

# Accustomed As We Are

— 'you'll go places, I'm sure'

Dear Brian

I'm writing to congratulate you on your farewell speech at the office party last week. Very funny and with pinprick accuracy, just the sort of thing we all needed. These rituals are usually an awful chore and a bore, but you breathed new life into the one last week.

At best there's a real community spirit in our office, almost a family feeling, and parties are a time for bringing it alive.

You were lucky, I suppose, to have that joke about funerals handed to you on a plate. Who could have guessed that Bob would have a family bereavement last week, and that you'd be able to make those hilarious — if, Brian, slightly macabre! — remarks. It's always a nuisance when someone is away from the office for a family funeral, not just because of the work left undone, but also because it encourages unhealthy thoughts about transience and all that.

Don't let anyone tell you that your remarks were in bad taste, they were exquisite Brian, exquisite.

Was it luck or was it crafty cleverness on your part that enabled you to get hold of old Paul's confidential self-appraisal papers? They were deplorably and analytical and naval-gazing, and also of course uncharacteristically frank and self-aware, and you were quite right to read out the juiciest bits. The office would be sheer chaos if people let it all hang out all over the place, and then thought they could hide behind the mask of confidentiality. Old Paul himself wasn't exactly chuffed, as you can guess, but everyone else thought that this part of your speech was absolutely necessary as well as gorgeously funny.

We also appreciated the way you put your secretary in her place, she makes a delightful sacrificial victim I must say, and I am sure all the other girls got the point. Which reminds me of your lesbianism joke, splendid Brian splendid, You tactfully reminded the female staff what their role in life is, but the same time made it absolutely clear that the chaps aren't really all that interested in them and certainly couldn't care less if they sometimes seem to be resistant to our charms. Your remark was timely and masterly as well as typically subtle. Ignore the feminist backlash, it will soon die down.

Then there was your handicapped people joke, the single-parent family joke, the people round the office getting decrepit joke, your Geoffrey Boycott story with its tastefully chosen profanities, all tremendously good. The climax for me, and I think for everyone else as well, but particularly those of us in more responsible positions, was your crack about equal opportunities policies. Everyone in the office knows, and everyone knows that everyone in the office knows, but no one in the office dares blurt out, that equal opportunities policies are a disaster area, the silliest thing since the Sermon on the Mount. It was refreshing and

invigorating to have them ridiculed so unambiguously by yourself, particularly — this was lovely — since it was you who chaired the committee which drafted our loony policy in the first place.

You mustn't let yourself be worried by criticisms of from some of our bleeding-heart colleagues, the types who like to look at the Guardian after a day's work in the real world. What you said needed saying.

It was an absolutely inspired touch, may I add, to imply that you have no confidence in the ability of our new colleague whose job is to steer the office's equality policies on race. Your remark about her was one hundred per cent libellous, of course, no doubt about it, but no one will dare object, you did it so delicately.

All in all I appreciate that you played the game, you didn't let the side down. Making speeches at office parties is one of the rituals which we senior people have to go through from time to time.

Somehow we have to remind the other ranks what and where ultimate reality is, and yet also to let them think they can take one or two slight liberties, can transgress on occasions over certain lines. It's terribly difficult to get it right, to hit the right balls to the right boundaries, as Levi-Strauss or Durkheim probably said, I shouldn't be surprised.

But nice one Brian, you were really elegant.

All good wishes, Brian, at the threshold of your new job, you'll go places I'm sure.

### **Source**

A paper in the 1980s that was privately shared with colleagues in order to express sympathy and support for comrades who had been unwarrantably hurt, and to remind ourselves, in relation to occupational culture, of the need for constant vigilance

The paper ended with two footnotes.

- 1) 'The symbolic function of ritual is to relate the individual through ritualistic acts to a social order, to heighten respect for that order, to revivify that order within the individual, and in particular to deepen acceptance of the procedures used to maintain continuity, order and boundary, and which control ambivalence towards the social order', from *Ritual in Education* by Basil Bernstein, Lionel Elvin and RS Peters, 1966.
- 2) 'Any man's death diminishes me, therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls ...' from *Devotions* by John Donne, 1623.

Later the paper was published in *Daring to be a Teacher*, Trentham Books 1990, pages 83-87.