

Talking of Toilets

by James Como



Last week at a dinner party in Manhattan I was, as usual, a right-of-center minority of one among a gaggle of progressives. Our hostess, a liberal lawyer of modulated expression, had imposed a No Politics rule, which we all followed, though at the price of one man (an academic) talking relentlessly about himself. For him there were no others – until the subject of fungible toilets arose. Of a sudden the world was filled with Others. It was playtime.

Having endured a plethora of rights-equality-compassion platitudes – mostly abstractions, like actual Others, to these One Per Centers – at dessert I intervened with, “let me be the Devil’s Advocate.” Silence: at table there is no joy greater than pricking the smugness balloon.

My points in a nutshell: understanding – or, as our hostess put it, “our responsibility to secure comfort for them” – is a two-way street, no one being more deserving of it than anyone else. This was unfathomable to the righteous. No, they protested: those who feel “wrongly sexed” deserve more . . . *protection*. But why? I asked. Is it because no one else is discomfited by this or another social convention? Or because those using the correct toilet must be *de-privileged*? Or because gender is so special? No, they answered (dodging the question), it’s because the use of a bathroom “should not be a big deal in the first place,” for example, there are stalls

that secure privacy. Well, then, whence the need to use a toilet other than one suited to your genitalia, if it's "no big deal"? And what about high school locker rooms with communal shower stalls, when it might indeed be "a big deal" in the first and last places and in several places in between?

They returned to moral posturing, the last refuge of the dialectically bereft: We all must be protected equally. We must strive for "oneness." We must show compassion. We must not become 'us' and" – here the horror – 'them'," presumably the same *thems* to whom our hostess had earlier referred, approvingly.

The self-absorbed fellow allowed that it was my age that kept me from . . . changing. I told him I was offended. "Oh no," he said, "I'm old too." "Oh no," I answered, "it's not being called old that offends but the implication of irrationality, as though my age somehow prevents my brain from reasoning disinterestedly to a conclusion." He apologized, twice. I accepted, grandly and with a smile; a smile, because back-footing this knucklehead had been *that* easy.

I managed these few additional thoughts: let us remember that equality is not the same as symmetry, that diversity (not a homogenized "oneness") is our objective, that all of us must practice the rules of common courtesy and charity (what Lord Moulton has called the Domain of Manners, where we obey the unenforceable) no matter our differences, that political bigotry is as hurtful as any other so that, for example, I too deserve "comfort," and that 'us' and 'them' will always be with us, as we would have seen dispositively had there been any Boston Red Sox fans at table.

The conversation would end with the completion of dessert, but not without a final gambit. "We must," said our equine elevated hostess, "sometimes impose upon people what's right, as we did with the Civil Rights Movement." Now, she is a good

woman, so I could not leave without an admonition. "All my adult life, my dear" I answered with condescension of my own, "I've taught preponderantly with and among people of color, especially African Americans. I urge you, when in their presence, not to compare that movement to the use of toilets."

The lesson? Some living room debates are genuine clashes of ideas; this one wasn't. I was almost tempted to do some heavy lifting for the other side which, frankly, must learn to do better. And that can happen only if they engage with their opposition, respectfully, as though there were another side in the first place.

Ay, there's the rub.