

LAW 38

THINK AS YOU LIKE BUT BEHAVE LIKE OTHERS

JUDGMENT

If you make a show of going against the times, flaunting your unconventional ideas and unorthodox ways, people will think that you only want attention and that you look down upon them. They will find a way to punish you for making them feel inferior. It is far safer to blend in and nurture the common touch. Share your originality only with tolerant friends and those who are sure to appreciate your uniqueness.

THINK WITH THE FEW AND SPEAK WITH THE MANY

It is easy to run into danger by trying to swim against the stream. Only a Socrates could attempt to do that. Disagreement is regarded as offensive because it is a condemnation of the views of others; the numbers of the disgruntled grow, on account either of some matter that has been the object of censure or of some person who has praised it: Truth is for the few, error is as usual as it is vulgar. Nor is the wise man to be recognized by what he says in the marketplace, for he speaks there not with his own voice, but with that of universal folly, however much his inmost thoughts may gainsay it: The wise man avoids being contradicted as sedulously as he avoids contradicting; the publicity of censure is withheld from that which readily provokes it. Thought is free; it cannot and should not be coerced; retire into the sanctuary of your silence and if you sometimes allow yourself to break it, do so under the aegis of a discreet few.

BALTASAR GRACIÁN, 1601-1658

TRANSGRESSION OF THE LAW

Around the year 478 B.C., the city of Sparta sent an expedition to Persia led by the young Spartan nobleman Pausanias. The city-states of Greece had recently fought off a mighty invasion from Persia, and now Pausanias, along with allied ships from Athens, had orders to punish the invaders and win back the islands and coastal towns that the Persians had occupied. Both the Athenians and the Spartans had great respect for Pausanias—he had proven himself as a fearless warrior, with a flair for the dramatic.

With amazing speed, Pausanias and his troops took Cyprus, then moved on to the mainland of Asia Minor known as the Hellespont and captured Byzantium (modern-day Istanbul). Now master of part of the Persian empire, Pausanias began to show signs of behavior that went beyond his normal flamboyance. He appeared in public wearing pomades in his hair and flowing Persian robes, and accompanied by a bodyguard of Egyptians. He held lavish banquets in which he sat in the Persian manner and demanded to be entertained. He stopped seeing his old friends, entered into communication with the Persian King Xerxes, and all in all affected the style and manner of a Persian dictator.

Clearly power and success had gone to Pausanias's head. His army-Athenians and Spartans alike—at first thought this a passing fancy: He had always been a bit exaggerated in his gestures. But when he flaunted his disdain for the Greeks' simple way of life, and insulted the common Greek soldier, they began to feel he had gone too far. Although there was no concrete evidence for this, rumors spread that he had gone over to the other side, and that he dreamed of becoming a kind of Greek Xerxes. To quell the possibility of mutiny, the Spartans relieved Pausanias of his command and called him home.

Pausanias, however, continued to dress in the Persian style, even in Sparta. After a few months he independently hired a trireme and returned to the Hellespont, telling his compatriots he was going to continue the fight against the Persians. Actually, however, he had different plans—to make himself ruler of all Greece, with the aid of Xerxes himself. The Spartans declared him a public enemy and sent a ship to capture him. Pausanias

surrendered, certain that he could clear himself of the charges of treason. It did come out during the trial that during his reign as commander he had offended his fellow Greeks time and again, erecting monuments, for instance, in his own name, rather than in those of the cities whose troops had fought alongside him, as was the custom. Yet Pausanias proved right: Despite the evidence of his numerous contacts with the enemy, the Spartans refused to imprison a man of such noble birth, and let him go.

Now thinking himself untouchable, Pausanias hired a messenger to take a letter to Xerxes, but the messenger instead took the letter to the Spartan authorities. These men wanted to find out more, so they had the messenger arrange to meet Pausanias in a temple where they could hide and listen behind a partition. What Pausanias said shocked them—they had never heard such contempt for their ways spoken so brazenly by one of their own—and they made arrangements for his immediate arrest.

On his way home from the temple, Pausanias got word of what had happened. He ran to another temple to hide, but the authorities followed him there and placed sentries all around. Pausanias refused to surrender. Unwilling to forcibly remove him from the sacred temple, the authorities kept him trapped inside, until he eventually died of starvation.

Bene vixit, qui bene latuit—“*He lives well who conceals himself well.*”

OVID, c. 43 B.C.-A.D. 18

Interpretation

At first glance it might seem that Pausanias simply fell in love with another culture, a phenomenon as old as time. Never comfortable with the asceticism of the Spartans, he found himself enthralled by the Persian love of luxury and sensual pleasure. He put on Persian robes and perfumes with a sense of deliverance from Greek discipline and simplicity.

This is how it appears when people adopt a culture in which they were not raised. Often, however, there is also something else at play: People who flaunt their infatuation with a different culture are expressing a disdain and contempt for their own. They are using the outward appearance of the exotic to separate themselves from the common folk who unquestioningly follow the local customs and laws, and to express their sense of superiority. Otherwise they would act with more dignity, showing respect for those who do not share their desires. Indeed their need to show their difference so dramatically often makes them disliked by the people whose beliefs they challenge, indirectly and subtly, perhaps, but offensively nonetheless.

As Thucydides wrote of Pausanias, “By his contempt for the laws and his imitation of foreign ways he had made himself very widely suspected of being unwilling to abide by normal standards.” Cultures have norms that reflect centuries of shared beliefs and ideals. Do not expect to scoff at such things with impunity. You will be punished somehow, even if just through isolation—a position of real powerlessness.

Many of us, like Pausanias, feel the siren call of the exotic, the foreign. Measure and moderate this desire. Flaunting your pleasure in alien ways of thinking and acting will reveal a different motive—to demonstrate your superiority over your fellows.

Wise men [should be] like coffers with double bottoms: Which when others look into, being opened, they see not all that they hold.

SIR WALTER RALEIGH, 1554-1618

WHEN THE WATERS WERE CHANGED

Once upon a time Khidr, the teacher of Moses, called upon mankind with a warning. At a certain date, he said, all the water in the world which had not

been specially hoarded, would disappear. It would then be renewed, with different water, which would drive men mad. Only one man listened to the meaning of this advice. He collected water and went to a secure place where he stored it, and waited for the water to change its character. On the appointed date the streams stopped running, the wells went dry, and the man who had listened, seeing this happening, went to his retreat and drank his preserved water. When he saw, from his security, the waterfalls again beginning to flow, this man descended among the other sons of men. He found that they were thinking and talking in an entirely different way from before; yet they had no memory of what had happened, nor of having been warned. When he tried to talk to them, he realized that they thought that he was mad, and they showed hostility or compassion, not understanding. At first he drank none of the new water, but went back to his concealment, to draw on his supplies, every day. Finally, however, he took the decision to drink the new water because he could not bear the loneliness of living, behaving and thinking in a different way from everyone else. He drank the new water, and became like the rest. Then he forgot all about his own store of special water, and his fellows began to look upon him as a madman who had miraculously been restored to sanity.

TALES OF THE DERVISHES, IDRIES SHAH, 1967

OBSERVANCE OF THE LAW

During the late sixteenth century, a violent reaction against the Protestant Reformation erupted in Italy. The Counter-Reformation, as it was called, included its own version of the Inquisition to root out all deviations from the Catholic Church. Among its victims was the scientist Galileo, but an important thinker who suffered even greater persecution was the Dominican monk and philosopher Tommaso Campanella.

A follower of the materialist doctrine of the Roman philosopher Epicurus, Campanella did not believe in miracles, or in heaven and hell. The Church had promoted such superstitions, he wrote, to control the common folk by keeping them in fear. Such ideas verged on atheism, and Campanella expressed them incautiously. In 1593 the Inquisition threw him into prison for his heretical beliefs. Six years later, as a form of partial release, he was confined to a monastery in Naples.

Southern Italy was controlled by Spain at the time, and in Naples Campanella became involved in a plot to fight and throw out these invaders. His hope was to establish an independent republic based on his own ideas of utopia. The leaders of the Italian Inquisition, working with their Spanish counterparts, had him imprisoned again. This time they also tortured him, to discover the true nature of his impious beliefs: He was subjected to the infamous *la veglia*, a torture in which he was suspended by his arms in a squatting position a few inches above a seat studded with spikes. The posture was impossible to sustain, and in time the victim would end up sitting on the spikes, which would tear his flesh at the slightest contact.

During these years, however, Campanella learned something about power. Facing the prospect of execution for heresy, he changed his strategy: He would not renounce his beliefs, yet he knew he had to disguise their outward appearance.

To save his life, Campanella feigned madness. He let his inquisitors imagine that his beliefs stemmed from an uncontrollable unsoundness of mind. For a while the tortures continued, to see if his insanity was faked, but in 1603 his sentence was commuted to life in prison. The first four years of this he spent chained to a wall in an underground dungeon. Despite such

conditions, he continued to write—although no longer would he be so foolish as to express his ideas directly.

One book of Campanella's, *The Hispanic Monarchy*, promoted the idea that Spain had a divine mission to expand its powers around the world, and offered the Spanish king practical, Machiavelli-type advice for achieving this. Despite his own interest in Machiavelli, the book in general presented ideas completely the opposite to his own. *The Hispanic Monarchy* was in fact a ploy, an attempt to show his conversion to orthodoxy in the boldest manner possible. It worked: In 1626, six years after its publication, the pope finally let Campanella out of prison.

Shortly after gaining his freedom, Campanella wrote *Atheism Conquered*, a book attacking free-thinkers, Machiavellians, Calvinists, and heretics of all stripes. The book is written in the form of debates in which heretics express their beliefs and are countered by arguments for the superiority of Catholicism. Campanella had obviously reformed—his book made that clear. Or did it?

The arguments in the mouths of the heretics had never before been expressed with such verve and freshness. Pretending to present their side only to knock it down, Campanella actually summarized the case against Catholicism with striking passion. When he argued the other side, supposedly his side, on the other hand, he resorted to stale clichés and convoluted rationales. Brief and eloquent, the heretics' arguments seemed bold and sincere. The lengthy arguments for Catholicism seemed tiresome and unconvincing.

Catholics who read the book found it disturbing and ambiguous, but they could not claim it was heretical, or that Campanella should be returned to prison. His defense of Catholicism, after all, used arguments they had used themselves. Yet in the years to come, *Atheism Conquered* became a bible for atheists, Machiavellians and libertines who used the arguments Campanella had put in their mouths to defend their dangerous ideas. Combining an outward display of conformity with an expression of his true beliefs in a way that his sympathizers would understand, Campanella showed that he had learned his lesson.

Interpretation

In the face of awesome persecution, Campanella devised three strategic moves that saved his hide, freed him from prison, and allowed him to continue to express his beliefs. First he feigned madness—the medieval equivalent of disavowing responsibility for one’s actions, like blaming one’s parents today. Next he wrote a book that expressed the exact opposite of his own beliefs. Finally, and most brilliantly of all, he disguised his ideas while insinuating them at the same time. It is an old but powerful trick: You pretend to disagree with dangerous ideas, but in the course of your disagreement you give those ideas expression and exposure. You seem to conform to the prevailing orthodoxy, but those who know will understand the irony involved. You are protected.

It is inevitable in society that certain values and customs lose contact with their original motives and become oppressive. And there will always be those who rebel against such oppression, harboring ideas far ahead of their time. As Campanella was forced to realize, however, there is no point in making a display of your dangerous ideas if they only bring you suffering and persecution. Martyrdom serves no purpose—better to live on in an oppressive world, even to thrive in it. Meanwhile find a way to express your ideas subtly for those who understand you. Laying your pearls before swine will only bring you trouble.

Never combat any man's opinion; for though you reached the age of Methuselah, you would never have done setting him right upon all the absurd things that he believes.

It is also well to avoid correcting people’s mistakes in conversation, however good your intentions may be; for it is easy to offend people, and difficult, if not impossible to mend them.

If you feel irritated by the absurd remarks of two people whose conversation you happen to overhear, you should imagine that you are listening to the dialogue of two fools in a comedy. Probatum est.

The man who comes into the world with the notion that he is really going to instruct it in matters of the highest importance, may thank his stars if he escapes with a whole skin.

ARTHUR SCHOPENHAUER, 1788-1860

*For a long time I have not said what I believed, nor do I ever believe
what I say, and if indeed sometimes I do happen to tell the truth,
I hide it among so many lies that it is hard to find.
Niccolò Machiavelli, in a letter to Francesco Guicciardini, May 17, 1521*

KEYS TO POWER

We all tell lies and hide our true feelings, for complete free expression is a social impossibility. From an early age we learn to conceal our thoughts, telling the prickly and insecure what we know they want to hear, watching carefully lest we offend them. For most of us this is natural—there are ideas and values that most people accept, and it is pointless to argue. We believe what we want to, then, but on the outside we wear a mask.

There are people, however, who see such restraints as an intolerable infringement on their freedom, and who have a need to prove the superiority of their values and beliefs. In the end, though, their arguments convince only a few and offend a great deal more. The reason arguments do not work is that most people hold their ideas and values without thinking about them. There is a strong emotional content in their beliefs: They really do not want to have to rework their habits of thinking, and when you challenge them, whether directly through your arguments or indirectly through your behavior, they are hostile.

Wise and clever people learn early on that they can display conventional behavior and mouth conventional ideas without having to believe in them. The power these people gain from blending in is that of being left alone to have the thoughts they want to have, and to express them to the people they want to express them to, without suffering isolation or ostracism. Once they have established themselves in a position of power, they can try to convince a wider circle of the correctness of their ideas—perhaps working indirectly, using Campanella's strategies of irony and insinuation.

In the late fourteenth century, the Spanish began a massive persecution of the Jews, murdering thousands and driving others out of the country. Those who remained in Spain were forced to convert. Yet over the next three hundred years, the Spanish noticed a phenomenon that disturbed them: Many of the converts lived their outward lives as Catholics, yet somehow managed to retain their Jewish beliefs, practicing the religion in private. Many of these so-called Marranos (originally a derogatory term, being the Spanish for "pig") attained high levels of government office, married into the nobility, and gave every appearance of Christian piety, only to be

discovered late in life as practicing Jews. (The Spanish Inquisition was specifically commissioned to ferret them out.) Over the years they mastered the art of dissimulation, displaying crucifixes liberally, giving generous gifts to churches, even occasionally making anti-Semitic remarks—and all the while maintaining their inner freedom and beliefs.

In society, the Marranos knew, outward appearances are what matter. This remains true today. The strategy is simple: As Campanella did in writing *Atheism Conquered*, make a show of blending in, even going so far as to be the most zealous advocate of the prevailing orthodoxy. If you stick to conventional appearances in public few will believe you think differently in private.

THE CITIZEN AND THE TRAVELLER

“Look around you,” said the citizen. “This is the largest market in the world.” “Oh surely not,” said the traveller. “Well, perhaps not the largest,” said the citizen, “but much the best.” “You are certainly wrong there,” said the traveller. “I can tell you....” They buried the stranger in the dusk.

FABLES, ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON, 1850-1894

If Machiavelli had had a prince for disciple, the first thing he would have recommended him to do would have been to write a book against Machiavellism.

VOLTAIRE, 1694-1778

Do not be so foolish as to imagine that in our own time the old orthodoxies are gone. Jonas Salk, for instance, thought science had gotten past politics and protocol. And so, in his search for a polio vaccine, he broke all the rules—going public with a discovery before showing it to the scientific community, taking credit for the vaccine without acknowledging the scientists who had paved the way, making himself a star. The public may have loved him but scientists shunned him. His disrespect for his community’s orthodoxies left him isolated, and he wasted years trying to heal the breach, and struggling for funding and cooperation.

Bertolt Brecht underwent a modern form of Inquisition—the House Un-American Activities Committee—and approached it with considerable canniness. Having worked off and on in the American film industry during World War II, in 1947 Brecht was summoned to appear before the committee to answer questions on his suspected Communist sympathies.

Other writers called before the committee made a point of attacking its members, and of acting as belligerently as possible in order to gain sympathy for themselves. Brecht, on the other hand, who had actually worked steadfastly for the Communist cause, played the opposite game: He answered questions with ambiguous generalities that defied easy interpretation. Call it the Campanella strategy. Brecht even wore a suit—a rare event for him—and made a point of smoking a cigar during the proceedings, knowing that a key committee member had a passion for cigars. In the end he charmed the committee members, who let him go scot-free.

Brecht then moved to East Germany, where he encountered a different kind of Inquisition. Here the Communists were in power, and they criticized his plays as decadent and pessimistic. He did not argue with them, but made small changes in the performance scripts to shut them up. Meanwhile he managed to preserve the published texts as written. His outward conformity in both cases gave him the freedom to work unhindered, without having to change his thinking. In the end, he made his way safely through dangerous times in different countries through the use of little dances of orthodoxy, and proved he was more powerful than the forces of repression.

Not only do people of power avoid the offenses of Pausanias and Salk, they also learn to play the clever fox and feign the common touch. This has been the ploy of con artists and politicians throughout the centuries. Leaders like Julius Caesar and Franklin D. Roosevelt have overcome their natural aristocratic stance to cultivate a familiarity with the common man. They have expressed this familiarity in little gestures, often symbolic, to show the people that their leaders share popular values, despite their different status.

The logical extension of this practice is the invaluable ability to be all things to all people. When you go into society, leave behind your own ideas and values, and put on the mask that is most appropriate for the group in which you find yourself. Bismarck played this game successfully for years—there were people who vaguely understood what he was up to, but not clearly enough that it mattered. People will swallow the bait because it flatters them to believe that you share their ideas. They will not take you as a hypocrite if you are careful—for how can they accuse you of hypocrisy if you do not let them know exactly what you stand for? Nor will they see you as lacking in values. Of course you have values—the values you share with them, while in their company.

Authority: Do not give dogs what is holy; and do not throw your pearls before swine, lest they trample them under foot and turn to attack you. (Jesus Christ, Matthew 7:6)

Image: The Black Sheep. The herd shuns the black sheep, uncertain whether or not it belongs with them. So it straggles behind, or wanders away from the herd, where it is cornered by wolves and promptly devoured. Stay with the herd—there is safety in numbers. Keep your differences in your thoughts and not in your fleece.

REVERSAL

The only time it is worth standing out is when you already stand out—when you have achieved an unshakable position of power, and can display your difference from others as a sign of the distance between you. As president of the United States, Lyndon Johnson would sometimes hold meetings while he sat on the toilet. Since no one else either could or would claim such a “privilege,” Johnson was showing people that he did not have to observe the protocols and niceties of others. The Roman emperor Caligula played the same game: He would wear a woman’s negligee, or a bathrobe, to receive important visitors. He even went so far as to have his horse elected consul. But it backfired, for the people hated Caligula, and his gestures eventually brought his overthrow. The truth is that even those who attain the heights of power would be better off at least affecting the common touch, for at some point they may need popular support.

Finally, there is always a place for the gadfly, the person who successfully defies custom and mocks what has grown lifeless in a culture. Oscar Wilde, for example, achieved considerable social power on this foundation: He made it clear that he disdained the usual ways of doing things, and when he gave public readings his audiences not only expected him to insult them but welcomed it. We notice, however, that his eccentric role eventually destroyed him. Even had he come to a better end, remember that he possessed an unusual genius: Without his gift to amuse and delight, his barbs would simply have offended people.