

The pleasures of (pressing) the flesh

I love it. I wonder if you do? Hearing about faraway places, a bit of physical contact, interspersed with some chatter and a nibble, all washed down with a glass of something.



“Don’t you ever stop networking?”

My dear late father was a principal probation officer (as it was called many years ago) and networked before they invented it. He just enjoyed bumping into people, passing the time of day, always taking an interest and helping out if he could. And what went around came around. It all helps the world go round doesn’t it?

I seem to have absorbed some of that and relish the chance to ‘swan about’ (as my wife calls it), meet

people and hear their stories about what’s going on. Yes, I enjoy pressing the flesh.

Whether you like it or not, networking of all sorts is a core skill for all trustees. Larger organisations may have a fancy reception so trustees need to be out there glad-handing the corporate sponsors and the great and the good. Smaller ones may have a gathering after the AGM and offer trustees the chance to practise a touch of multi-tasking with staff, chewing over the excitements of the previous year and on a celery stick at the same time.

Our organisations’ beneficiaries may see us trustees as remote. So it’s for us to get out and about to say hello. We’re all in this together after all, and meeting beneficiaries is part of our role.

But mingling and mixing is not everyone’s preferred way of having fun. I remember a presentation skills course I was on some years ago. One participant shared his greatest horror – walking into a reception with babbling noise and a sea of faces and having to somehow find someone to talk to. Surprising really

as he was a trainer who regularly stood in front of large audiences with no difficulty.

Our interest in the people we meet has got to be genuine. I feel uneasy when I read about networking techniques which somehow convey the impression that other people are conquests. I recall a conference I was at some while ago where I was pounced on by a dear lady carrying a fistful of business cards who, having dispatched one into my limp hand, looked over my shoulder and breezed on to the next target. Since then I’ve occasionally seen her across the room – and manoeuvre myself to keep it that way.

In a crowded room there are many ways we can demonstrate our practical respect for others: asking a lone soul to join the group we’re standing in; offering our name even if we imagine the other may know it because we’re a trustee; telling someone joining your group what you’re talking about rather than leaving them dangling on the outside of the conversation.

Whatever background mood music we have in mind when we meet someone, I suggest we would do well to actively test the proposition that ‘there is something in this person which I’ll find interesting and I’d like to find out what it is’.

Then listen, allowing people you meet at least 4/5th of the air time. And, I suggest, you will find the proposition always to be true. ●

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