "But in fact there was a terrific breakdown in the old social order and the community ethic" after World War I, signaled by everything from crime and sexual liberation to substance abuse and divorce.

The sense of community didn't return comparably until about 1930, he said, when the collective hardships of the Great Depression forced a greater sense of mutual dependence on the nation and manners reasserted themselves. Privacy was also appreciated more after 1930 because in times of economic hardship it's less readily available.

In America that decent veneer of respectability was even more important than in England, Martin notes, because unlike Europe, where the aristocracy was one of blood, the democratic notion of aristocracy was one of behavior. In most of this country, you were considered a "lady" or "gentleman" not because of how much money you had or who your parents were but because of how you acted -- dignity and consideration for others ranking high among the qualifying attributes.

It is worth noting that much of the moral force of the civil rights era of the early 1960s was achieved by blacks in the South who, through the dignity and restraint of their personal behavior in the face of segregation's indignities, managed to transcend and shame -- and ultimately defeat -- a system designed to humiliate them.

Now everybody in America is not only doing what they want to do but telling us all about it on television.

If there's a moral force operating in l'affaire Lewinsky, it's clearly not evident in the actions of Congress or the special prosecutor or the media, all of whom appear to be tarring themselves with the bitumen of the behavior they condemn.

There's gossip and jokes, of course, but as Martin notes, the pleasure of gossip is in feeling superior to the gossipee. "But there are boundaries to that," she adds. "When gossip spreads and spreads and spreads it becomes frightening, and that's what's happening now. Because you realize how quickly it could turn on you."

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