

Threatened with a king-hit

Early evening on a Wednesday night, I go to a favourite Asian restaurant in the Canberra city centre for a meal before the chamber music concert at Llewellyn Hall at seven. There's hardly anybody there when I arrive, just three men at the back. I am seated at the other end, as are others as they arrive. This is not just because it's the end near the window on the street, I soon realise. It's also because the three at the back are very loud – one in particular. I become aware that there is a long rant about a wide range of 'arseholes' going on, covering what appears to be a large portion of the Canberra population. Oh well, some men seem to need to fill the room with their voice, so I order dinner. Then the loudest one starts swearing even more pungently. After five minutes or so I don't see why I have to put up with this while I am eating: I ask the young woman who is serving if she minds me asking them to tone it down. She tells me to go ahead. The woman sitting at the next table supports her.

I walk over. The very loud one is, I think, a large man in a suit. His two companions are dressed more casually. They appear to be in the 50s or 60s: man in a suit might be the oldest. I ask them if they would please tone it down: their voices are very loud. Both I and others are finding the language inappropriate. Suit man immediately apologises. One of the others asks what my name is and, rather oddly, what am I? I say, 'my name is Michael and I am somebody who is here to have a quiet meal.' He says nothing more, I thank them and return to my table. The voices abate and I think the incident is over.

As I get up to leave I hear raised voices again. One of them is saying to a waiter something along the lines of 'watch him, make sure Michael doesn't go without paying, look, he's leaving now.' I ask for the bill and he comes up to me. Shorter than me, in his late 50s perhaps, a fairly nondescript white male. Voice not noticeably slurred. He stands about a metre away from me.

'You're the biggest asshole I have ever met and I'm going to hit you in the head,' he says. 'Just one hit and I'll kill you.'

'You're kidding,' I say. I don't feel any anger or fear, which can only be the result of meditating for half an hour most days for the last two or three years. I feel calm, not even surprised. Just taking notice of the situation and calmly thinking through what to do next. A mindful response, I think later. I am sure a few years ago a fight / flight response would have started in me straight away.

'No I'm not, I'm going to hit you and kill you.'

'Well then you're a moron, and I am going to call the police unless you walk away.' I stand my ground, but start thinking about what I should do if he does take a swing. Duck? Run? I'm not going to hit back, that would just escalate things.

I repeat my threat to call the police twice more, not particularly raising my voice (another thing I would have done in past times).

He walks away.

They have been drinking since lunch-time, the waiter tells me as she gives me my change. I suggest she call the police, and ask her if she wants me to do so. She says 'no, I know a brother of one of them, I will call him and ask him to come and get them.'

'You should do so,' I say, 'but I also think you should call the police.' She doesn't want to. So I leave (watching my back as I go).

A little later, feeling uneasy about leaving it at that, I call the city police. The officer on operations duty listens politely, and asks if I want to make a statement, pointing out that the threat of an assault is an actual assault. I decline, but suggest they should look in at the café.

And so that's my first experience of being threatened by alcohol-fuelled violence, but on reflection there was a lot more than alcohol fuelling it. There was male aggression, taking control of space by voice: the privileging of intemperate abuse and vile language in public, if used by adult men. Perhaps I caused short man's anger by reprimanding him in public? Being challenged by somebody he did not know, who was not an obvious authority figure? I could have ignored them in the first place, of course, but if somebody the same age and gender does not speak to such boors (and I was polite, did not swear at them, or raise my voice) who will? There is on the face of it a question about why they were able to keep drinking, but I wonder if any of the staff would have felt comfortable about refusing their orders?

I think about a recent conversation with my daughter, about the way alcohol-driven violence is often portrayed in the media as primarily a problem among her generation of people in their twenties. The drunks who shout abuse at her on her way home as they spill out of Randwick Race Course are men in their 30s, 40s, and older, she says, not young people, not her contemporaries. She is right. This is a problem among Australian men of all ages. We have inherited a tradition which accepts public drunkenness and bullying from a culture that stretches back to the days of the Rum Corps and the intemperate mores of the Britain that invaded Australia in 1788. It is, for most of us, our culture that teaches us how to behave. No amount of policing or training in 'the responsible service of alcohol' is going to stop such behaviour, because it is only partly about the alcohol. Excessive consumption of alcohol is just one rip pulling us into a maelstrom of unequal power, aggressive masculinity, contempt for civility, pack behaviour overcoming any sense of personal responsibility and, quite simply, the prevalence of morons.

I will keep on with my meditating, in the hope that it will keep me from joining their sad company.

Michael Mosenthal

6 March 2014