

Sunday, September 30, 2007

### **"You remind me of a young Richard Nixon."**

Engaging a monkey at a Buddhist temple outside Kuala Lumpur (August 1989), not knowing that within twenty-four hours I would be compared to a young Richard Nixon, while eating off a banana leaf. (Photo copyright Jon Katz.) As a trial lawyer and as one enjoying adventure, it is essential for me to know people, hear and share our life stories (make that portions of the key chapters), know how to engage them in meaningful conversations, and know what motivates them and makes them tick. However, just as a car trip to an island paradise can be interrupted by treacherous storms, dangerous car collisions, and disgusting highway food, striking up a conversation with a plane seatmate, a diner at an adjacent restaurant table, and a fellow drinker at a bar can turn up the unpleasant unexpected along the road to meeting fascinating people. My experiences striking up conversations with other people usually are very enriching. For instance, around two years ago, I was taking a return business flight home, and tossed my excellent Ceremony novel (by Leslie Marmon Silko) on my plane seat before storing my carry-on bag. That started a conversation (both about the tossing and the novel) with the woman and man sitting next to me. On the one hand, they live in Orange County, Virginia, which strikes me as a rather conformist place (I should not stereotype regions so much), but they are very interesting people, these two. For instance, they spent several years in the Alaskan wilderness with their child on a homesteading program that I had never heard of, where they would receive their supplies by airplane drops. I regret that I misplaced their phone number; of course, in the Alaskan wilderness, apparently they had no phone. Two weeks ago, I blogged about my parking lot meeting with the fascinating Baba-Kundi Ma`at-Shambhala. Longer before that, on a plane returning from depositions in Cleveland, back to my office, I met Stephanie Tubbs Jones sitting next to me. Before I knew she was (and still is) a member of Congress -- I still carry strong presumptions against politicians, and, to boot, she's a former prosecutor and judge -- I was impressed by how genuinely (as it appeared to me) and effectively she engaged so many of the passengers boarding the plane. They are her constituents. I do not know what pet political issue I raised with her -- possibly opposition to the criminal sentencing guidelines and mandatory minimum sentences, the general overall unfairness of the criminal justice system, marijuana legalization, or drug decriminalization. I recall how apparently genuinely upbeat Stephanie was about life and people. She told me that when she would conduct wedding ceremonies, she would recite the Indian wedding prayer. This prayer means so much to me that I recited it to my wife at our wedding. For that, alone, I very much appreciate Stephanie. At the Trial Lawyers College, much is discussed, covered, and presented about storytelling and engaging people, including engaging our clients and our witnesses, and engaging opposing witnesses in cross examination, engaging the jury, engaging judges, and engaging everyone else who is important to our clients' causes. We have much to learn from children about engaging others, because they have no agenda in doing so, at least not in the beginning. My eighteen month-old son is fearless to approach and engage dogs and people, on the street, in parks, and in restaurants, among other places. Last week at the Edward Hopper exhibit, he made an unsmiling security guard smile so broadly that I said he can even draw a smile from the unsmiling. Engaging new people to get their story sometimes is dangerous. Hunter S. Thompson got beaten badly by Hell's Angels members when spending hours and time on end with them to write his Hell's Angels book. Last week, Burmese military member(s) killed a Japanese news photographer capturing the visual story of the anti-government demonstrations there. In El Salvador in the 1980's, a moving photographer captured the horrifying (yet perhaps all too common) image of Salvadoran (or was it pre-Sandinista Nicaragua in the 1970's?) military members shooting dead a photojournalist point blank. Also, warbeat journalists and photographers place their safety and lives on the line all the time. It is easier and safer to hear a story by reading it than getting it from the source. When the story gets too unpleasant, the reader can close the book, switch to a different website, or throw the newspaper in the trash or fireplace out of exasperation. It took me a few tries to keep my cool and control in choosing whom to engage in such conversation, and what to do when the discussion starts getting too much out of hand -- by better reading the person first, and knowing how to exit the conversation or place or to turn around the discussion, sometimes by just excusing myself to hit the men's room or to feed the meter, and sometimes just smiling and moving to a different topic. Before I got better at that, I once misread a man in front of me at a McDonald's over ten years ago, as a large, unfriendly man, until he turned around to me, and said "This line is slow as molasses." He then asked if I knew if they had any eggnog shakes, to which I replied "no". He then happily regaled me how wonderful are these eggnog shakes, which "taste just like eggnog, only thickuh" (in a New York accent). Whenever I pass by Nyack, New York, where I met this man, I remember him and his entertaining eggnog shake discussion. Further south from Nyack, one snowy Friday evening in early 1986, months before starting law school, I went to a movie, and thereafter decided to check out a recommended bar a few blocks south of my shoebox apartment without a kitchen at the corner of Lexington Avenue and 23rd Street. Drinking a beer at the bar, I saw that the man nearby me seemed to be a regular who knew the bartender and several of the patrons well. Whether or not it was a mistake for me to have started talking to him, I learned from this, after the fact, how to exit a conversation when it gets ugly. This man had much to say, but very little willingness or ability to listen. He talked of having slept in doorways before rather than stealing. Learning that I had recently graduated from college in the

Boston area, he parroted the ugly exclamation that I have heard too many times: "I'm not prejudiced, but the Celtics are the only winning team where every starter is white." Finally, he kept inviting me to "do a line." The man at the bar said numerous unpleasant and unsettling things. When he excused himself to go to the restroom, I bolted out of the bar like a bat out of hell; there was no reason to stay. Of course, even some of my least pleasant interactions with people give me better understanding of people, and sometimes provide a chance to talk with my friends to try to make some sense of my experiences. As the Dalai Lama said, "Everyone is my teacher." Finally, I go to the title of this blog entry: "You remind me of a young Richard Nixon." Around two weeks into my post-bar exam Southeast Asia vacation detailed here (for the Thailand part), I was in Singapore looking for a hole-in-the-wall Indian vegetarian restaurant recommended in the Fodor's guide, which was such a hole in the wall that I passed by it several times before realizing that this simple-looking of simple-looking restaurants was my destination. As I had experienced earlier at an Indian restaurant across the Causeway, in Johor Baru, Malaysia, the server put a banana leaf the size of a large plate in front of me, and started putting rice, delicious curries, and papadum on the banana leaf. Along the wall were a few sinks for handwashing; everyone but me was eating with fingers only. I started asking the man to my left -- probably around sixty-years old -- about the tradition of eating sloppy-looking food with fingers, and I got more than I had bargained for in reply. He was very enthusiastic that I had just completed law school, and thought he was complimenting me by likening me to "a young Richard Nixon," with a bright career ahead of me. (I guess he was overlooking that Nixon left the Bar (I forget if the New York bar accepted his effort to resign rather than being disbarred), among other major problems in Nixon's life). I asked this man -- I'll call him M, as neither of us asked each other's names -- whether this restaurant and other businesses voluntarily or by pressure or law very visibly posted the pictures of then-Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew and his second in command. In a softer tone, M said "It's better." The conversation improved when we turned to Indian vegetarian food, and the existence of better local Indian vegetarian restaurants with some having better quality banana leaves (little did I realize how much a banana leaf's quality could impart improved flavor in food, possibly akin to a better tobacco leaf in a cigar). Unfortunately, the conversation went south towards nowhere when two women around twenty or so passed the restaurant wearing shorts barely covering their behinds. M vocally advocated caning the women as punishment (punishment for what?). I wonder if he supported Singapore's caning of Michael Fay five years later. Little did I realize when M mentioned caning that it involves not a few raps from a smooth cane, but excruciating pain from the split ends of a bamboo cane. By now, my appetite was going south, too, but at least I had finished most of my meal. I excused myself to visit the restroom, figuring if I stayed there long enough, he'd get the hint and depart, or would realize it was time to get to his day's remaining errands. The bathroom was right next to the kitchen, where I returned after leaving the men's room. I thanked the chefs for the delicious meal, and learned that the restaurant treats them all for a return trip to India each year, which made me feel additional positive karma about the restaurant beyond its vegetarianism. Returning to the eating area of the restaurant, I saw M standing there with a smile, proudly telling me that he had paid for my lunch, it having been an honor for him to see me have a chance to try such cuisine. Fortunately, the bill before tip was only around \$2.50, and instead of suggesting that we spend anymore time together, he suggested that I probably had better things to do that day than to be talking further with an old man. (I didn't mind his age, didn't think of him as old, but was still perturbed by his "young Richard Nixon" comment). He proceeded to go on at length about the several better Indian vegetarian restaurants in town, even though this one was excellent. Not having asked him for the names of the better banana leaf restaurants, the at least equally delicious one I visited the next day served its food on traditional metal dishes. I don't know what was more surreal about my visit to Singapore: being likened to a young Richard Nixon, or seeing almost nobody but machine-gun toting security at the airport's luggage carousel area upon my past-midnight arrival, where, nonetheless, nobody bothered asking to inspect the huge suitcase that I transported for my Singaporean friend and host who had left the suitcase in Washington before returning to Singapore from graduate school, and who overlooked giving me the combination to unlock it in the first place. Of course, the surreal and bizarre are part of the territory in seeking out people's stories and seeking to engage them in meaningful conversation. Jon Katz. ADDENDUM: After posting this blog entry, I remembered that only a few months before meeting the man who likened me to a young Richard Nixon, my parents met him and his wife, Pat, at a Manhattan restaurant. His autograph -- which I have buried somewhere -- says "To Jon- With Best wishes, Richard Nixon." Had I been in the restaurant, I'd have felt inclined to leave or ask for my table to be moved. As much as I try to find the Buddha nature in everyone, it's still tough for me to do with Nixon.

Posted by Jon Katz in Jon's news & views at 00:00