

## SINS OF OMISSION

Over 30 years ago, I wrote a piece entitled “Silent Standards” – examining the unarticulated criteria, the unvoiced expectations, that affect the perception of our surroundings and human relations.

It was primarily aimed at lawyers and their legal practice, For instance, I discussed:

- Drawing inferences during negotiations that provide clues to anticipated behavior – if your adversary held a particular view, he would have made certain statements, yet he didn’t – but with the danger that the standard you invoke as to what he would have said is your own, not his.
- When to initiate contacts with a busy superior relating to new developments in the transaction or case the two of you are handling – picking your spots, determining whether the question or report is something the superior would perceive as being appropriate at that time.
- Evaluating a subordinate by comparing him or her to the evaluator’s notion of what makes a good lawyer – but wait, Jim, is that model simply yourself, so that you’re looking solely for attributes that mirror your own strengths?
- The comeback time for an assignment – although nothing explicit may be said initially about when the project is due, a silent expectation benchmark as to its completion date nevertheless exists, and the assignee better not run afoul of it.

Re-reading my article recently, I realized how applicable the topic was to many non-lawyer interactions. As one example, when does your spouse’s tepid response of “It’s okay” to a suggestion of yours – perhaps which movie the two of you should go to see, or what restaurant to eat

at – reflect such an absence of enthusiasm, such a failure to attain a silent standard of minimal zest, that it's just not worth pursuing?

I concluded back then that the biggest problem with the silent standard in human relations – especially among those in close personal or professional relationships – is the specter of nonfeasance. The real friction often emanates less from what you do than from what you don't do that you're expected to.

At the heart of the article was one of my favorite poems\* by Ogden Nash, who by all rights should have been our poet laureate. Here's how Nash honed in on the point:

*“It is common knowledge to every schoolboy and even every  
Bachelor of Arts,  
That all sin is divided into two parts.  
One kind of sin is called a sin of commission, and that is very  
important.  
And it is what you are doing when you are doing something you  
ortant,  
And the other kind of sin is just the opposite and is called a sin  
of omission and is equally bad in the eyes of all right-thinking  
people, from Billy Sunday to Buddha,  
And it consists of not having done something you shuddha.”*

(Can you believe this man – rhyming “Buddha” and “shudda”?!)  
But hold it here for a minute, Ogden, while I clarify something for the folks. Nash interprets sins of omission broadly, as do I. They're seldom of the “seven deadly” variety, and usually don't involve a moral component. Rather, it's everyday annoying stuff that you forget (or deign) to accomplish.

Where another individual is involved, since the other person's expectations are highly individual, you may not be aware you're not fulfilling them. Yet the other person, typically assuming that his standards and yours are mutual, draws an unwarranted negative

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\* “Portrait of the Artist as a Prematurely Old Man”, O. Nash, Verses from 1929 On (Little, Brown & Co., Inc., 1959)

inference from your failure to come up to his mark. In other words, dummy, should you have sent her some flowers?

How about it, Ogden – what do you think about all this?

*“I might as well give you my opinion of these two kinds of sin  
as long as, in a way, against each other we are pitting them,  
And that is, don’t bother your head about sins of commission  
because however sinful, they must at least be fun or else you  
wouldn’t be committing them.  
It is the sin of omission, the second kind of sin,  
That lays eggs under your skin.  
The way you get really painfully bitten  
Is by the insurance you haven’t taken out and the checks you  
haven’t added up the stubs of and the appointments you haven’t  
kept and the bills you haven’t paid and the letters you haven’t  
written.”*

Reviewing my own situation at 81, I’m sad to confess that I don’t engage in many sins of commission – the kind that, in Ogden’s phrase, “must at least be fun or you wouldn’t be committing them.” More’s the pity . . . .

But I’m less confident making a similar assessment about sins of omission. Frequently you don’t even realize you’re committing one. Sometimes you discover later what you failed to do that you should have, but often you never find out.

Let’s say I send an email to my friend Sam, attaching an article I’ve just read that I think he’ll enjoy. Sam writes back, thanking me for forwarding it. No further response on my part is required – the transaction is complete. But what if Sam’s reply contains some thoughts about what’s in the article. Is it a sin of omission for me not to acknowledge Sam’s email? I’ll confess that in a number of these instances, I’ve sent no further response – do the Sams of the world consider me rude and boorish? They may well, and yet they’re unlikely to say anything about it – so I’ll never know.

A few years ago, I wrote an article about what I called the “sensitivity valve” – the precaution we ought to take before uttering words that could come back to haunt us. It now strikes me that what we should have to avoid sins of omission is a “sensitivity pump” (with bell attached), to alert us as to when we need to do or say something to avoid committing one.

Let’s circle back to Ogden for his take on another significant point.

*“Also, about sins of omission there is one particularly painful lack of beauty,  
Namely, it isn’t as though it had been a riotous red-letter day or night every time you neglected to do your duty;  
You didn’t get a wicked forbidden thrill  
Every time you let a policy lapse or forgot to pay a bill;  
You didn’t slap the lads in the tavern on the back and loudly cry  
Whee,  
Let’s all fail to write just one more letter before we go home,  
and this round of unwritten letters is on me.  
No, you never get any fun  
Out of the things you haven’t done.  
But they are the things that I do not like to be amid,  
Because the suitable things you didn’t do give you a lot more trouble than the unsuitable things you did.”*

Nash is so right – there’s no fun in what you’ve omitted to do. Where’s the joy in failing to compliment your hostess on her lima beans? What pleasure do you get from forgetting your nephew’s birthday? How uplifted do you feel in not acknowledging the bottle of wine your guest showed up with?

As I was completing this essay, I read a fine op-ed piece in The New York Times (12/1/15) by Roger Cohen. It contains these lines that present a more sober view of the subject than the lighter touch of Messrs. Nash and Freund, thus providing a valuable counterweight.

*It seems, as we grow older, that we are haunted less by what we have done than by what we failed to do, whether through lack of courage, or inattention, or insufficient readiness to cast caution to*

*the winds. The impossible love abandoned, the gesture unmade, the heedless voyage untaken, the parting that should not have been – these chimera always beckon.*

*What's done is done but the undone is another matter.*

So, here's your assignment for today. Make a list of your half-dozen latest sins of omission ( which can be of Nash/Freund lightweight variety – chimera need not beckon). Note for each whether you received a reprimand or figured it out for yourself – and, in the latter case, whether you did anything to rectify the situation, albeit tardily.

Finally, how about it, Ogden – is there a moral to all this?

*“The moral is that it is probably better not to sin at all, but if some kind of sin you must be pursuing, Well, remember to do it by doing rather than by not doing.”*