

Growing Up In Gaithersburg

Real Class True Grace



By Marien Helz

We were going out to dine at our favorite restaurant in the Kentlands recently and noticed that on the boulevard in front, an elderly couple was standing around, and someone was changing the tire on their car. We looked again and saw that the man changing the tire was the proprietor of the upscale restaurant. By the time we had parked, he had finished and was entering the restaurant at the same time we were. “I’d shake your hand, but...” he said, and held out hands that were all blackened from the tires. His shirt had perspiration blotches from the work he’s just done in 93 degree Fahrenheit heat.

“They had been waiting for their automobile service for two hours!” he exclaimed with disgust.

So here is the owner of a fine establishment who would rather ruin his clothes than allow an elderly couple to wait for more than two hours to have their tire fixed.

Within half an hour, he reappeared in a crisp white shirt and spotless tie.

It’s the kind of thing about which people will often say, “That’s real class!”

I avoid that usage of the word, however, because it’s just the concept of “class” that would keep a lot of people from doing something like that. Few people would change a tire for someone even if they knew how. They wouldn’t want to get their hands dirty because it might make them seem to be low class. A society stratified by class is, nonetheless, antithetic to the American ideal. Ralph Waldo Emerson’s description of self reliance is what we celebrate.

Yet, of all the people who drive, only a few know how to change a tire. The only time I changed one was in Mr. Brady’s driver training class. When I was growing up in Gaithersburg, you could get your license much sooner if you took driver training, and in order to pass the course, you had to change a tire. Just under a decade later, I needed the skill when I had a flat driving on the thruway up to Philadelphia. I found, however, that I was unable to budge the lug nuts. I pushed with all my might and nothing happened. I placed the lug nut wrench in a position horizontal to the ground and stood on it and jumped up and down. Still nothing happened. All of Mr. Brady’s efforts had been wasted—I knew *what* to do, but I couldn’t do it. If I had been able to get the wheel off, I probably wouldn’t have been able to tighten the spare enough to keep it from falling off at high speed.

Eventually, I was the beneficiary of a Good Samaritan—like the one in the Kentlands whom I haven’t identified because most people from here will know who he was, and also because Good Samaritans often don’t want their acts of charity broadcast. They perform their good services because they feel they ought to, and they pay no attention to the thing referred to as “class” or “real class”; they have no concern for reward or lack thereof.

The way I describe such people is to say that they have “true grace.”

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