

The Cost of Doing Business

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I grew up in President Bush's bedroom. After the first George Bush was elected to Congress, he and my stepfather concluded a deal over the telephone whereby we bought their house. The two of them shared a laugh about being the only two guys in Houston who actually *needed* seven bedrooms. That house doesn't exist anymore, but the sense of linkage, remote yet palpable, remains. We were fostered by parallel universes, W and I. We both came from "nice" families. My family, like his, large and distinguished (no, not that distinguished). My childhood, like his, full of Texas myth – oil, ranches, and wide open spaces, coupled with an ivy league intellectual vein. My social world, like his, rendered by privilege. We belonged to the same country clubs, had the same friends, pursued the same sports. I was just ten or twelve years behind him. I grew up in the contented, unexamined world of Houston's go-go days. Ken Lay was a friend of my father's. Dick Cheney spoke at my doctoral graduation.

Privilege is its own cultural system. As with any system, there are implicit social rules that keep it working smoothly. You don't actually sign a contract or anything; you just soak it up through your skin, what's "done" and what's "not done." Right down to the hemlines, the side of your head that your hair is parted on, your Papagallo shoes or your Peter Pan collar. That's where the dilemma starts. See, it's not *polite* to challenge a person's politics. Ever. That was my mother's teaching. And (so the code goes), if you challenge someone, you are impolite, and hence a bad person. As a child of the South, and especially as a girl, you are raised to smile and listen and nod, and keep your own counsel. Be a good person.

If a girl is "well brought up," she is sheltered from exposure to danger, poverty, sex, and work. Sure, it's important to have a passing knowledge – theoretical – about the vagaries of life in the real world, but because she's so lucky, she never has to encounter it. It's a privilege for which all

the daughters of privilege should be grateful. We're expected to avert our eyes to the real-world costs of privilege.

In my own upbringing, there was one vivid moment in which the sheltering filter fell away, while I was on a school trip to Latin America. We were visiting the 2nd largest plantation in Guatemala (twenty minutes to reach the house from the entry gates), whose chief business was the processing of palm oil into margarine. Upon exiting, our bus was held up at gunpoint by some impoverished workers who demanded that something be done about their situation. My Spanish, thanks to my excellent education, had improved enough to fully comprehend what they were saying. My eyes took in this exemplar of the banana republic existence. Their eyes, meanwhile, moved from anger, through surprise, to shame as they comprehended the youth and tenderness of their accidentally foreign prey. Chagrined, they did the only decent thing, which was to turn their barrels around and leave the bus. Changed, I reflected on our mutual disappointment: they, that they'd found no escape from their conditions, and I, no escape from mine. This, this insuperable altitude, this exclusive "have" status, was my class. This was my station. I was expected to align naturally with the owners. My heart, however, betrayed my class.

For awhile, I persisted in the Stepford world for which I had been so well prepared. I grew up and became a Republican's wife, a Junior League member, a book club founder, a Sunday school teacher. I was a soup-bearing neighbor, playgroup organizer, volunteer worker and soccer coach. I even trained in spiritual direction, since those nice religious men who ruled my church diocese placed a ban on the ordination of women. Oh yeah, that's right, women are there to support and sustain, kindly and politely. Arrange the flowers. Polish the silver. I knew my station. My parents were bursting with pride. I was moral, I was attractive, I was demure, I threw lovely dinner parties, and my children were wonderful. On top of it all, I squeaked out a nice Ph.D. in psychology. Gravy.

But I never shook that moment on the Guatemalan bus. I was plagued, haunted, destined, committed to understanding the gestalts of wealth and poverty. The uses and abuses of power; the conditions that preclude empowerment. As a social psychologist, I have worked in impoverished

Indian villages and counseled the wealthy. I have helped construct financial structures that hold an elusive blend of idealism and pragmatism. I have served as a strategic consultant to business leaders, non-profits boards, and philanthropists. I have worked at the boundaries of mission- and market-driven businesses. Values, value, wealth, worth. Step by step, inch by inch, I have clawed my way out of the country club and into a life rendered more intimately around my convictions. Comfort, friends, influence, marriage, financial security, and enviable zip codes have been the casualties of this crossing.

This year, I just wasn't up to the usual July 4th fireworks; so in a twisted nod to patriotism, I went to see Michael Moore's "Fahrenheit 9/11." Like so many, I'm sure, I was a willing victim of this inflammatory media drive-by. For me, however, the film had a singularly personal import so overwhelming that I struggle to voice it - recent arrival, as I am, to voicing anything "impolite," and hence "immoral," according to The Teaching. Not only did I grow up in W's room, in W's Houston, in W's clubs, but I also had the misfortune of moving to lower Manhattan August 11, 2001. Still wrestling with divorce and work, bathroom fixtures and unpacked boxes, I was one of those small people flattened by the largest attack on the American mainland in 200 years. Right after seeing my children off in that all-American ritual, the first day of school. Right next door. Right overhead, through an uncannily blue sky, plowed some misguided jet. The twin towers that had shaded part of my day, banished to dust in a single, sunny, fiery morning. My little neighborhood, converted instantly into a Godzilla film, all screaming, bloodied, fleeing victims racing up six lanes of traffic. Cars flattened. Birdlike suicides, those fragile figures who leapt from high floors to avoid death by fire. Weeks of white ash, a month of smoldering manholes and broken subways; police guards and barricades, through which I had to usher my valiant children after school each day.

In "Fahrenheit 9/11," I can see the Bushes easily through Moore's bitter, incisive eyes. I sympathize with his courageous expose of the ugly underpinnings of the sunny Bush machine. I concur with his assertions that until the powerful have their own children exposed, they will not be dealing with the real weight of war. In the film, I see also the steady and confident steering of the wheels of power through Bush's eyes. Such administrative skill. Such confidence. Such

networking. Such conviction to take the hits and stand by one's decisions, right or wrong.

Admirable skill, horrifying in its applications.

In a Bush world, when one makes the big decisions that are part and parcel of wielding power, there's another little code of privilege that goes like this: it's just the cost of doing business. That is, when you are trying to build a business, the process isn't perfect, and there are always casualties along the way. It's the cost of doing business. You do what you can to make situations favorable for your business. When you are in a position of leadership, you know that you are there to guide action. There will always be criticism; there is never a perfect pathway. You will break some eggs, and you just go ahead and break them. Anyway. Because the costs are outweighed by the benefits.

But here's where I draw the line, and I saw it right there in the film: in a moment, just one moment, in the anguished cries of a grieving mother, the kind of cries that only come from gut-wrenching grief, the experience of sorrow so vast that every inch of the intestines contracts to expel the breath in a sound of keening agony: when that sound issues from her, and she asks, she wants to know, *why?* Why is it necessary for her loyal and responsible son to give his life to invade a sovereign nation? *Why?* That's my moment. In that moment, you see, I realized how little is the worth of a woman in this particular worldview. She just wants to know. She's not suing the government, she's not angry, she's in agony. She just wants a good reason to make her own pain, and her son's complete sacrifice, worth bearing. Then I sit with that, and it hits me. Her losses don't matter. Not in light of those *other* losses that really matter more in a Bush world: access to business growth. Her loss, her son's loss, and their counterparts in Iraq – theirs are the small costs of big business.

The distance from that mother's cries to the White House is just that perfect distance – the distance of privilege. If you live in the right place, and you build a powerful business, your reward is distance. Not just any kind of distance. Privilege is the distance adequate to insulate the wielder of power from witnessing the "cost" part of the cost-of-doing-business code, while providing the proximity to the "benefits" part: more business.

Now business is so big that what used to be known as the “military-industrial complex” has taken on the malignant growth of a dark machine. Love is the commodity our powerbrokers can afford to sacrifice: not just any kind of love, but mothers’ love - just women’s work, after all, all those hours of mothering, necessary for the perpetuation of American – um, democracy. There are always more women, more lovers of children, engineered as they are to be generous of time and body. The higher priority lies in protecting that sacred loop between the manufacture and sales of weapons, the use of those weapons, and the lucrative rebuilding contracts that ensue in their destructive aftermath. This is our growth market. In the news, it’s all about the guys, doing business, selling business, growing business, arranging contracts, negotiating treaties, forging governments. They’re so busy, these guys. Newsworthy. Big boys. Players. Running the world, measuring success one dollar at a time. Taking their cuts. Sleek, fat, and hungry. Insatiable, in fact.

There are no Dow Jones Industrials, no NASDAQ’s, no indices that chronicle the decline of the value of the feminine. No, not women’s rights, I mean the *feminine qualities*, – the attributes that make life worth living: tenderness, rest, receptiveness, beauty, purity, nurturance, humor, nature, boundaries. These priorities, so qualitative, go unquantified. Feminine priorities concern the context in which living things thrive. The spirits of protection, nurturance and restoration are hallmarks of the feminine. Stories about feminine qualities, and even women’s activities in general, are too soft, though, unfit for reporting. After all, good reporting is “hard hitting.” Female faces are utterly absent from our newsworthy pages. Feminine priorities are somehow divorced from those of the Nation. Whoever the Nation is.

As Americans, we are standing waist-deep – no, maybe neck-deep - in a spiritual crisis.

We have become sleepy co-conspirators in a scheme of global gaming. Our enemy is not terror abroad, but complacency at home. Our enemy is acceptance of a business ethos that tells a Sherron Watkins, voicing the truth of your concerns is a career-ending move. Our enemy is the unquestioned arrogance of a Harvard professor who taught Andy Fastow, if you’re going to steal, steal big. Our enemy is an appropriations reasoning that says, we must pay the weapons

manufacturers to do their jobs, but we hope the social workers who repair the traumas of war will volunteer, we can't afford them. Our enemy is an urbane cynicism that mocks those who hope and work for positive change. Our enemy is a handy notion that says the spiritual world is somewhere else. Our enemy is not physical, but metaphysical; and it lives in the underworld of our own psyches.

Wake up, America, your spiritual house is on fire.

In our stupor, we assume that small steps can't arrest the momentum of a vast machine. Untrue. The truest, most powerful act in Moore's (manipulative) film is one woman's grief. In her keening, uncoiffed dance of grief, the choices, consequences and costs of our nation's policies are laid bare for us all to consider.

While it is fashionable among women and men these days to be macho – ambitious, powerful, buff, and tough – and it is utterly unfashionable to be feminine, perhaps today we might reconsider our values. If we persist in monetizing masculine values and circumscribing the feminine to the arena of "priceless," the risk is removing the feminine from the equation altogether. There we'll be, no beauty, no rest, no tenderness, no generosity, no mothering, and no nature. Just a nice, scaleable, 24/7 economy of thick-skinned predators in a wary contest of market brinksmanship.

Once, while growing up in W's house, I mentioned (impolitely) at the dinner table that perhaps this guy Nixon was deceiving us all, and wasn't that awful? The news was full of it. My mother's face went pale with shock and disapproval. She, however, knew her place. My father turned to me and said, "You don't know what you're talking about. In the real world, leaders can't just let everyone in on their business."

Gently admonished for my impertinence, I finished my dinner and went upstairs to my bedroom. I lay in that bedroom, honor-bound to respect my parents, laden with homework and frustrated about my situation. For a time, it seemed, silence should be my ally; so I kept quiet. My sense now is that

silence has not been an ally – not for me, for my children, for my country, or for mother nature herself.