

“White Shoes” May 24, 2009

It's Memorial Day weekend, early this year, so all of us can now get out our white shoes and wear them, at least until Labor Day. That's what I was always told, and grew up thinking, and frankly, it's something I sort of adhere to, but I'm not exactly sure why.

Someone suggested that it had to do with southern customs. In fact, I found web sites that used the phrase “GRITS—for girls raised in the south, and there it is an absolute no-no and a sign of bad manner not wear white shoes before Easter or after Labor Day. So, perhaps those of us who live up north picked it up from our southern friends and neighbors.

I still wasn't sure about all that, so I did a little more investigation, consulting www.etiquettegrrls.com to see what it had to say. Someone asked the writer if she could wear white shoes, linen, sandals, warm weather clothing or carry a straw handbag prior to Memorial Day. The answer? “Nope. Unless you want to look like a Fashion Victim.” That seems silly to me, and so I guess I am and will always be a “fashion victim.” After all, when it's 85 degrees in April, I'm going to wear sandals, regardless of what “etiquette grrls” has to say!

However, that got me thinking about some other things and why we do what we do. Where do some of our customs and traditions come from? One rather well-known story I came upon had to do with the distance between the rails of train tracks. The standard gauge (distance) between the rails is 4 feet, 8.5 inches, and that sounds like an odd number to me, as it evidently did to some others who researched it. At first, the answer they got was “We've always done it that way!” Then finally, it came out that that distance was used because that's the way it was in England, and those who came from England were the ones who built the railroad.

But why did the British use that distance between rails? It turns out that it was because those who built the first railroads were the ones who had also built the trams that had previously been used, and those tramways used the same spacing as had been used for wagon wheels. And the wagon wheels were that distance because that was the space between the ruts in the early roads, which were created by the Roman war chariots that had traveled those pathways. And the Roman chariots were made just wide enough to accommodate the back ends of two war horses! So the 4 feet, 8.5 inches between the rails of our train tracks in the U.S. date by to the width of the back ends of two Roman war horses!

There's another bizarre twist to that story, too. Whenever we see the space shuttle sitting on its launch pad, we may notice that there are two big booster rockets attached to the sides of the main tank. These are solid rocket boosters made by “Thiokol” at their factory in Utah. However, the boosters have to be

shipped by train from the factory to the launch site, and the railroad line from the factory happens to run through a tunnel in the mountains. The rocket boosters had to fit through that tunnel, which is only slightly wider than the railroad track, which is the width of the back ends of two horses. Isn't it amazing that a major design feature of the world's most advanced transportation systems was determined over 2000 years ago by the width of the back end of a horse?

That sounds almost as hard to believe as the white shoe thing, but even more difficult to understand. However, my guess is that every one of us could name at least one thing that we continue to do, even though we have no idea where the custom came from or why we do it. I suspect the businesses and organizations of which we are part often do the same kind of thing. Some of those killer phrases are all too familiar to many of us.

The church is notorious for this kind of thinking. Once an event begins, it never ends, because no one has the courage to shut it down, even if it has long since outlived its usefulness. A church consultant by the name of Bill Easum actually wrote a book about this very thing; it was entitled—*Sacred Cows Made Gourmet Burgers*. In it, Easum tried to help leaders break through some of the traditions and bureaucracies that often choke the life out of ministry; however, I'm afraid his book hasn't changed very much, because as some of us know, old habits die quickly.

That is a deadly approach to ministry and to life. It's living out the saying that goes—“If we always do what we've always done, we'll always get what we've always got.” In fact, the definition of insanity is continuing to do the same thing while expecting different results. It just simply doesn't work.

If we keep on doing it the way we always have, nothing new will come into being, and that's the real problem. You see, always doing things the same old way cripples our imaginations and limits our potential. Outdated habits and routines keep us from moving forward and making significant innovations. Nonetheless, most of us keep doing the same things over and over again, because we are afraid. We cling to the past because we fear the future; we keep doing what we've done, because it feels safe and familiar.

However, I don't believe that's the way God wants us to live our lives. One of my favorite passages to support this view is the Bible passage we have for this morning. It's the prophet Isaiah who's sharing God's perspective with his listeners and with us. Our version reads this way:

God says,
“Do not cling to events of the past, or dwell on what happened long ago.
Watch for the new thing I am going to do.
It is happening already—you can see it now!”

If we stop to think about it, it's hard to deny that one of the key characteristics of God is creativity. God is known as the creator, and we read in the Bible that we are created in God's image. Therefore, the way I see it, that makes you and me creators, too! We are designed to be innovative and creative people—not mindless

repeaters of useless habits. The creative spirit is the very thing that gives us life. Someone whose name I cannot pronounce (Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi) once said: "Creativity is a central source of meaning in our lives...most of the things that are interesting, important, and human are the results of creativity...when we are involved in it, we feel that we are living more fully than during the rest of life."

So, how do we begin to let go of the old things that are holding us back and keeping us focused on what used to be? How do we discover and uncover the creative energy within each of us?

Marcel Proust may have given us the key about where to begin. He wrote, "The real act of discovery consists not in finding new lands, but in seeing with new eyes." It all begins with cultivating a new way to look around us and see the world. It has to do with being an observer, but withholding judgment, and just watching. It's all about having an open mind, and paying attention to our instincts and intuition, and honoring our hunches. As Bernice Fitz-Gibbon said, "Creativeness often consists of merely turning up what is already there," and indeed it is.

Sometimes we just may need to put ourselves in some places where we would not normally go, and doing some things we don't normally do. That's wherein the possibility of discovery lies. It's following the counsel of Alexander Graham Bell, who said: "Leave the beaten track occasionally and dive into the woods. Every time you do so, you will be certain to find something that you have never seen before."

Letting the creative spirit come alive within us has to do with trying things in ways we never have. Take the story of the Fosbury Flop—an example of what someone has called "backward" innovation. In the 1960's, there was a kid named Dick Fosbury, who was an unremarkable track and field athlete at his high school in Medford, Oregon. His preferred style of jumping was called the scissors, a move we sometimes see on tennis courts when a triumphant player jumps over the net sideways.

When Fosbury began doing the high jump, his coaches thought he would do better with the then-popular "straddle," or what was also called the "belly roll." He did as his coaches told him, but continued to be very average at the straddle, never passing the 5'4" mark.

However, during one track meet when he was 16, Fosbury began straddling again, going against the conventional wisdom that was limiting his success. Then something unexpected began to happen. As the height was raised, he started laying out more. He recalled, "Pretty soon I was flat on my back." He wasn't quite flopping yet, but he was going mostly backward, and clearing 5'10", higher than he's ever gone before.

The summer after his 1965 graduation from high school, he began doing his trademark "Flop," landing on his shoulders face up. That summer, he went over a bar 6'7" high. Even though his college coaches tried to correct his jump, he kept on flopping, right on to the 1968 summer Olympics in Mexico City. While skeptics

said he would break his neck, he wound up breaking all kinds of American and Olympic records with a jump of 7'4 1/2" and won the gold. Finally, some ten years later, Fosbury's innovation was finally adopted by every Olympic high jumper in the world.

The Fosbury Flop probably looked pretty strange the first time anyone saw it, because it was a different way of doing things. As it turned out, his innovative way of jumping became the better way of doing things, and it happened because he let go of the way everyone said it had to be done, and tried something new.

So, I guess the moral of this story is that the next time someone tells us our idea sounds like a crazy one, or that no one's ever done it like that before, we just might ask them if they know the story of the Fosbury Flop.

Closing:

It takes courage to stop doing things the way they've always been done, because it's scary and sometimes unpopular. However, that's when it's important to remember the words of Margaret Wheatley, who said: "The things we fear most in organizations (and I would add "in our own lives")—fluctuations, disturbances, imbalances—are the very sources of creativity."

As we leave here this morning, I hope and pray we'll open our eyes, our hearts, our minds and our spirits to the new thing that is happening, and experience it within us and see it all around us.

Have a great Memorial Day weekend, and go in peace. Amen.

