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George V. Higgins

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TWENTY-THREE YEARS AGO last spring, Irving Howe conducted a seminar for Stanford University graduate students bent upon intensive study of the works of Nathaniel Hawthorne and Herman Melville. The syllabus was daunting, requiring of the prudent seminarian not careful study of the masterful performances (Hawthorne's biography of the unfortunate Hester Prynne; Melville's fishing story), but Hawthorne's *Blithedale Romance* and Melville's *Pierre*. The professor was daunting, too; Mr. Howe at least in those days was a prepossessing man, capable of rudeness and protective of his eminence, not noticeably inclined toward gracious waiver of the privileges his rank conferred when he smelled impudence from mere novices. We sat there under his hegemony, frantically conjuring up "insights" from bad books which provoked few, ever conscious that our projected applications for financial aid and coveted assistantships might very well be shriveled by a mean comment from him, and we were not happy scholars.

I was not, at least. That seminar stood out in a thoroughly disagreeable year as an especially anomalous and pointless exercise. Mr. Howe, the 1976 recipient of the National Book Award for his *World of Our Fathers*, was simultaneously intensely Jewish and insistently socialist, inclined to dogmatize. His politics accounted for his selections of the two utopian, visionary, Tractarian dull novels written by Hawthorne and Melville in the throes of similar political ideologies and enthusiasms. I guess they did, anyway—I can't imagine any other motive to explain those assignments. His ethnic sensitivity I presume now to have been the wellspring of his evident disdain for a Boston College graduate whose round face and surname lent credence to suspicions he was Irish Catholic; I was young then, far from home for the first time, innocent of the bigoted anti-Catholicism then if not now fashionable as the intelligentsia's version of anti-Semitism. Slouching sullenly in my chair, hearing the birds in the palms outside herald in song an unearned spring's arrival to a land that knew not winter, I listened without recourse or right of reply (then, not now) to a bigoted ideologue from New York pontificate in Palo Alto about the mind, the morals, the ethics, and the character of New England, the place where I grew up.

That unsettling experience, one of many furnished without let or hindrance to me by that university and state (Do you know what they do out there? They list "lobster" on menus when crayfish is what they've got) in that dreadful year, carried with it, I suppose, the merit of abrading the surface of the certitudes about what I am and where I come from I had harbored until then. It also served with the rest of Stanford's many courtesies to make a quick quietus to my initial plans to live my life as a West Coast academic (as did, I should add, similar courtesies and veiled insults inflicted upon my first-year colleagues from the East in other graduate departments; of twenty who entered Stanford Ph.D. programs and my dormitory floor in the fall of 1961, sixteen voluntarily departed in June of 1962, settling for M.A.s). For this English major, at least, the best poetry of June of 1962 was that proclaimed by the public address system at San Francisco International Airport, announcing the departure of American Airlines' direct flight to Boston.

Since then a kindlier fate and somewhat better judgment than combined to cause me to choose Mr. Howe's seminar have on a good many occasions brought me back to Logan Airport in East Boston to depart New England, but always temporarily. I visit other places; this is where I live. The minds and characters, the morals and the ethics that one finds in New England have their faults and defects, but we are orderly when right and ashamed when we are wrong. We have a sense of decency. To a degree we seem to have a better sense of who we are and what we ought to be than I have seen elsewhere in their inhabitants. We know what evil is.

By one tradition, of course, evil is reputed to exist solely in the eye of the beholder. So I suppose I had better pause here and go back to the beginning, to the sources of my eyes.

The end of World War II released gasoline and tires to civilians like my father, and eliminated at the same time what I suspect had been the explanation he and my mother had until then made to my maternal grandmother, Evelyn Montgomery, for their omission to pay visits in the summer to her home in Hinesburg, Vermont. For the millions who have never heard of it, and with excellent reason, the center of Hinesburg in the late forties consisted of a creamery, Lantman's IGA general store, a Mobil gasoline station, the Congregational church, and the public school. Thirty miles or so south of Burlington, it was more or less a part of Richmond, a wider spot in the road to the north.

In the summer the Green Mountains collected heat and stored it in the valleys of Hinesburg, where it lay undisturbed by anything more than the occasional, vagrant hot breeze. The Jerseys in the pastures were lethargic, even for cows, and the maple leaves seldom stirred. I suppose I was six, maybe seven, when my father and mother loaded me and the baggage into the blue and white 1941 DeSoto and headed north from Rockland, Massachusetts, with a grim resignation perceptible even by child. We arrived in early evenings, on those visits that became detestably annual and remained so until I reached puberty (although that milestone was not the reason that they stopped—I don't know what the reason was, but I was grateful for it), and after Coca-Cola from juice glasses on the screened porch behind the grapevines guarding against intrusion by any fugitive breeze, the youngest of the three trail-hardened pilgrims was taken up the brown-painted staircase with the railing made of pipe to his lumpy bed in the room at

the northwest corner of the house, under the red tin roof which had conserved the heat all day especially for him. The single window to the north was opened on the wan pretense that there might be a cooling breeze, and it served admirably the convenience of abundant pollen from the surrounding fields. Much later, when I first read about the owls bearing away the farm from "Fern Hill," I knew two new things instantly: Dylan Thomas was a wonderful, lyrical poet and he did not have allergies.

Fairly early the next morning for a normally late riser, my father in his annual up-tempo imitation of Pontius Pilate washing hands of us would back the DeSoto down the steeply inclined gravel tracks of the driveway, cramping the front wheels to the limit in order to avoid hanging up the undercarriage on the steeper incline upward to the roadway at the bottom. If my eyes by then had not been swollen shut by allergic reaction, I would cry as I stood on the lawn and watched him desert my mother and me for a full two weeks of something approaching penal incarceration in Boredom Penitentiary. My mother was more restrained and did not show her dismay, but if either of us could have gone back home with him, abandoning the other hostage, either would have done so at once. I will accord to the late Evelyn Montgomery the *carte blanche* extended to all decedents not known to have been convicted of felonies, and content myself with the observation that she was an unhappy woman, and therefore a difficult one. It was not her fault, either, that her old car didn't work, and there was really no place to go in it anyway. But those circumstances all had much to do with the fact that her company and isolated village attracted few outsiders who had any other choice.

Evelyn had come from Scotland as a girl, whether alone or accompanied I do not know, bringing with her one trunk she still had when I met her. With childish heedlessness I rejected her importunate offers to provide me with an oral inventory of the contents of that trunk and the history of her life, begun across the sea while Bismarck was plaguing Europe, perhaps one of many slights by me and others accounting in part for her disposition. She met her husband, Roy, in time to give birth to my mother, her first child, in 1909. There is some doubt whether Roy's ancestry was Scottish or Irish, but none on the point that he was a Roman Catholic until she insisted that he renounce popery when he married her.

Notwithstanding that religious ductility, he seems not to have proven an especially felicitous marital catch. He was an unregenerate financial opportunist, capitalizing (but not very successfully) on what he learned circulating through the state as a dairy inspector by purchasing seriatim one broken-down operation after another, moving his family in, spending a few years working them and himself to their nubs in order to fix up the places, then selling off the now-spruce homes and barns to acquire another wreck. I remember Evelyn saying that "Roy always made money on his deals, but . . . ," and letting her voice trail off. I can finish the sentence now for her, with some confidence: ". . . treating his family like a bunch of intrastate Joads who never did settle down."

While that was going on in Vermont, south of Boston what seems strikingly like a mirror image of it was in progress. My paternal grandfather was born in North Abington, one of a family of five brothers and one sister, in 1874. His father, Arthur, was an Orange Protestant, probably from Londonderry, converted to Green Catholicism by his wife, Mary. Charles J. Higgins was the sunniest, hardest

working, most generous and compassionate human being that anyone who met him will admit to having seen. He married Annie, who gave him no competition whatsoever in quest of such respect, and they had one child, my father, in 1906.

Therefore, when my mother, raised as a Protestant, married my father, raised as a Catholic and a fiercely believing one, she converted back to the faith her father had renounced to marry her mother, leaving the final family score of defectors at Romans 2 (Arthur and Doris), Protestants 1.

40 For several strong reasons valid in their times, my father and his father, and their various pastors at Holy Family Church, were inclined to take grim satisfaction from that sort of tally. While my grandfather commenced his adult life in the second phase of Irish assimilation into American economic life with fewer and smaller handicaps than his father had confronted, a more genteel but flourishing nativist prejudice still influenced his whole life. He progressed against it nicely, from hardware store clerk to hardware store owner, to tax collector, to town treasurer, to treasurer of the Rockland Cooperative Bank, only by much hard work done in furtherance of indissoluble alliances with other ambitious young men of Irish Catholic heritage.

A prime principle of their league was not to forget their own, not only their own families, but also their fellow Micks not gifted with their luck or wit. His priests believed, his friends believed, and he believed as well, that mutual aid and loyalty were the only hope that any of them had.

Charlie Higgins kept that creed for more than eighty years, some of them the decade of the Crash of '29. That was what accounted for the stream of mourners who tramped through his wake at his house (no funeral home wakes for real Irish, no matter how much grief; my father said he'd haunt me if I did that to him, and by God I didn't do it—I have got some sense). Most of them were people of modest circumstances in 1955, men and women in their sixties, their eyes filled with tears, grasping my fifteen-year-old hand in both of theirs, often embracing my nonplussed father, telling him who understood and me, who then did not: "During the Depression, Charlie Higgins saved my house. I couldn't pay the mortgage and my taxes, see, and I went up to see him, and I told Charlie all my troubles, and he said: 'Jim, don't worry, we won't take your house. We know you'll pay up when you can. Go home and don't worry.' " And when better times arrived, that is what they did. Of course if Charlie were around today, overlooking delinquent property taxes due the town, carrying mortgages defaulted at the bank, he would be indicted in short order and remanded to custody.

But then again, of course as well, if Charlie were around today, he might not dare to do it. There are many more laws now than there were then, a bewildering array of exquisitely technical statutes enacted to meet needs perceived during the gradual and continuing erosion of ad hoc, unwritten sanctions against wickedness. The strong secular creed of solidarity enforced in Charlie's day by churchmen and parishioners alike imposed upon the recipients of compassion obligations fully as solemn as it did upon grantors. My grandfather's standing in the community rested upon his decency to the temporarily needy family. That family's standing rested no less upon its justification of his trust when better times came back. As he and his fellow members of the upstart Mick bank board would not have dared to ape the callousness of the Protestant bankers they had challenged with their

venture, so the Rockland Co-op's borrowers would not have dared to dishonor or abuse their trust. Ostracism yawed for offenders in either camp. There was less need for statutes to punish banking wickedness, because there was less likelihood that irregular banking practices would result in losses to the bank.

The material rewards of the settled lifetime Charlie spent with his family in shoe-town Rockland, while not great by worldly standards, were markedly better than the ones that Roy spent gypsying from farm to Vermont farm with his. Charlie's family had been able to help him through two years of business school, my namesake granduncle through medical school, my father's namesake uncle through enough college to teach school, and my granduncles into steady trades. Charlie's relative prosperity secured not only a full A.B. for my father at Boston College, but also an M.A.

Those generational improvements in educational credentials, though, did not bring with them automatic access to better opportunities. Resourcefulness was still required. In the forties and fifties my father encountered in his professional career in public education evidence sufficient to persuade him his religion barred him from the executive positions he coveted. He overcame that bigotry with a modified version of the strategy my grandfather and his friends had employed to start the bank, channeling the energy of his resentment into electioneering among the increasing numbers of Irish Catholic teachers joining what is now the Massachusetts Teachers Association, becoming its treasurer. He went back to Rockland to secure his principalship from a five-member school board including three Micks, succeeding another Irish Catholic who had died in office (thus swapping, not so incidentally, the English teacher's position that was his joy and passionate *métier* for the greater status he perceived in a grueling, tedious, administrative post).

I emerged from the inculcation of his experiences and Charlie's into a cold day with snow blowing down the canyon of Boston's Milk Street one afternoon in February of 1967 with: a 1961 A.B. from Boston College; a 1965 M.A. from Stanford University; a law degree expected in June of 1967 from the Boston College Law School; a wife who wanted to have children soon; the sickening residue of a bad interview with a worse lawyer who had offered me sixty-five dollars a week to do scut work for him; no other job prospects or promising leads; and all my prejudices intact. I encountered Walter Jay Skinner (now a Boston federal judge), whom I had come to know in 1963 when as an assistant attorney general he had prosecuted the Hancock Raceway cases in the Hampden Superior Court in Springfield. I covered those trials as Springfield correspondent for the Associated Press. When he committed the blunder of asking me how things were going, I told him. Those trials had done much to inflame my judgment that my destiny in life was to try cases. Now here I was, almost ready to do that, and I couldn't get a job.

"Elliot Richardson's hiring staff," Jay said. "Why not apply to him?" And all of my gloomy bitterness at nearly everything in the world came out in one sour response along approximately these lines: "Oh, sure," I said. "Yankee Republican. I bet he's really beating the bushes for Irish Catholic Democrats without political connections. Can't find enough of them."

Jay Skinner's a nice man, nice enough to be harsh when the situation dictates. "Why don't you grow up?" he said. "That stuff's all gone by. Elliot doesn't care."

He didn't, either. And when he was succeeded by Robert H. Quinn, Democratic Speaker of the House of Representatives chosen by that body to complete Richardson's term in 1968, I discovered to my further gratification that the highly political Mr. Quinn did not expect the resignations of Mr. Richardson's appointees, nor any reduction of their prosecutorial zeal, but rather that they remain in place for as long as they wished, party renegades or no.

Such signal but far from singular demonstrations of decency from unexpected quarters over the years demolished many of the self-defensive certitudes that I inherited from forebears. Their credence of them in their times was certainly justified, but sometime before I reached the point in my life where my efforts to make my way called for their application, they became obsolete. Without for a moment meaning to imply that ethnic, religious, and racial prejudices are things of the past in New England, I have to posit the fact that I have either not suffered their application, or else have been too dense to see what was done to me. I prefer the former hypothesis. In the occasional contemplative moment, I have wondered whether there might perhaps be other areas in which my own empirical data indicate that some ideas I always trusted have also become obsolete. I have decided that there are.

For example: Donald Hall, in his splendid "Rusticus" inaugurating this forum for New Englanders who admit to making up what we write, in last year's winter/spring issue, designated me "one of the [Boston] *Globe's* resident Hibernians." I believe the designation was meant as a compliment, as I always do when it is uttered to my face, although I detect in it a certain imputation of insularity which I hope I do not have. But I question whether a mongrel such as I merits certification as a purebred Irishman, notwithstanding such assumptions by Messrs. Hall and Howe. If, after more than a century of New England family mixed-breed history, I am nevertheless obliged to claim an original ethnic origin influential of my point of view, I would say I am a Celt. That is the only thing my people have all been.

Except for the other thing, of course, which is New Englanders. New England, where I've lived most of my life, is a different matter. My middle-class upbringing in Rockland, only briefly interrupted by those dreaded Vermont trips and the "vacations" we took when my father attended NEA conventions in St. Louis and Miami Beach, and four years at Boston College had by June of 1961 inserted in my marrow some trace element which to this day affects every judgment that I make. That June, regrettably for me, I was not aware that this had happened, but by the following December, after a mere three months at Stanford among California heathen, I knew it all too well. I came home for Christmas like a prisoner on work-release, and when it came time for me to return to California after the holidays, I went with deep pain in my heart. Also in my belly, as it turned out—when I made my escape from that wretched place in June of 1962, I had copies of hospital records to enlighten doctors here, should my bleeding ulcer recur.

Most of the aspects of California life which I found repellent then—e.g.: the wave of drug use cresting under the malign genius of Owsley with his chemistry set in Berkeley, making LSD; the prevalence of sexual orgiasts among groups of people who otherwise appeared normal—of course soon made their way across the country (perhaps initially leapfrogging the Plains States) to the Atlantic littoral. But there were differences significant to me in the West and East Coast

behavior of respectively indigenous wantons, jades, and junkies: here there were nowhere near as many of them visible (from which I gradually surmised not that there were fewer of them in the East, but that they took more care to avoid detection, although it may be that I was aging fast, and was not getting invited to their gatherings). The ones who were visible, to evince an invincibly bourgeois attitude, were disreputable anyway. And even they were sheepish here, as they'd not been out there. On the Stanford campus on the Monday morning after the Saturday night when I'd learned to my shocked dismay that a "B.Y.O." off-campus party invitation did not mean I should bring a bottle of Jim Beam, but a companion of either gender amenable to group sex (lust-ridden as I was, I was nonetheless appalled by that idea), the people who'd attended the orgy had no trouble meeting my gaze—I had trouble meeting theirs. They were not ashamed of themselves, but I was ashamed of them.

Those coastal differences in decadent behavior I think attributable to the disparity between the two regions in likelihood of community disapproval for shameful acts, and the consequent ability of the actors to commit them without shame. Sin has always been pleasant, and therefore most of us have sinned. But in New England there was then and remains today a strong if reduced community consensus that when the self gets out of control, it had better be discreet. It is perfectly all right to remark that consensus as a lingering remainder of bluenose Puritanism, in my case and many others intensified by an Irish Catholic upbringing of the Jansenist subspecies. It is permissible as well to sneer at all its public manifestations, whether egregious (Boston Mayor Raymond Flynn's leadership of censors enraged by local production of *Sister Mary Ignatius Explains It All for You*) or moderate (protests by Irish Americans convinced that *Globe* cartoonist Paul Szep, portraying a leprechaun as a rat in an anti-IRA panel, would not have taken similar liberties depicting a Jewish villain of whom he disapproved), and it is indisputable as well that an element of hypocrisy is often involved in the enforcement of a public morality. But as Harvard's James Q. Wilson has so often pointed out, the enforcement of personal codes of morality and ethics, whatever their defects, first by the family and then by the community, is the engine which drives the machinery of social order. When those codes, however repressive, begin to break down, as they did about twenty years ago, the burdens of law enforcement increase geometrically.

It is in the nature of humankind to seek limits on behavior. When there are no visible limits, when the keenest eye cannot discern a probable informal punishment for previously merely shameful behavior, the more timid among us will behave shamefully, while the boldest will be piqued by the temptation to investigate whether there exist formal punishments for criminal acts. During the second of my three years as an assistant U.S. attorney in Boston, the presentencing reports prepared by the probation office on convicted defendants so regularly recorded ineffectual or utterly absent paternal influence of the subjects in their formative years that then-U.S. Attorney (now U.S. District Judge) Joseph L. Tauro and I began to keep an informal log of such entries; after six months or so, when the 93 percent incidence of such findings had been steady for a while, we stopped, and declared our suspicions confirmed. If, as my children have occasionally alleged, I am rather more vigilant of their comings-in and their goings-out than is strictly necessary, that is a part of the reason.

I am not sure I could marshal social reinforcements somewhere else to make such vigilance effective. Donald Hall has spent enough time in the South to inform the estimate he published in the last issue crediting the long-established society there with many of the same sinewy strengths mustered by ours, but I have not done that. The other places I have stayed—Washington, D.C., and California—did not present such strengths. The New England code of acceptable behavior, though marked by repeated infractions, remains in my estimation relatively sturdy, and however censorious and frequently irritating, accounts in considerable part for the fact that life here is more orderly than I have found it elsewhere. We have retained a sense of decency, still powerful enough to prompt even those flouting it, and getting caught, to feel a sense of guilt.

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That insistence on discretion has been the hallmark of the New England communities where I have spent enough time to gain a sense of place. Now, I am not here suggesting that a young newspaperman in his novitiate at the *Providence Journal* embarks upon eight months' residence in Rhode Island with powers of observation superior to those of an examiner from the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation assigned out of Washington for the same period to the same place. Or that a year in Springfield, covering western Massachusetts for the AP, qualifies anyone as an expert on the manners and mores of people west of Worcester. What I am suggesting, though, is that the reporter has to concentrate as best he can those powers of observation which he happens to possess, and to develop as rapidly as possible a working understanding of what goes on in a new place, and what people there think of it, unless he really likes being reamed out by the copy desk when he gets something wrong. And, further, that the dependence of his continued employment upon his ability to make good use of his occupational right to interrogate total strangers from all walks of life implies a further incentive to glean as much as he can from what they say of what they think. He enters his new town surrounded at his new post by garrulous gents and ladies (whom he deems elderly at fifty-one or so) adjured by the generous traditions of the trade to conduct, free, gratis and for nothing, crash courses in the local history. If he is shrewd, he listens, and if he isn't shrewd he listens anyway, because reporters tell good stories and they're fun to collect, like old coins.

If you listen to those stories, and remember them as well, you will not only have good times on slow nights, but at greater leisure perceive what looks a lot like a common thread. That leitmotiv is that no matter what the stated offense that brought somebody down, the secular punishment that followed was either for flouting the consensus, or rank hypocrisy. Nothing I heard and saw later, prosecuting and defending here, changed my view on that. I think you can get away with quite a lot in New England, as a good many of us do, if you are discreet enough to do it privately and never boast that you are doing it and getting away with it, or claim that you aren't doing it. The Reverend Mr. Dimmesdale knew that; his whole life in Hawthorne's *Scarlet Letter* was destroyed anew each time he saw Hester with her *A*, because he in his position was impliedly announcing he himself was pure of lust. Since the community never caught on, he quite properly finished himself off. Good story, that—pure New England, too.

There are, of course, some drawbacks. The presumption of that shared sense of decency and susceptibility to pangs of guilt, and the unanimous shared sense that those two things are extremely important to the preservation of our lives,

probably account for the frequent shrillness of our public discussions, especially in Massachusetts, and most especially in the *Globe*. As religious and ethnic enforcement of the codes (both good—charity toward the less fortunate—and bad—prejudice toward persons of other faiths) has eroded, even here, New Englanders have begun to worry. A concomitant and undifferentiated zeal has arisen to replace those codes with legislation.

If you examine closely most of the proposals most noisily advanced to expand government influence in private lives in New England, you will find in both the rhetoric of their presentation and the objectives advocated what amounts to a demand to codify in statute a given moral or ethical position. Pro-life agitators seeking new prohibitions of abortion (and ignoring ample historical evidence that the old prohibitions did not prevent the practice) are effectually petitioning the government to enforce a moral viewpoint, and to restore a footnote to the definitions of decency and evil. Gay and lesbian enthusiasts promoting statutory recognition of their life-styles are in substance doing the same thing: demanding that the definition of decency be amended to include their conduct, and the definition of evil be amended to strike it out. The gravamen of arguments by good government groups against large campaign contributions by Political Action Committees (PACs) is that disproportionate influence of beholden politicians is certain to follow from huge donations, and that is secularly immoral. Courts ordering mandatory busing to desegregate the schools, construction of new treatment plants to disinfect the sea, construction of new jails to improve accommodations, vast betterments of institutions where the retarded are housed: all are showing sympathy for arguments to the effect that the conditions protested constitute indecencies. All are dealing with evil as it is perceived by them, and all are seeking decency, as they think it ought to be.

Taken piecemeal, such agitations are tolerable. Especially, of course, if the auditor happens to subscribe sincerely to one or more of the points of view being marketed as seemly improvements of the official code. But taken wholesale those commotions make an awful din. It is tedious, and endless, and noisy beyond belief. Most of New England, most of the time, is under steady hectoring by some disgruntled bunch or other, bent on its reform.

That's the price we pay for the order we enjoy. Each is the product of virtually constant, nearly unanimous consensus that there is such a thing as a code of proper conduct of people living in communities. The disputes are about the constitutive elements of that code: what the provisions are to be, and who is to enforce them. Nothing more than that.

In 1973, the same Elliot Richardson who as Massachusetts attorney general had taught me something about New England in 1967 taught Richard Nixon and the whole republic from the same basic text. The president of the United States ordered Mr. Richardson, his attorney general, to rid him of Archibald Cox, the troublesome special prosecutor then in hot pursuit of Mr. Nixon's tapes. Mr. Richardson, in a principled act of insubordinate integrity, refused to obey. He had accepted his appointment on the president's undertaking to leave Mr. Cox alone, no matter what he did, and if Mr. Nixon chose to break his word, Mr. Richardson did not. The president fired him.

Returning to Washington soon after Mr. Richardson's behavior in the Saturday Night Massacre had thrilled a woeful nation steeped in seamy Watergate

disclosures, my colleagues and I from New England discerned in the reactions of reporters from elsewhere an element of pleased surprise at what Mr. Richardson had done. Those of us who knew him were in turn surprised by that. Mr. Richardson is from New England. If he had done otherwise, he could not have come back home.

Of course when he did, eleven years later, the ingrates of his party rebuffed his application for the GOP senatorial nomination, awarding it to his opponent, Ray Shamie. But that's another facet of the New England character, a story for another day.