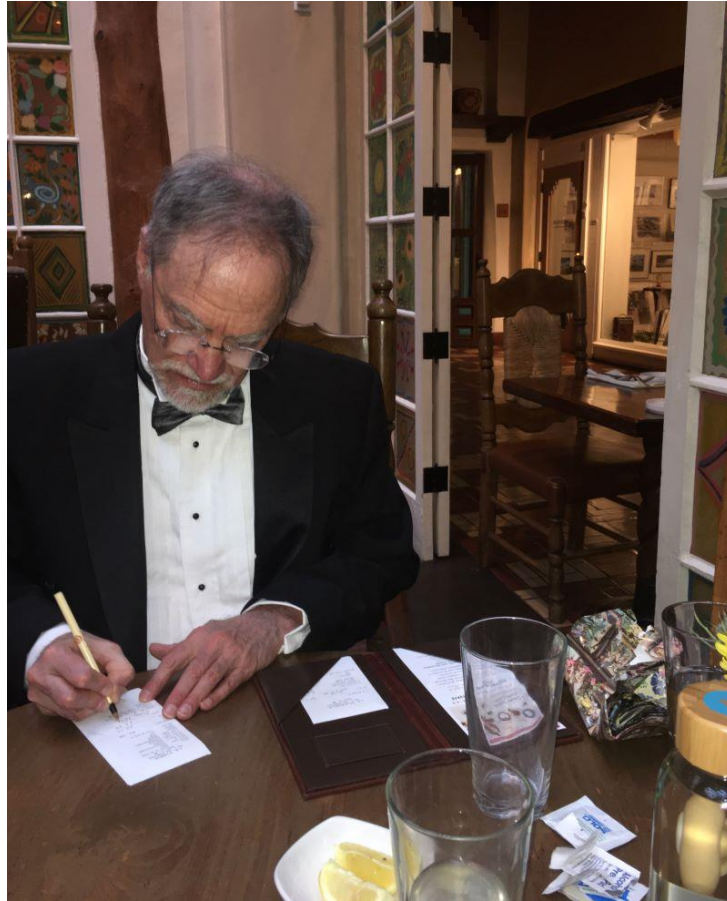


Clothes make the man – even without a cell phone

by Craig Barth



Aphorisms are lurking all around us, those little nuggets of folk wisdom which bubble up from nowhere. They fill in the cracks which appear in our otherwise continuous stream of consciousness. Whatever their source, we encounter them everyday: "A stitch in time saves nine." "A penny saved is a penny earned." "Don't look a gift horse in the mouth." "Beware Greeks bearing gifts." "An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure." "If you can't stand the heat, stay out of the kitchen."

Over the millennia aphorisms have assumed an archetypal status within our collective psyche. A recent experience of mine illustrates the power of the adage "clothes make the man."

But first, let me digress to explain how I came to be the proud owner of a set of tails, complete with bow tie and cummerbund, the stuff usually returned to the tux rental company the morning after senior prom.

2 Clothes make the man

Ten years ago a chance meeting with the commander of the Army Corps of Engineers managing Cochiti Dam led to the establishment of a summer astronomy program for campers occupying their lakeside grounds. Between May and October ever since, I have organized and conducted monthly "Star Parties" at the Boat Launch parking lot. This has involved working closely with the Corps rangers and staff.

Across the lake is a second campground, at the base of the local, aptly named landmark, Tetilla Peak. (Tetilla, pronounced "te-'tee-ya," means nipple in Spanish; the peak is shaped like a diminutive breast with a prominent nipple at its apex.) Tetilla Peak campground is located alongside the river atop a cliff; an observation deck at cliff's edge offers dramatic views north into the Rio Grande Gorge.

Several years after the astronomy program got started, I suggested we hold a season-ending reception to thank Corps staff and village volunteers. Marcos, the Corps commander, was supportive. After a minute, his eyes lit up and he said: "great, we could hold it on the Tetilla Peak side of the lake, at the observation deck. Then we could call it the 'Tetilla, te-tea party!' And you and I could dress up in tuxedos and we could have the event catered. Imagine tea and canapes served on silver trays! And little glasses of sherry. It would be the high point of the local social calendar!"

Ideas like this don't come my way too often. Swept away by the notion of a "Tetilla, te-tea party," I spent the next year hunting down a deal on a set of tails. I wasn't going to let a Tetilla-te-tea party happen without being suitably attired! How could I miss what would likely become the high point of the local social calendar?

Unfortunately, a string of government budget cuts, the result of the great recession, prevented our cliff-top reception from happening. And sadly, until recently, the only occasion for wearing my glorious evening jacket, complete with cummerbund and bow tie, has been at Halloween. The addition of an inexpensive, white, half-mask lets me greet trick-or-treaters as the Phantom of the Opera!

But recently, an occasion custom-made for tails and bow tie arose and I jumped at the chance to "dress up." What could be more appropriate for a tuxedo than the celebration of my sweetie's 70th birthday?

On the day, Victoria, resplendent in her evening gown and jewelry, and I went to dinner at La Plazuela restaurant in Santa Fe's iconic La Fonda Hotel. La Plazuela is located in an elegant lofty atrium, framed with wooden columns and beams. Its center is dominated by two gigantic ficus trees, festooned in white Christmas lights. Its entrance opens onto the La Fonda's stately lobby, a blend of colonial Spanish and early 20th century Craftsman.

One would think that such a glittering night spot would attract a large number of patrons in formal attire. But, remember, this is New Mexico - and even well-to-do tourists and locals usually dress casually in slacks, open-necked shirts, sneakers or cowboy attire.

So on this occasion Victoria was the only woman wearing an evening gown and I was the only man wearing tails. Given Santa Fe's rich cultural life, it is not uncommon on occasion for patrons to be dressed up so we did not feel at all uncomfortable. In fact, we noticed several diners glance our way with approving nods and gestures.

Fifteen or twenty minutes after we sat down, a mother - in her mid-thirties - and her 10-year-old son sat at the table in the corner behind me and, at least temporarily, disappeared into the woodwork. After dinner Victoria savored the occasion as she opened her birthday presents, taking the time, as she always does, to carefully remove the wrapping paper totally intact.

While Victoria was midway through her presents, we heard the boy behind us serenading his mother with his beautiful tenor. It was so striking I turned around and caught his mother's eye and gave her the "thumb's up" signal with my left hand. She acknowledged my appreciation with a nod, her eyes glistening with pride.

I turned back around to face Victoria and we continued with our celebration ceremony. Before long, we asked our waiter to take a few photographs to memorialize the occasion.

About the time we finished our sopapillas, we were startled by a loud crash on the table behind us. I figured the boy was just "bein' a boy" and we didn't give it a second thought. But soon another, louder noise caught our attention; this time, the distinct sound of a water glass being slammed down onto the table top. "Okay," I'm thinking, "this kid's throwing a tantrum." No big deal. Mom will get things under control.

And then we heard the grumbling. "I'm angry," she uttered at first just beneath her breath. "I'm *really* angry," a bit louder. And the crash of a glass once again on the table top. *Her* glass!

As a rule, I've found things usually go best when I live and let live. So, after shrugging my shoulders at Victoria, we went on with our special evening.

"I'm really, *really* angry! REALLY ANGRY!" And this time she slammed her water glass down so hard on the table that the entire restaurant looked her way in astonishment. In the process, she sprayed water all over me. At this point, "live and let live" be damned! I stood up, turned around and said "this time you got me wet!" As I sat back down, she said to me: "Can I borrow your phone? My phone isn't working."

Turning back to her, I replied: "I don't have a phone."
Unwavering, she retorted: "You don't have a phone?"

I said, again: "I don't have a phone."
She: "You don't have *an iPhone*?"

I replied: "I don't have a cell phone."
Flustered, she uttered: "But I have an emergency!"

4 Clothes make the man

In an assuring voice, I suggested: "Why don't you go to the front desk. I'm sure they're in a position to be able to help you."

"I can't leave my son."

"Just take him with you," I replied.

With a sigh, I turned back around to face Victoria and assumed the matter resolved. We heard some rattling and rustling sounds behind us and figured our neighbors were preparing to leave.

In a moment, she appeared standing at my right shoulder, glaring directly into my face: "*You* don't have an iPhone?!!!"

Looking into her eyes, I replied: "I do not own a cell phone."

And then, clutching her son to her chest, and howling for all the restaurant to hear: "You're a white man in a tux and wearing a bow tie...and you don't have an iPhone?"

I looked up into her eyes and as calmly as possible replied: "No, I don't have a cell phone."

Stamping her foot, and one more time: "You don't have a phone?" Still in denial.

"No," I answered.

At this point, fearing for my safety, Victoria interjected: "He has electrical sensitivity and can't use a cell phone."

This, at last, to our surprise, stopped her in her tracks. After a double take, she stood up straight as if awakening out of a stupor, extended her hand towards mine, and uttered: "Oh!" (pause) "I'm sorry" and shook my hand.

Then turning abruptly towards the exit, she and her son strode off into the hotel lobby and up to the front desk. Victoria and I breathed a sigh of relief.

Clothes make the man, indeed!

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