

The Naked Eye

Misanthropes

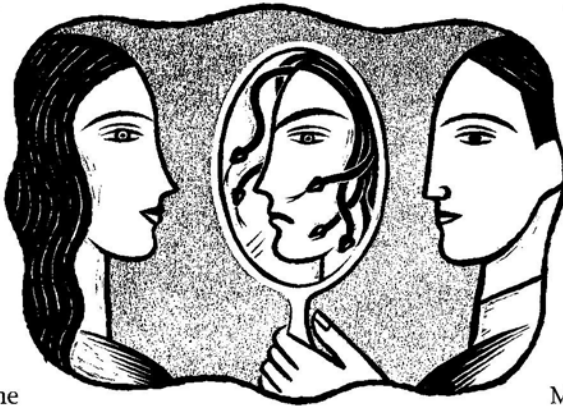
BY MARK MATOUSEK

*Sure, I like people.
But aren't they awful?*

I like thorny people, no-bullshit people, a little guarded, a little jaundiced, and not outwardly what you'd call friendly. On *ER*, if you watch it, it's Dr. Weaver who touches me—the snippy, officious lady with the cane who nobody really likes. I like her because she doesn't effuse, she cuts through the nonsense, calls her melodramatic colleagues to task, and is also—if you look beyond the chilly reserve—the kindest soul in the lot.

I know where this affinity comes from. People like Dr. Weaver remind me of my mother, who was a misanthrope herself. Since she didn't give love easily, her infrequent shows of affection were that much more significant. "It doesn't mean anything if you give it to everyone," she'd say about warm and fuzzy people, including her sister Ruth. My aunt was sugar to my mother's salt, a cuddly little lady who hugged and *kvelled* and wanted to eat you up, you were so delicious. At family affairs, while Aunt Ruth hoovered the room for love, my mother would sit in the corner smoking her cigarette. "I'm a nicer person than my sister," she'd whisper, and I suspected that she was right.

Not that I wanted to be like my mother—in fact, I did everything in my power not to emulate her. Outwardly I mastered the art of friendliness, but inwardly I remained her son: critical, edgy, reclusive, skeptical, loyal to a few friends, ear cocked constantly for disingenuous notes. Trust comes hard to me; I give my heart in cautious steps. On rare occasions when I've found myself in touchy-feely seminars, I hide whenever possible, comforted by a voice



that says that although I'm all by myself in a corner, I'm really much nicer than all of them.

This may not be true; it's probably not. It's probably just a cover-up for misanthropic tendencies. Still, I've had to embrace my nature, or at least not lie about it. "It's just the way you are," Louis told me over dinner the other night. He knows me better than anyone and has an antisocial streak himself. People get on his nerves, Louis says; he's content to be a workaholic semi-shut-in with two or three peripheral friends. I feel the same way but worry as well that our hermetic ways will snowball down the years—that a decade hence we'll be locked up together in our apartment, snarling at anyone who calls us on the phone, like those psycho Kennedy sisters in the documentary *Grey Gardens*, chewing on cat hair.

It's not that people don't like us. We do get invited to parties, which we both dread, and to dinners with strangers, which make our palms sweat. The trouble for me is that most people are *work*, one way or another, and I'd really rather be home with a book, or holed up one-on-one with a friend. Joining groups of any kind is completely hopeless. There have

been moments in the past when I thought I should participate more, when I would have given my right arm to be a member of anything—a Buddhist, a Twelve Stepper, a Marxist, a Christian, even a card-carrying queer—but I just could not adhere. The funny thing is that although this outsider complex can be tough, and has lots to do with arrogance and self-loathing—refusing, à la Groucho Marx, to belong to any club that would have me as a member—it's also a kind of liberation.

I realized this a couple of years ago when a woman I didn't know made a remark that opened my mind. She was one of those smartass people I've mentioned—caustic, sneering, like vinegar with a mouth. We were in the waiting room of a hospital (where one of her best friends was about to die of lung cancer), smoking together like chimneys. People tend to get philosophical in hospitals (when they're not fighting or depressed), particularly with strangers. This woman was feeling philosophical.

"I'm 48 years old," she said, sucking on her cigarette. "I have no idea what this nonsense means." She tossed her hand to indicate Life, orange leather chairs, and her friend dying in the other room. "But I do know one thing."

"Yeah?" I said.

"I never met a person I didn't dislike."

I howled with laughter—we howled together. I wanted to stand up right there and hug her (had I been that kind of person) for saying what stands as one of the single most honest things anyone's ever said to me. By admitting without a hint of

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Illustration by Timothy Cook

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shame what I (and, I suspect, most people at one time or another) secretly feel, this cranky lady had, without meaning to, set me free. I'd never met anyone I didn't dislike either. I liked people, too, of course, and even *loved* four or five of them, but that was beside the point. The point was that up close, beyond a certain cosmetic distance, everyone was unlikable as well, not to mention scary. With the mask cracked at close range, people reveal themselves in all their magnified weirdness—the pulsations of vice, the ingrown hairs of hypocrisy—like faces in a fun-house mirror. You're forced to see

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them for what they are—hungry, naked, greedy animals just like you, struggling to break through their granite hearts, pulling their back-breaking loads of woe inch by inch up the hill of virtue, then crashing to the bottom. Intimacy is completely appalling.

I learned this finally when I got married. How many times, since living with Louis, had I wanted to yell, "Unconditional love—forget it!" In the real world of real relationships, if I could go an entire day without attacking my mate (aggressively or passively), cutting him down, correcting him, I was miles ahead of the game. If I could listen and be patient an hour a day, remain, if not completely open, at least ajar when everything inside me was screaming, "Retreat!" I was already winning the war. Though Thomas Merton chose a

monastic life, I know he understood misanthropy when he wrote, "True love and prayer are learned in the hour when love becomes impossible and the heart is turned to stone." He knew very well that friendship could be as trying as any love affair. I'm devoted to my friends, but they also drive me crazy. Smart, passionate, creative, they're also exasperating, tyrannical, narcissistic, pious, promiscuous, and lazy. In other words, they're a lot like me.

Recognizing these human foibles, I don't know how it's possible for anyone to say truthfully that he just adores the human race. We honor the Buddha nature, of course, the immaculate mirror signaling through the fog of bad behavior. We honor each other's struggle, giving full credit where credit is due. Our hearts break witnessing each other's tug-of-war between devil and angel, day in and day out, but it's not just compassion that comes leaking out. It's also horror and biliousness. It's awful being human with other human beings sometimes. It's just so shameful to say it out loud.

That's one of the reasons that men like James Hillman and Thomas Moore are on the ascent, I think. They've struck this misanthropic chord, reminded us that spirit (i.e., love, light, brotherhood) is only half of the equation. They've helped make room for the beastly side, the uncharitable, the broken, the antisocial. Popping our saintly balloon, their work reminds us that sourness gives the bite to what's sweet—there's room in us for what's unfitting, the part that *wants*, like a grumpy Garbo, to be left alone.

Unspiritual? Probably. But at least it's not hypocritical. I'd rather have feelings than be sentimental. Nietzsche said that he loved humanity but couldn't stand people. He might have been having a bitchy day, but my mother would have said the same thing, had she been a bigger thinker. Come to think of it, she would have liked a guy like Nietzsche.

Contributing editor Mark Matousek's memoir, *Sex Death Enlightenment* (Riverhead), is now out in paperback. Responses are welcome at MMATOUSEK@aol.com.

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