

## *Graceful Hospitality*

I was reminded of the value of warm hospitality recently on a quick trip to Florida. Hospitality comes anywhere, given by anyone trying to make someone else comfortable, to lift spirits, to refresh. What's probably not surprising is how seldom it is genuinely given in the "hospitality industry", that euphemism for hotels, motels, resorts, restaurants, even bars that form a fairly good part of our national economy.

True hospitality comes from the heart, whether you give it to friends on your back patio or to a guest in a hotel. It cannot be generated with pretentious gestures or lofty words. It comes from warmth and real caring about another person's welfare.

If you read the travel rags, you've probably encountered their carefully veneered descriptions of the beauty or the facilities of a place — the view, climate, golf privileges — the *amenities*. Travel magazines use a specialized vocabulary that carefully enhances the scene and disguises anything "real". Frequently, these places are rated by readers. I've always wondered who answers their surveys. I can't remember ever receiving one — but then my zip code is known in the marketing world as a "mixed" neighborhood, not likely to have enough affluent people in it to be worth the postage.

My Florida trip was not a vacation but a carefully planned trip to visit elderly relatives who had been "difficult" in recent years. Our lives are very different. Their consists of days full of trips to doctors and grocery stores and evenings full of Wheel of Fortune, Jeopardy, and The Golden Girls. My days are full of household responsibilities, business, and volunteer administrative tasks, and evenings filled with reading or conversation. Our friends are different. Our homes are different. Even our language is different. They smoke. Smoking gives me violent headaches. So does Wheel of Fortune. On my most recent visit, I decided to stay in a motel to maintain my equilibrium and gain some semblance of peace.

I picked a place I'd stayed before. A known quantity was better than an unknown one in a tough situation. After all, I might have to retreat there on short notice. I didn't need a lavish resort, but I did need a pleasant atmosphere that wouldn't depress me.

What a pleasure to be greeted at the simple motel I chose by a friendly desk clerk who had the reservation right, gave complete descriptions of the facilities,

and then said “if there’s anything you need, we’ll be here all night.” Even the housekeeping staff was gracious, when I met them replacing towels. This was real warmth and grace. These were not uniformed robots programmed to say good morning to every guest they met in the corridors or on the elevators.

The waitress in the little restaurant was friendly without intruding. When the place was closing down and I indicated I was ready to chat by asking a question. She had intelligent observations to make on her community and the locale. The dining-room food was comforting. The restaurant featured “homemade mashed potatoes.” (It says something about our culture that such a phrase implies that there is some other kind.) Their pies were baked by an Amish woman down the road.

What a contrast to the “five-star” hotel where I stayed during a recent business trip to Chicago. The room was poorly designed — too large to be of graceful proportions, too small to be divided into a mini-suite. An outrageous piece of mechanical equipment vibrated constantly on the opposite side of the bathroom wall. The tub faucet dripped constantly and there were no towel racks in the bathroom. The closet was a long walk from any piece of furniture on which one could lay out clothes for dressing. The furniture was formal and the brocade draperies were a boring shade of smog-blue that matched the view outside. But, should I have needed it, the room had two incoming telephone lines plus an instrument on the desk with ports for my fax and my computer and a fast-dial line to the concierge.

When I checked into this posh establishment, the desk clerk made me wait 15 minutes, then treated me like a local vagrant, despite the fact that I was well dressed and my wallet displayed a variety of platinum-colored cards. Each evening my bed was turned down by a maid who only closed half the drapes and always changed to the radio station from my choice of classical music to her choice of African-American easy listening.

In my sweet little spot in the quiet Florida Gulf-coast town, a large orange juice was \$1.50 and a whole breakfast with “the works” could be got for \$6.00, delivered cheerfully, freshly cooked. My Chicago palace charged \$11.00 for a Continental breakfast. The Japanese breakfast was \$22.00. One day I ordered “the works” (for \$14.50) and got hashed browns that were gluey and black in the middle, delivered after half an hour, totally cold, by a surly waiter.

Maybe you have to work harder to be gracious in a big brocaded hotel where guests disport themselves carrying \$1,200 Chanel handbags. Maybe the strain is higher, the demand greater. But it seems to me that the desire to make a guest comfortable comes from within and doesn't depend on the physical surroundings. It starts at the top with a director who cares, and it percolates down to the plumber and the night room service clerk, not to mention the maid who leaves your radio the way you set it, closes your drapes properly, and cheerfully brings you a pile of pink, fluffy towels.

I don't expect a mint on my pillow or my bed turned down in a motel, but I am delighted to find fresh towels each day and a staff that inquires whether there is anything I need (not the artificial, haughty "how is everything?", which prompts the answer "oh, fine" because you know they really don't want to hear your true reactions).

I don't think you can conduct seminars in hospitality for employees and expect it to "take." Graciousness and hospitality come when personnel feel good about themselves and about the place where they work. When the majority of hotel staff personnel haven't been born with silver spoons in their mouths, and may live in rather mean circumstances once they go home, graceful hospitality is something they may have to acquire. These things aren't built in when a person is born any more than manners are. They are an acculturation process taught by example of caring and compassion. Clearly the spirit and a little acculturation could catch on at more of the "narrow high-end" places if they really want to be, well, hospitable. Some of the high-end places do it very well, such as the Hotel Cipriani in Venice, Italy. But many others could learn a lot from that Veranda Inn in Venice, Florida, with its genuine care and its totally homey mashed potatoes.

*Madge Griswold*