SOME THINGS IN LIFE SHOULD BE SERIOUS

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CENTER VALLEY – Though not officially, “Pomp and Circumstance” could be considered the song of the month, given the number of graduation ceremonies each June. Popular though it may be, however, there seem to be fewer people able to appreciate either word in the title. Composed by Sir Edward Elgar in 1901 and modified a year later for use in the coronation of King Edward VII, this melodic march used to call to mind the “pride, pomp and circumstance of glorious war!” (from Shakespeare’s “Othello”). Today, it seems instead to signal the commencement of hootin’ and hollerin’ more akin to a rodeo or wrestling match.

But not in Galesburg, Ill. There school officials required students and their parents to sign contracts concerning dignified behavior at the commencement ceremonies. This year, five students whose family cheering section got out of hand found out first-hand what that contract meant, as each had to leave the stage empty-handed. Rowdy behavior meant that they wouldn’t receive a diploma that day (though later they could, following eight hours of public service in the school district).

Good for Galesburg! While stories of high school hi-jinks at graduation are, no doubt, innumerable, at least there are some educators willing to teach a life lesson, however unpopular: circumstances do matter, and some things in life should be taken seriously.

No one will mistake a graduation exercise or a wedding reception for a royal pageant. Still, what is being celebrated on these occasions calls for social pride, not just personal noise, and respect more than reverberation.

Culturally, we do have our moments of pomp and circumstance. A presidential inauguration, a military parade, even a police officer or firefighter’s funeral – these and similar ceremonies are characterized by formal attire, precision pacing, and measured speech. The nature of such events
elicits and also emits a certain solemnity. Whether attending or watching, we experience a sense of pride in the moment.

But more and more we seem to associate pomp with pretension, and mistake circumstance for mere occasion. We’d rather our celebrations not be straight-jacketed by custom or tradition, which may explain why guests so quickly shed their formal jackets. In the end, having fun replaces taking pride as the purpose of our presence.

What happens, as a result, is that ill-conceived celebrations end up cheapening the event. Raucous screams at graduation can be more embarrassing than congratulatory when the student’s name is publicly announced. Inebriated guests (or spouses) at a wedding reception can be more of a blight than a bonus to the party. Milestones in life that should be enjoyed for what they represent are rendered meaningless by behavior that fails to fit the circumstance.

This trend reveals more than a lack of education in social conventions or a rejection of etiquette as merely ancient regulations arbitrarily imposed. Usually, there isn’t that much thought involved. Rather, outlandish behaviors stem from an unspoken conviction that we can act as we please on any occasion, that we are free to be and to do whatever we want, as long as it issues from or leads to our having fun. Occasionally, this individualistic approach also gets articulated, as when the senior vice-president at Fox television lauded a recent federal court’s repeal of government policy regulating the broadcast of obscene language. “Viewers,” he proclaimed, “should be allowed to determine for themselves … what is appropriate viewing.”

As human beings, though, we exist in the dynamic unity of who we are and what we think and how we act. What we do reflects our understanding of the meaning of things, including ourselves. How we act, especially in public, contributes to the importance we invest not only in the event but in the persons whose celebration it is. Society thrives when our being and thinking and doing remain in harmony.

This is not to suggest we should adopt a staid silence at celebratory events. After all, graduations or weddings are certainly occasions for great joy and shared merriment. But four years of scholarly success deserve more than incessant yelling or deafening blasts from an air horn. And the exchange of wedding vows intends something much more significant than an excuse to dance shamelessly or drink unabatedly.

The commencements we celebrate this month are key moments in young people’s lives. Graduations “begin” another chapter in maturity, leaving high school to begin full-time employment or to extend one’s education. Weddings “begin” a new chapter in interpersonal intimacy. In either case, the circumstance represents that which we find to be profoundly meaningful in human life. These celebrations invite us all to act accordingly.