Life lessons from the Texas kitchen

In marrying a girl from a small town in north Texas, I brought several liabilities to her family. First, I was a Yankee. All other liabilities paled beside that. Second, I was a city boy, and the product of transient parents. I could point to no one area of the country where my kinfolk dwelled. Third, I was a Papist, a threat to spew Latin incantations and holy water with the least provocation.

But these liabilities were counterbalanced by my one asset: I was a doctor, or soon to be one. Never mind that their little girl was my medical school classmate and would become a physician at the same time as I. Somehow, that never registered with her family. She had always been a source of vague concern—going east to the fancy university, writing a book in college, never quite learning to cook—but now it looked like she would turn out all right. She was marrying a doctor.

Her family was divided about the worth of physicians. On the one hand, they drove up land prices. Her father and uncles were always complaining about this or that fool orthopaedic surgeon from the city who bought a section of grazing land for twice what it was worth. On the other hand, such a physician, if situated in the right family (theirs), might support a considerable cattle habit.

My first trip to Texas, and the many after that, introduced me to a family hierarchy that has escaped the scrutiny of anthropologists. Studying this system has given me insight into power relationships in general, especially in academic medical centres. In Texas, power resides in the kitchen, which is ruled by the female who is oldest, cognitively intact, and in the direct bloodline of the original owner of the land. Under her are arrayed all the other women aged 18 years or older or married (whichever comes first).

The specific hierarchy becomes most apparent at meals. The pecking order follows the vertical rule. The big mama, all the men, and the children sit down to eat. Then starts the manoeuvring among the remaining women, who stay vertical, each busying herself with some task in the kitchen, while telling the other women to sit down. The sheer volume of “sit downs” drowns out all conversation for the first 5 minutes of the meal. One by one, the women sit, though I have been at meals when one was still standing by dessert.

The point is, that the first seated are less important than the last standing. The busiest woman, the one with the most tasks, the last one standing, is almost always the heir-apparent, the second most powerful female. And it pretty much follows that order, with the next most powerful female sitting down next to last, and so on, down to the least useful daughter-in-law, the one no-one would trust to fold a napkin.

So it is in life, or at least in medical centres. Status is determined by busyness. The most important people are always vertical, always working. The appropriate answer to “How are you?” is “Busy”. “You look busy” is a compliment.

My wife has shown me another path. When the first “sit down” rings out at family dinners, she’s down, and enjoying her food. She doesn’t have to be told twice. She says that there are too many women in the kitchen pursuing too few tasks; so her early exit from the competition is an opportunity for non-blood females to gain in stature. She is content to be worthless but well fed.

The lesson is clear. It’s OK not to be busy. When you are not busy, you can think. Sit down. Be worthless. Good things will come of it.

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