

## HELLO AND GOODBYE: THRESHOLD RITUALS AND THEIR IMPORTANCE

Perhaps the most cordial greeting ever extended to me by a stranger came from Bishop Desmond Tutu in December of 1991. My wife and I were attending the graduation ceremonies of our son and daughter at the University of South Carolina, and to our great surprise and pleasure, Bishop Tutu from South Africa was the keynote speaker. After the school president introduced him, the bishop stepped to the lectern and said to the hushed crowd of perhaps ten thousand, “The God in me greets the God in you.” Whatever tension caused by a black man addressing a mostly white audience in a red state was instantly dispelled. Bishop Tutu, I believe, would agree that polite greetings and farewells are a lot like sacraments: outward and audible signs of an inner and spiritual grace. In Robert Frost’s words, they’re “temporary stays against confusion.”

After the ceremonies, I added a line of my own to Bishop Tutu’s greeting:

“Whether you are Christian, Muslim, or Jew,  
The God in me greets the God in you.”

Occasionally I use these verses when meeting a literature or humanities class for the first time. After one such occasion, an Indian exchange student informed me that Tutu was simply but elegantly translating the Sanskrit *Namaste*, which means, “I bow to the divine in you,” or, “I honor the spirit in you, which is also in me.” After a trip to India, my sister, a Methodist minister by trade but an ecumenical at heart, started saying *Namaste* when she would meet members of her congregation in town or after Sunday services. Before some people started complaining about it, she would bring her hands together prayerfully at her chest, bow her head, and pronounce the foreign compliment. Then like the Dalai Lama, she would take the extended hand of the person she was greeting in both of hers like a mother warming the hands of a child who has just come in from sledding. Most Methodists, however, preferred a firm handshake, and she eventually abandoned the practice.

Children, however, aren’t as tied to society’s rituals as their parents are. I once was asked to speak to a fourth grade class about the origins of personal names including the students’ own. The class was already in a playful mood, and I didn’t help matters when I went up to several of them and said, “Give me some hungry chicken.” A college student had recently taught me this greeting as a variation on the old “Give me five” routine, and suddenly it occurred to me that something new and comical would help me gain the class’s attention. Of course, I had to explain that when I said, “Gimme some hungry chicken,” the person being greeted should extend an open hand. It was from this that the greeter would hungrily “peck” the proffered “grain.” Unfortunately for the class’s teacher who’d invited me, the kids continued pecking long after I’d left.

An adult hand tickling the excited hands of children is an unmistakably friendly gesture in any culture. The same must be said for the topless greeting given by British wives to their husbands and boy friends who were steaming into Southampton harbor on a troop ship following the Falkland Island War in 1982. No mistaking the sincerity of that greeting. However, what is one to make of a welcome mat I once saw that read, “You’re not unwelcome”? To be effective, a greeting should be more than an abrupt “Don’t get up” extended by a standing visitor to a seated co-worker. My response to this opener once was, “Well, don’t sit down.” Neither one of us quite understood what I meant nor where we should go from

that point. Thoreau complained about the “ruts of tradition,” but I regard most properly observed social rituals as long, steel rails that enable people to travel smoothly and efficiently together. The ritual observance, however, must be clear and precise.

Clarity is precisely what was missing when a twenty-something black stranger greeted an African-American acquaintance of mine in 2003. Dressed conservatively, freshly barbered, and bling-free, my thirty-something acquaintance had driven himself to a self-serve gas station in Greenville, SC where he filled up his aging Datsun. After paying inside and as he was leaving the station, he was greeted by the stranger with, “What’s up, player?” My acquaintance was offended because to him *player* is synonymous with *pimp*, or what he refers to as the “BET-Blaxploitation-Superfly meaning of the word.” *Cassell’s Dictionary of Slang* (1998), however, says that since the 1950s *player* is anyone who uses “wit, charm, or intelligence to gain his objectives.” (“I sure do miss Cary Grant and Sidney Poitier; now they were players.”) When I polled my students about what they thought *player* meant in the gas-station context, one said it was an acknowledgment of common culture, six had no idea, fourteen thought it was an insult as my acquaintance did, but forty-seven thought it was just an innocent variation of *hello*. I sided with the majority and suggested to my acquaintance that he assume the best until he knew otherwise. When he wrote a newspaper column about the incident, his mail ran thirty to one in his favor; the majority thought that “Hello, brother” or something similar would have been more appropriate. Perhaps it would have, but not even Hitler had the power to change a language try as mightily as he and his henchmen did. The young will be served, and there is no way to stop them from using words as they please even if it doesn’t promote collegiality. At least he wasn’t greeted with a *nigga*, *killer*, *gangster*, or *dawg*.

Embarrassment, of course, is not what a greeting should accomplish, unless the two involved are intimate and have a history of playfulness. In Aristophanes’ famous 4<sup>th</sup> century B.C. comedy *Lysistrata*, an Athenian magistrate greets a visiting Spartan herald, knowing the man has not had sex in months because of a sex strike the women of Greece have called, “Say there, are you a man or Priapus?” Says the visitor, “I’m a herald, you lout! I’ve come from Sparta about the truce.” Unwilling to stop his teasing, the magistrate says, “Is that a spear you’ve got under your cloak [or are you just glad to see me]?” Thus was born the joke that survives to this day. I’m not sure who first added the tag line, but what’s interesting are the variations on *spear* that show up over the next two millennia: everything from a cigar during the Bill Clinton presidency, to an iPod, a joystick, a phaser, a nightstick if the visitor is a policeman, an Oscar if he’s an actor, a putter if he’s a golfer, an inflated ego, a bankroll if he’s rich, a vibrating phone or pager, some mojo, or a banana to mention but a few. Nevertheless, few husbands would object to their wives privately “roasting this chestnut” even if it is as old as the Parthenon.

Perhaps seeking some relief from the Depression or the war, playful rimed greetings were popular in the 1930s and 40s. “Hello, Joe, what do you know?” “What’s cookin’, good lookin’?” and, “What’s knittin’, kitten?” were, according to my parents now in their eighties, commonplace. Punning greetings like, “Hi gossip, what’s news?” “Hi, sprout, what’s growin’?” and, “Hi Sugar, are you rationed?” likewise were all the rage in the Big Band era, and apparently few took offense.

A punning greeting, however, is seldom appropriate especially when there has been a long and painful absence. One of the most heart-felt greetings in the history of literature is that given to the prodigal son when the father of the born-again wastrel commands his servants to “kill the fatted calf.” For nothing in the ancient world quite said, “You are

welcome in my home” as meat on the table, and the more fat there was, the more welcome one felt. Two thousand years later when Old Lodge Skins in the film *Little Big Man* says to his adopted son, Jack Crabbe, after a long absence, “Greetings, my son, you wanna eat?” the viewer knows the much-traveled Jack is truly welcome. But perhaps no greeting has been as soulful as that which Lodge Skins speaks a few scenes earlier, “My son, to see you again causes my heart to soar like a hawk—sit here beside me. We must smoke to your return.” I suppose the contemporary equivalent would be, “Daddy’s home—release the doves!”

This brief discussion of welcoming ceremonies may remind us that in recent years *welcome* has become decidedly unwelcome. How often have we heard an NPR or CNN interviewer’s “Thank you” met by an interviewee’s “Thank you”? Not, “Thank YOU [for inviting me],” or “No, thank YOU [for your gracious invitation to speak on national media],” just, “Thank you” with *you* unstressed? Another annoying habit is the British use of “not at all” in replying to an American’s “Thank you.” It appears to be shorthand for, “My services have *not* been any trouble *at all* for me to supply,” but I find the phrase dismissive and bordering on the rude. It’s like the American habit of replying to a “Thank you” with, “Hey, no problem.” I suppose the speaker is saying that the service he’s provided was not a problem to deliver; he was just doing his job, but then the speaker probably knew that. The worst substitute for “You’re welcome” is the “Don’t mention it” response to an expression of gratitude that may have been clipped from, “My services were so insignificant that they do not deserve any mention at all.” But if that were taken literally, where would discourse and the web of sociability woven by grateful recognition be? My feeling is that every kindness should be thanked, and that gratitude should be respectfully acknowledged.



An Austrian proverb states that “Parting is a lot like grief,” but for gentle souls like my mother-in-law, some arrivals are like grief because they anticipate the imminent and inevitable farewell that will soon bump the heart out of plumb. Goodbyes have by definition always been harder than greetings especially for those whom “party in peace” is just not adequate or appropriate. One of Camus’ best stories, “The Guest,” illustrates the obligations of the host and the difficulties of a guest’s departure. As Arab anti-colonial fervor builds, the French police charge a colonial employee in a remote section of Algeria with the responsibility of turning an Arab suspected of murder over to government authorities in a distant town. After the Frenchman has informed the Arab of his travel options, he hands his guest, a man he has known for less than a day but for whom he feels a primal obligation, a two-day supply of food and a thousand francs. When the Arab attempts to thank his host, he cuts him off saying, “No, be quiet. Now I’m leaving you.” And off he walks. To be sure, there are cultural obstacles and language difficulties between these two, but that doesn’t entirely explain the awkward irresponsibility of their separation and the host’s generosity. Does the Arab feel potlatched? Two women probably would have handled it a lot better.

In the offices adjacent to the building where seventy of us in the Clemson English Department teach, it is common to hear a colleague announce his or her departure especially as a class hour nears. A professor setting out to discuss Frost might ruefully say, “And I have miles to go before I sleep.” Another professor who loves T.S. Eliot often leaves his office with, “Let’s go raid the inarticulate and beat our wings for the truth” unless he’s

leaving with someone when he'll often say, "Let us go then you and I." If the someone he's leaving with is a stickler for grammar, he might hear, "Do you mean, 'Let us go then you and me?'" No matter who or what I'm teaching at any given hour on any given day, one colleague who loves vintage aircraft will often say as I pass his office, "Keep 'em flying." My usual response is, "Once more into the breach." The closest either one of us has ever come to combat was a desk job in the Cold War, but war and sport imagery is what many males resort to in difficult moments when nothing else springs to the lips.

At critical and not-so-critical junctures, men more than women, says Deborah Tannen, are likely to sound a note of levity to dispel the tension of the moment. Not once has a woman told me, "Au Reservoir," or, "Abyssinia," or, "Later, tater," or, "Let's make like an atom and split," or, "Don't let the screen door hit you where the good Lord split you," or, "Keep your nose between the ditches and the bears out of your britches." During the First World War, Southern country boys often would depart with "Well, butter my butt, and call me biscuit, but I have to be goin'." In the Second World War, many men who left with a "Bye, bye bonds," had sons who grew up to say in the 1960s, "Plant you now, dig you later." The sons of these men may have signed off with "Live long and prosper" if they were Star Trek fans, or "Escalator" if they were gay. However, in each case, humor substituted for heartfelt emotion as men continued to struggle with their "inner children" and "feminine sides" that psychologists assured us we all had. Rare is the male like the orphanage director in John Irvine's *Cider House Rules* who can announce each night, "Good night, my Princes of Maine, my Kings of New England" and convince his boys that he's not mocking them, that, indeed, he loves them.

When anonymous joking farewells fail us, many of us turn to the celebrity *du jour*—Alan King's "May the wattle fairy never darken your door," Groucho Marx's "Go and never darken my towels again," Cosmo Kramer's "Giddy-up," Elvis Presley's "Elvis has left the building," or Kinky Friedman's "May the god of your choice bless you." When Joseph Epstein retired from writing his quarterly essay for *The American Scholar*, he summoned the spirits of Jimmy Durante, Jackie Gleason, George Burns, Fibber McGee, Walter Winchell, Red Skelton, Jack Benny and perhaps some others unknown to me to conclude his poignant farewell piece. Wrote Epstein, "Good night, Mrs. Calabash, wherever you are. How sweet it is! Say goodnight, Gracie. Good night, Molly. Good night all. With lotions of love. God bless. We're a little late, so good night folks. And thanks."

Many years ago, an African student told me that in Swahili the equivalent of "Good night" is "Wake up living." This frank recognition of the dangers of sleeping in lion and elephant country led me to wonder what foreigners really are saying when they say goodbye because we sponges who speak English have absorbed so many foreign exit lines. Many of these farewells like our *goodbye* (a contraction of "God be with thee") express a wish that God accompany the departing guest as in the Spanish *adios, vaya con Dios*, and the French *adieu*. Often speakers of English leave with "I hope we see each other again soon" or simply "Later," as in the Russian *do svdanya* and the German *auf Wiedersehen*. Another standard approach is to wish one's departing guest a safe journey as in our own *farewell*, the German *gute Reise* (though speakers of English may prefer the cross-language pun *gute Fahrt*), and the French *bon voyage*. Wishes for peace include the Hebrew *shalom*, the Arabic *ma'a salama*, and the Latin *Pax vobiscum*. But perhaps the most touching and melodious farewell is the Japanese *sayonara* which might be translated, "Thus if it be." I cannot imagine any phrasing more wistfully indirect yet satisfyingly incomplete. The full idea when the

implied subject and predicate are added seems to be that Fate or Time has conspired against two people who must part. Anne Morrow Lindberg in *North to the Orient* thought *sayonara* was the most beautiful of all the goodbyes because “it does not cheat itself by any bravado” or provide “any sedative to postpone the pain of separation.” Like me, she appreciates its indirect direction. By its very opacity, “Thus if it be” adds no pain to the separation, nor does it give any false hope of a god’s protection, world peace, or a quick reunion.

In 1996, the *New Yorker* ran a cartoon drawn by Michael Crawford showing two yuppies going separate ways at a street corner. Said the man to the woman, “Plutardo, babe.” “*Plutardo*” appears to be some idiosyncratic Esperantesque coinage meaning, “Later,” but it also appears to have died the instant it was published, for I cannot find another trace of it in English except as a proper name. Apparently inspired by the Italian *a più tardi* (“till later”), the English word (if one can call it that) was created from the Latin roots “*plu-*” meaning “more” and “*tard-*” meaning “late.” Most people I’ve shown the cartoon to just scratch their heads in bemused wonder.

As long as I’m parsing foreign farewells, let me deconstruct a few in English. The British *ta-ta* appears to be a child’s simplification of *bye-bye*; *toodleoo* and *toodlepip* are comic variations of the French *tout à l’heure* (roughly translated, “[I’ll be] back presently”); *cheerio* seems to have devolved from *cheers*, and *olive oil* is a late-nineteenth-century mispronunciation of *au revoir*. The English *so long* has inspired glosses from the Hebrew *shalom*, the Arabic *salaam*, and the German *so lange*, but Occam’s Razor leads me to believe it’s just a clipped form of, “Let us not be apart *so long* again,” or, “I hope it’s not *so long* before I see you again.” Finally “eighty eights” and “thirty for now” are remnants of telegraph slang. “Eighty eights” was an arbitrarily chosen numerical sign-off meaning “love and kisses” like XOXO which is widely used today by senders of email to represent “hugs and kisses” with the X standing for an embrace and the O an open mouth. “Thirty for now” or, “That’s thirty” comes from the telegraph convention of ending a sentence with an X to represent a period, XX to represent the end of a paragraph, and XXX to stand for “End of message,” or, “Goodbye; I’m signing off.”

But from high to low, from James Joyce’s, “I go . . . to forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race” to the anonymous, “May your genitalia never fail ya,” exit lines are often personalized as a way of telling the other, “I’m bored with *goodbye*, but not you.” A few years ago, my son and I started imitating those NFL players who after an interception, run toward each other, jump straight up, and bump their padded pectorals. We dispense with the running and jumping parts and just turn a farewell hug into three “pectoral thrusts” each followed by a manly, “Uh!” My daughter, on the other hand, gets a peck on the cheek and a conventional hug. Devoid of jumping but not kissing, my German wife and I have also evolved a rather elaborate bilingual departure ceremony: after I kiss her goodbye every weekday morning, I say, “Juice” (an anglicized variation on *tschüs* or “bye”), and she says, “*Luba du* or *Lova du* (anglicized forms of “*Ich liebe dich*,” or, “I love you”). I then say “See-ox” (because the German *Sioux* is pronounced “see-ox” which sounds a bit like “see you”), and she goes to the window to wave as I back out of the drive way flashing my “light horn.” Elements of this routine come and go, but in one form or another, it has served a worthy purpose for over forty years. At day’s end, my reception is not quite as elaborate as my leaving but every bit as ceremonious. I suppose we just don’t have the energy. The important thing is that I greet her and she me before I tell her of the stack of papers I have to grade, and she tells me she has jury duty.

And speaking of personalized farewells, my friend Dr. Jim Skinner of Presbyterian College fondly relates his mother’s habit of asking her children whenever they left the

house, “Do you have a handkerchief?” Initially, this ritual was a helpful reminder, but it soon became annoying before eventually turning into an endearing trademark. Jim and his three brothers finally reached the point that when they heard the question, they would simply pull their hankies from their back pockets and wave them without so much as a backward glance as if to say, “Yes, Mother, I *have* my handkerchief.” When she died a few years ago, the four men concluded the funeral service by pulling out their handkerchiefs and waving them in silence over the casket. Mrs. Skinner, of course, had known all along those handkerchiefs would come in handy one day, and they did.

Briefly in closing, William James thought habitual ceremonies, both public and private, were the “flywheel of society...its precious conservative agent.” Others have regarded them as the ballast in a ship’s hold, which in a storm are worth their weight in platinum. I could not agree more, for whatever the metaphor, the brevity of these rituals belies their steely-stony weight.

#### LIKE NAIL CLIPPINGS IN THE FIRE

*For Ingrid*

“Then the dust shall return to the earth as it was,  
and the spirit shall return unto God who gave it.”

Ecclesiastes 12:7

The sudden abridgement of heart and brain  
should let my soul make its sighing exit  
like light passing unobstructed through glass.

Then, assuming proper ventilation,  
the gases will vanish up the flue  
and be shuffled back in the mix.  
Methane and phosphorus should flash blue-green  
and head to some black hole starved for light.  
Blood and tears will gradually boil off  
and join Aeolus stuffing the stomata  
of Pickens County and Jupiter’s moons.  
Soon, only the solids will remain—  
enough iron for a ten-penny nail—  
some of the same stuff, I imagine,  
that stiffened the spines of Adam and Eve.  
Though the skull may require a pestle,  
please scatter the carbon and calcium  
with their emptinesses now dismantled  
into that bed of perennials  
we weeded and fed for thirty years.

Watch for me in the spring,  
Should you choose to wear me on your breast,  
draw me into your lungs, dear, one last time  
or as long as the fragrance shall last.