

## The Miser and the Pornographer

My brother and I get along, which is remarkable, considering. Most siblings our age (approaching Social Security eligibility) do not get along, or if they do, they do so grudgingly and with reservations, but I would place my brother very high on any scale of reliability, honesty, compassion and just-plain character in general, which you might not think if you overheard some of our conversations.

We've been disagreeing on a variety of subjects for a very long time, almost as far back as I can remember. (My first two memories date from the summer of his birth, when I was two years old, which are my only memories of not disagreeing with him about something or other.) We've had fights, both physical (when we were very young, where naturally I usually prevailed,) and verbal (where we've broken pretty much even over the years), sometimes bitter, angry fights, but in the past few years, I've been pleased to find us agreeing on the broader principles of life, such as how to treat people less fortunate than we've been, and which candidates for office to support and which ones to mock. Most families I know are fundamentally broken over issues like these, which is where the begrudgement of each other comes in, but there's literally nothing like that between my brother and me. If we were to disagree about some fundamental issue, and I'm not able to think of anything we're very far apart on, I think we'd each conclude that the other's position is a reasonable one, though perhaps not one worthy of immediate endorsement.

When I cite families that don't get along very well, or at all, I'm not excluding my own family, just my brother and myself. Each of us has been divorced one time, and each of us has two grown children, one of whom we each remain close to and affectionate with, and the other of whom doesn't seem to like us very much, a source of heartache for my brother and for me. And one of the things we agree on most is the assessment of our other family members, our cousins and our uncles and our aunts, who played a very large role in our younger lives, both while our parents were alive (when the larger family was very tightly knit) and after our parents died when we were teenagers (when the larger family took care of us, or tried their best to, anyway). Remarkably, we've come to share the same view, more or less, of most of these relatives, some of whom we're fond of, at a safe distance, and others whom we both regard as dangerous lunatics, mean and thoughtless and demented as the year is long.

Because our larger family played such strong roles in our lives early on, and because they were so outspoken in their feelings, they influenced how we felt about ourselves, I think, a great deal. My aunts and my uncles held opinions that they saw no reason to keep to themselves, and they weren't shy about expressing those opinions, even if they were plainly unwelcome. They were quite capable of making mean-spirited characterizations of each other's children, for example, and I remember how they characterized my brother and me.

Their nickname for my brother was "The Miser." From a very early age, he had a sharp sense of what was his, and what wasn't, and he wanted very much to keep what was his, and to acquire what wasn't—when my aunts and uncles noticed this trait, they laughingly called him "The Miser," and he seemed by his behavior to reinforce his nickname. On one of his earliest birthdays, he received a present of an article of clothing, I think a colorful sweater of some sort, and his famous response to opening the package was to grimace and proclaim, "I don't want this. Give me money."

To give him his due credit, he didn't really care how his impolite reaction made him seem to other people. He was extremely self-contained, and a rather confident little boy, in contrast with me—I was far more seeking of approval than he was, and I knew how to affect an outward appearance that pleased my elders. He didn't mind offending his elders as long as he made clear what he wanted from them, and so he became characterized as a little miser. The family acknowledged that my little brother showed more selfishness than other children did, and this acknowledgement was reinforcing: the more he showed this trait, the more widely he was teased about it, and the more broadly he came to accept it as a statement of who he was, and the more miserly he became.

I remember being put under a great deal of pressure to help socialize my brother. I was told to set an example for him, to show him how to share, and to tolerate his anti-social behavior cheerfully. If he refused to share his toys with some other child, for example, which he did constantly, I would be told to share my toys with that child instead, to defuse the conflict. I suppose many older siblings are put in similar positions, of behaving especially well to deflect from their younger siblings' poor behavior, but because of my brother's unusual intransigence, I lived most of my early life running interference for him. One of my jobs was making friends with his potential enemies, so that the world would perceive us brothers as, on average, tolerably agreeable: "Stevie is good-natured, and Mickey is a brat, so together they're okay" was how that went, or so it seemed to me.

As he matured, very slowly in this regard it seems to me, he gradually became more open and trusting, so that by adolescence he was close to normal in his social behavior—he had friends, he would let them borrow his things from time to time, and his miserliness eventually disappeared. But my relatives wouldn't let it go—they would continue to joke about it, in a way that wasn't entirely mean-spirited but which didn't help my brother find his path to socialization any quicker, either. Today, he lives a pretty independent life, modified by his efforts to make room for others in that life. He gave his second wife a remarkably generous amount of control over his business affairs, and in semi-retirement now, he spends much of his time fly-fishing, which leaves him about as independent as a man can be, except for his occasional work as a fly-fishing guide, in which he teaches others how to enjoy their own autonomy, free from others' interference while they're alone on the river. In middle age, he's become a person who enjoys sharing what he's capable of sharing, with those who appreciate his generosity, but who still prizes his time alone. He's come about as far as he could have from being a miser, if my relatives' early assessment of his personality was even accurate.

My relatives' nickname for me, on the other hand, was "The Pornographer." As a child, I liked to draw and paint, though my family was not particularly supportive of the arts, in theory or in practice. The entire generation before me earned their livings as small businessmen—opticians, candy-store owners, pillow salesmen and the like—and they raised their children, generally, to enter somewhat loftier professions, as lawyers, entertainment executives, stock traders. The trend was towards higher status and, more importantly, more money, and they tended for those reasons to look down upon any backwards sliding in the direction of any of the arts. I got some lessons in painting and writing and acting, but I also got a lot of negative reinforcement for even considering becoming any kind of artist, and among the discouragement I got was a horrified response to my first attempts to draw the human form.

Drawing people's bodies is a rudimentary and necessary stage in art instruction, but I was getting instruction from people who were not themselves very formally trained or, more likely, from myself, and

my own method of self-teaching was just to copy anything I could get my hands on, or borrow, or observe. Sometimes that was from life around me—most memorably, I was sent home from kindergarten for drawing a full-frontal nude of my mother, replete with genitalia—and sometimes that was from whatever paintings, drawings and photographs I saw around me. I remember drawing a pencil-sketch of a publicity photograph of Elizabeth Taylor in a bathing suit, a notably voluptuous picture publicizing Suddenly Last Summer, and receiving no praise for replicating the proportions of her form so accurately but instead receiving a stern warning from my father not to distribute such smut among my friends, although the photograph came innocently enough from one of the many movie magazines my parents kept around the house.

When my relatives got wind of the fact that I was drawing “nudies,” as they phrased it, I never heard the end of it. “How’s the porno industry coming along, kid?” would be a typical greeting, maybe accompanied by a salacious gesture or two, and a few wet laughs. My response was to blush, probably, and to keep my art career to myself as much as possible. When I would show my paintings to my relatives, or give them as presents to them, they would be of the safest subjects possible—landscapes, still-lives, portraits of animals—and eventually my relatives accepted my interest in art as being only “weird” in itself and not necessarily sexually perverted. But their early over-reaction to my painting and drawing, their over-the-top response to some of my subject matter, taught me to mistrust the way they saw the world.

I came to see myself as “The Pornographer,” in other words, much as I imagine my brother came to see himself as “The Miser,” and both of us learned to accept these fundamentally misguided labels of who we were and what our interests were. Call a dog a name, and he will learn to answer to it. For a long time, speaking only for myself (though I suspect something of the sort happened with my brother), I both resented the labeling and came to understand myself in opposition to the values espoused by my family. As it happened, my interests were more literary than painterly for a long time, and I came to think of transgressive writing, writing that offended and irritated and sometimes angered people, as virtuous, so when I returned to the paintbrush and the easel many years later, well, I can only say that my paintings of the last ten years have been called “prurient” and “salacious” and, yes, “pornographic” by their critics, but they have never been called “incompetent” or “dull,” and I have never been anything other than pleased by them, or by who I am for painting them.

I paint headless nudes on clothing, and I can’t tell you how angry these paintings make some women. Some self-proclaimed feminist friends have stopped speaking to me, several woman who were romantically involved with me have decided that the man who painted those awful things can’t possibly be dateable, and female students who’ve gotten wind of my paintings have denounced me and tried to have me removed from my (fortunately tenured) position, all because of my artwork. The students were mostly offended by the headlessness—in a manifesto they published (online, and anonymously) for my colleagues’ benefit (some of whom stopped talking to me, too, as a result) they complained, I think, that my paintings showed a wish to decapitate women, and were extremely hostile to women, which I find funny. (If I had lost my job, I probably wouldn’t see the humor quite so well.) The funny part is that I’m trying to show how much I like women’s bodies, not how much I hate them, and the headlessness is in part designed to de-sexualize the images.

I don't want to over-explain, or even to explain, my art work too much (it ought to speak for itself) but it always seemed to me that the really pornographic element in any depiction of nude bodies is located in the facial expression on the model. Imagine a pornographic picture of any kind where the model's face is expressionless, or bored, or just caught in an awkward moment like in the course of sneezing or spitting. That detracts from the sexuality considerably, I'd say, if not totally. In my nudes, which are painted on dresses or shirts or overalls and therefore have no facial parts for me to paint on, the viewer cannot know what the model's face is doing. If he wants to imagine a sexy come-hither look on the model, well, that's on him, isn't it? If he wants to imagine any sort of look, he can—and as I say, since the power behind any portrait rests largely on the facial expression, my paintings deliberately deny that power to the viewer. If he (or she) wants my paintings to be pornographic, he's free to go in that direction, but if he doesn't, then they're not. My paintings may be about pornography, but only if that's how the viewer's mind works.

The only way I can paint what I'm trying to paint is to accept that some people will call me a pornographer, and I've had a lifetime of practice in accepting that label. So my relatives may have been right in mislabeling me that way, as they were onto something in mislabeling my brother, and I think we've lived our lives and done the things we wanted to do by absorbing the hit of my relatives' judgments of us and then shrugging it off as if they'd never spoken.