



A Manner of Speaking

I didn't much like Asa when I first met him. And he'd be quick to tell you that he didn't care for me either. "Things sure didn't get off to such a good start. Whew, we didn't get along!" To me Asa seemed brusque, gruff, and just downright mean. I've never had the courage to ask him what he thought about me. Asa has printed most of our magazine covers since March 1992; he retires this month, and I will really miss working with him.

So what happened? One day, Diane, our rep, dropped a line about Asa's sense of humor. "Asa? You've got to be kidding! He's not funny at all! In fact, he's just plain difficult." So we compared our widely divergent Asa stories.

Still doubtful, I decided to test out this reputed sense of humor the next time we worked together — and the door opened to a friendship that enabled us to laugh and challenge each other through all those beautiful covers. Asa came to measure the days to retirement in terms of our magazine: "I have one turkey and five Child Cares to go."

It took a while to figure out why this story is so important to me. I think it speaks to the trouble we can get into and the opportunities we miss if we reduce ourselves to the roles we play and forget or hide the people we truly are. Instead of two people who love to joke around and be sarcastic and who truly care about the quality of their work, it is easy to become a gruff professional versus a demanding customer.

I had a terribly frustrating episode over a camera repair. The owner/manager wouldn't help, didn't care. I spoke several times to a clerk named Leslie who one day put aside her role and became a person. "I know how you must feel. You aren't the only one. We are having some organizational problems here and things are a mess. But I will make sure that the manager looks at your invoice and I will call you tomorrow at five to let you know what is happening." She did call at five, and though the news she had to share wasn't what I wanted to hear, I felt connected to a real person who was sharing the truth and my anger and frustration became more bearable.

When parents come to you for information, ideas, support, you can't always give them the answers they are looking for; but you can be a person beyond your role, someone they can trust. Each time staff come with concerns or ideas, you must choose whether to be your role or yourself. Playing a role is easier, being yourself is what people want from you.

You know how a great waiter can make your evening a success by performing his roles perfectly, yet sharing a bit of his personality along the way. A doctor can know exactly how to treat your problem; but you want news, good or bad, delivered by a real person who is there by your side.

Asa couldn't always print the perfect cover, although I am sure he tried. Leslie couldn't tell me that my camera was repaired. The medical procedure still hurt. But the human connection goes a long way towards making the moment.

Please join me in wishing Asa many happy years of retirement, doing the projects he loves, some fishing, time with family and friends. Use our little history to remind yourself to be real. 🧩