

THE ART OF GRACE – What would Jackie do?

By Barb Cotton *

A fun book has recently been released titled “What Would Jackie Do? An Inspired Guide to Distinctive Living” by Shelly Branch and Sue Callaway (New York, New York: Gotham Books, 2006). The two authors, both journalists for American magazines, have taken a somewhat tongue in cheek approach to postulating how Jackie Kennedy Onassis would deal with situations presented in today’s world. Although much of the book is a bit of fluff, some of it contains nuggets which suggest the art of gracious living, and I would like to excerpt some of these gems for you:

Obscure Your Ego to Reveal Your True Qualities

It won’t, it can’t, it mustn’t always be about you. And even if you don’t agree, you’d do well to at least pretend so some of the time. A substantive woman – and Jackie was nothing if not that – can check her hubris as easily as she does her evening wrap. It’s always there, of course, but sometimes it’s better left in the background.

Shift the spotlight. Self-promoters, Jackie once said, “really get my back up.” But because people tend to crave the limelight so much themselves, they’ll be thrown (and delighted) when you transfer some of the attention you command. Out for aperitifs with girlfriends? Insist that the cute guy in the opposite banquette is ogling one of them, not you. Tell your hairdresser that his splendid updo – not your fine form – drew gasps at the charity ball.

A master at shifting the spotlight, Jackie would playfully say to friends that the press “must know you’re here!” when helicopters buzzed overhead. Even when the pressure was on, she knew to turn the focus away from herself. Once, when one of Jackie’s Doubleday authors – Tiffany design director John Loring – asked the editor to do a rare interview on his behalf for *The New Yorker*, Jackie at first agreed, but ultimately reneged by using a clever deflection technique. She told him, “You don’t really want me in that profile, because people will only remember me, and you’ll just be forgotten completely.”

Overlook faux pas. You musn’t let the minor transgressions of others interrupt your daily flow – or block your precious *chi*. When people stumble with their words, their manners, or their wit, there’s just no need to take an emotional tumble. Jackie wouldn’t give a damn if you said, “I love your Gucci!” (if in fact

she was wearing Pucci) or “How was the bear hunt?” (when foxes were her thing).

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Don’t (publicly) criticize your enemies or opponents. Leave such base behavior to modern-day politicians and reality show contestants. Particularly resist the temptation to bad-mouth people by e-mail: There’s nothing worse than electronic slurs, which can be endlessly forwarded. Though surrounded by enemies (political) and jealous types (frumpy women), Jackie refused to get nasty. During the 1960 campaign, she declined to take potshots at Hubert Humphrey. And two decades later, when Nancy Reagan got swamped with negative publicity, Jackie waxed empathetic, going so far as to call her to offer advice on handling the press.

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Be riveted, not just riveting. When you turn your attention to others, especially new acquaintances, be more than polite. Be truly (if briefly) engaged and grant everyone, even buffoons, a gracious nod or two. Jackie “never in public let people know she did not like them,” recalled art critic John Russell. “People always went away thinking, ‘She quite liked me, yes, she was impressed by me.’ It was a very endearing quality.”

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Hand Gestures: Scoring Big with Courtly Correspondence

A woman with erudite aura writes *à main*. She knows that words that flicker on a screen may land her a job interview, even a few good dates. But she also gets that words flowing directly from a pen are apt to deliver more – if less immediately tangible – riches.

Jackie was a model correspondent. She used her trademark stationery (light blue sheets with embossed white lettering) and loopy script to curry favors, charm lovers, maneuver out of tight spots, and evoke her famous wrath – usually in effusive fashion.

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Your rites. Is there any way to be “appropriate” in the face of tragedy or wrongdoing? Jackie believed so. The urge to break down – at a memorial mass, a dying friend’s bedside – may be strong, but it’s a reaction that Jackie didn’t often allow herself. During JFK’s memorial services, she stoically kept it together behind a European-style veil she had carefully chosen for the occasion,

and didn't shed any visible tears. She held her own between a weeping Christina and a sobbing Artemis Onassis at Ari's services. Even as her own illness had her firmly in its grip, she insisted to friends that she was doing just fine, and made forward-looking plans.

Of course, there's no one way to govern our emotions in such times. But there are some distinct Jackie take-aways here: When the weight of tragedy falls upon you, console yourself by consoling others. Jackie expressed her sympathies and concerns to a stunned White House staff on the night of the assassination, and later found solace in replying to some of the thousands of cards and letters sent to her in the aftermath. Remarkably, she even threw a joint birthday party for Caroline and John Jr. on their last day in the White House.

Another balm for the grief-stricken, as Jackie so famously taught: Work to ensure loved ones will be remembered in the most favorable, permanent, light. In her case, of course, that meant almost immediately shaping her husband's legacy with the "Camelot" theme she dictated to *Life* magazine writer Theodore White. Setting up a college fund in a loved one's name or producing a video memorializing their life may be smaller gestures, but they have the same air of commitment and historical purpose that Jackie prized.

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Drill down on the details. Jackie's helpers were hardly the anonymous "little people" of Leona Helmsley's twisted palace. She made sure to learn not only their names, but also those of their spouses, children, and pets. She sometimes surprised people with her penchant for details. Arriving at the White House, the newly minted First Lady approached a staffer and exclaimed, "Good morning, Mr. Pierce." (Note her use of the surname, not assuming familiarity too soon.) Recalled Pierce: "It surprised me very, very much because . . . I had never been introduced to her. I didn't realize that she knew who I was."

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Preen Your Hobbyhorse

Whether you learn to knit G-strings, play baroque harpsichord, or join Circque du Soleil, challenge and mastery are what promise to make you an EFP (eminently fascinating person).

To follow Jackie's lead means becoming a full-immersion hobbyist, letting your passion and interests surround you from every (flattering) angle possible. Don't just go to films by Stanley Kubrick. Read his biography, go visit his hometown. If you play the violin, retune your love of the instrument by giving lessons on the

side and hoarding every obscure volume ever written about bow position – in addition to applauding great new talents on the scene.

Jackie so loved ballet in youth that she not only practiced the art, but also collected books on the subject. In New York, she spent more than twenty-five years on the board of trustees at the American Ballet Theatre (the organization named a school after her in 2004). As a book editor, she commissioned works from no fewer than three famous dancers – Judith Jamison of Alvin Ailey, Martha Graham, and Gelsey Kirland.

Forget about dabbling. Like a lover or mistress, lifetime hobbies also demand that you be honest about your commitment level. In other words, how much are you really willing to give of yourself?

Jealously guard the time you set aside for your passion, and don't let bores distract you. Jackie didn't permit anyone – not even Judy Garland – to take her eye off her painting, another soul-cleansing pursuit. When the actress burst in on her one day in Hyannis Port, Jackie looked up from her watercolors and asked the starlet to let her be. “Watch if you like. But no one talks to me when I'm painting,” she said.

Snuggle Up to Old People

Candid elders help you sharpen your wit, widen your perspective – and often have an uncanny ability to size up no-good friends and boyfriends. They also will inspire you with their wonderful storytelling, retro collectibles, and wardrobes – the latter of which they undoubtedly will loan (or bequeath) to you for your own enrichment.

During a visit to Italy in 1951, Jackie and her sister Lee were excited to drop in on the sage art historian Bernard Berenson. They were already jaded by all they'd seen, heard, bought, and eaten – but were still taken by the white-bearded man's advice. “Don't waste your time with Life Diminishing people,” he told them. “Seek the company of Life Enhancing people. . . .” Hear, hear.

Cozy up to in-laws, school professors, and distinctive characters you meet during your travels. Jackie did all of the above. Other than her most famous old-school crush, Joe Kennedy, a favorite elder was Prince Serge Obolensky, a public relations man and former Czarist officer whose company – and tales about pre-Bolshevik Russia – Jackie preferred to the banal soliloquies of East Hampton boys.

Reject Monotony

“Dreary” is how Jackie would probably describe the prison of habits that make some of us repeat the same routines, day in, day out. Treat the activities of your day as if they’re charged atomic particles, apt to bust from your calendar, they’re so in flux. This is the key to living always in the present. A big believer in mixing it up, Jackie said, “the only routine with me is no routine at all.”

If you like walk to your job daily, take a different path, soaking up different scenery, real estate, and marriage prospects along the way. And seek out new aids to further your freewheeling cause, such as the random-tune iPod shuffle.

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Heirs and Force:

The Tenets of Passing the Torch

If you’ve chosen to have children, you’re probably hip to Jackie’s number-one goal when it came to raising Caroline and John Jr.: She wanted them to be little APs – Admirable People. And from a young age, they were – despite a tragedy bigger than any youngster should have to bear and the world’s endless scrutiny. The classic images of Jackie and her young offspring capture their commendable spirit. There was John Jr. crawling under his father’s desk in the Oval Office, and Caroline, grinning ear to ear, astride her pony Macaroni. And, decades later, Jackie standing proudly at the Kennedy Library opening, with her heartthrob son and reserved daughter by her side – proof positive of her fait accompli.

Jackie was less than lucky when it came to bearing children; she lost three babies in eight years. But as a child rearer, she was nothing less than formidable. Not to mention nontraditional. She brought a pregnant bunny to the White House so that Caroline and John Jr. could witness, rather than just read about, the birthing process. Still, she was as human as the next mother, and was alternately doting, strict, inspirational, playful, educational, demanding, and emotional. Above all, she had ironclad ideas about how to raise kids who didn’t raise hell.

“In terms of child-rearing, Jackie always had her eye on the ball: the importance of character. She did what many affluent parents don’t – she focused on what her kids would eventually be in life, and she knew that what is important is that your child turns out to be loving, independent, productive, and moral.” – Michael Thompson, PhD, Child Psychologist; Author of *The Pressured Child: Helping Your Child Find Success in School and Life*

As you can see, so much of the art of gracious living as expressed by Jackie Kennedy Onassis was simply being attuned to the needs of other people-

I hope you found this fun.

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