

Petty larceny reconciled in kaffeeklatsch confessionals

by Sandi Dolbee

Since before George W. Bush was president and when Paris and Hilton were names for a town in France and a hotel chain, I've met weekly in a book group. We gather at breakfast to tackle everything from the Dalai Lama to "The Life of Pi."

It's a vibrant, intelligent, socially responsible collection of women who in another generation could be described as the salt of the earth.

That is, until I raised a question about whether it's OK for a traveler to take Equal packets from a coffee shop because her hotel doesn't carry that brand.

"If it's just once, then it's not an ethical question," one of them offered.

"I have done it if I know I don't have any at home and I'm going to have ice tea," another chimed in. Although she prefers the pink packets.

Others nodded. Not about the color of packets, but the permissiveness of a little petty theft between friends.

"It's just a few ones," someone agreed.

"It's built into their business plan," still another insisted.

Did I say salt of the earth?

One of our newer members told of taking her husband out to brunch recently only to find a full restaurant with a large crowd waiting for tables. She walked up to the hostess stand and casually announced they were there for their noon reservation.

When the hostess scanned the list and couldn't find their name, my friend was politely shocked. She and her husband were soon seated.

By the way, she didn't have a reservation.

"Oh, puh-leeze," she drawled, looking around the table.

We burst out laughing.

Then the gates to ethics purgatory were opened wide. It was true confession time.

As it turns out, several remove the shampoo and hand cream bottles from hotel rooms. One said her sister takes the toilet paper, too.

"I think that's part of the cost of the room," came the voice of assurance.

"But I would never take a towel," the woman with the sister said. You have to draw the line somewhere.

"Don't take the bathrobe or else they'll charge you on your card," another woman warned.

A few days later, an editor at work told me the reason the napkin dispenser in our cafeteria was moved from the dining area to near the more-visible cash register was because people were helping themselves to extra napkins.

The lady who runs the cafeteria confirmed the story. People were grabbing them by the stacks for their potlucks and birthday cakes. "Paper products are expensive," she said.

Isn't that just part of the cost of doing business? She laughed. But there was no humor.

In my desk is a pen from a Comfort Inn, three brown napkins from The Coffee Bean & Tea Leaf, a plastic knife from a fast-food place and a pair of chopsticks that I haven't a clue how they got there.

I guess we all have our stories of falling a little south of heaven.

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