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The State of Courtesy

Courtesy is the lubricant that makes society run smoothly. Its outward forms are changing as people become freer in their ways. Is it a dying art? Not if the public shows that it will not countenance boorishness. It's up to us . . .

☐ Nobody can be quite sure when courtesy first appeared on the human scene, but we can all be sure that our species would not have gone far without it. Somebody in prehistoric times had to be willing to stand aside and let the other fellow go ahead without thumping him over the head with a club; otherwise people would have thumped themselves into mutual extinction before civilization got its start. But if courtesy began as a means to the end of physical survival, it was not long before it became an end in itself, at least in religious and philosophical circles. "Leave off first for manners' sake," the Book of Ecclesiasticus exhorts.

Over the centuries, manners have come to be practised more and more for their own sake, and less and less under compulsion. There was a time when vassals were flogged for paying insufficient obeisance to their lords and masters; until relatively recently in western countries, a lapse in manners could provoke a fatal duel. But while it is true that real or perceived rudeness today can still result in a bloody nose or worse, we have reached the point where most of us are courteous primarily because we want to be. If there is an ulterior motive behind common courtesy, it is that making other people feel good makes us feel good too.

Yet unconsciously we are supporting the very structure of society every time we wish someone a good day, ask how they are, or say please or thank you. For the agreeable *modus vivendi* on which civilized social relations rest cannot be enforced by written law.

Courtesy is the lubricant that eases the friction arising from differences among human beings. By setting accepted limits on what people may say or do to one another, it prevents those differences from sparking strife. The elaborate politeness of diplomacy, the law courts and parliamentary assemblies may seem forced and hollow, but it serves a vital purpose. It recognizes that contentiousness is part of human nature, and allows this normal instinct to run its course within peaceful bounds.

There is a difference, however, between politeness and courtesy. Diplomats, lawyers and legislators must be polite as a matter of form. They do not necessarily have to be courteous, because by definition, courtesy is acting with kindness and civility in address and manner. Politeness may be civil enough, but when it turns cool, it is anything but kind.

"Politeness is fictitious benevolence," wrote Dr. Samuel Johnson. Courtesy, on the other hand, has benevolence built in. One cannot be genuinely courteous without having a genuine regard for the feelings and general welfare of one's fellows. Politeness is a quality of the head, courtesy of the heart.

Similarly, manners are nothing more than modes of behaviour which may have little or nothing to do with kindness or civility. Historians tell us that in the Europe of the early Middle Ages, the prevailing manners were simple and sincere. In the 14th century, however, their role began to change as the merchant classes sought to better

their social standing by duplicating the style of the aristocracy. The aristocracy closed ranks by making its manners more esoteric. Thus snobbery — both in the sense of social climbing and in the sense of looking down one's nose at others — came into being.

By the time that classic snob Lord Chesterfield was writing his much-quoted letters of advice to his natural son in the mid-18th century, the English gentry had devised a Byzantine code of "good breeding" that opened the door to their ranks only to those schooled in its intricacies. Chesterfield urged good manners on the boy not to have him make life agreeable for others, but to help him get ahead in the world. He wrote: "A genteel manner prepossesses people in your favour, bends them towards you, and makes them wish to like you . . . As for your keeping good company, I will take care of that; do you take care to observe their ways and manners, and to form your own on them."

It was not at all uncommon for the aristocracy of England and the Continent to be effusively polite among themselves and brutally boorish to those they considered their inferiors. As early as the 15th century Montaigne remarked that he had "often seen men prove unmannerly by too much manners," presumably referring to the upper class habit of acting with overpowering correctness to make the uninitiated ill at ease. Things could not have changed greatly in the next 400 years or so. In the early 1900s Henry James referred to aristocracy as "bad manners organized."

The more "refined" manners became, it seems, the more they drifted away from the spirit of courtesy. It is clearly neither kind nor civil to make someone feel bad for not knowing what you know, be it etiquette or anything else. True courtesy is universal. As George Bernard Shaw said through Professor Higgins in *Pygmalion,* "The great thing, Eliza, is not having bad manners or good manners or any particular sort of manners, but of having the same manners for all human souls: in short, behaving as if you were in heaven, where there are no third-class carriages, and one soul is as good as another."

"I am not a gentleman! I am a representative of the Soviet Union!" protested a Soviet delegate to the United Nations in the 1950s. Class discrimination as practised by the European social elite has given gentlemen a bad name in many parts of the world. But the outburst drew titters when it was reported in the United States, where a gentleman is not thought of as a man of property lording it over the masses, but simply as one who behaves gently towards others. To call a man a "real gentleman" is about the highest accolade an American — or a Canadian — can bestow.

In a democratic egalitarian society, dignity attaches itself not so much to social status as to conduct. Given the basic knowledge of manners taught in most homes and schools, a person may become as much of a gentleman or lady as he or she chooses to be. It is simple in theory but difficult in practice, because being a real gentleman or lady means running a continuous check on one's words and actions to ensure that they do not needlessly offend or disconcert anyone.

Children are exposed to what they should be growing out of

"The hardest job kids face today is learning good manners without seeing any," Fred Astaire once quipped. In too many cases, there is as much truth to this as wit. At a time when manners are informal, relaxed, and more or less up to the individual, they are in danger of being the babies that go out with the bath water. The new manners, such as they are, have emerged out of a general movement towards personal self-determination that has stripped our society of much of its former hypocrisy. But it is one thing to be yourself with other people, and quite another to take this as an excuse to behave any way you please.

"We live in a society in which 'letting it all hang out' and being candid are regarded as virtues, and this leads to rudeness," says Harvard University sociologist David Reisman. The climate of openness has had an especially deleterious effect upon courtesy within families and other small groups. Candour is carried to the point where people are constantly telling their intimates exactly what they think of them, with heavy emphasis on their defects. Courtesy implies keeping some thoughts to

yourself so as not to hurt others. This sort of charitable reticence is not much in evidence in many homes today.

Even children whose parents remain old-fashioned enough not to savage each other in front of the children stand to be influenced the wrong way by the bad form they witness on television. The tart-tongued anti-heroes and insult-slinging comedians on the tube offer no guidance in the prime purpose of courtesy, which is to make people feel at ease. Sports celebrities reveal themselves to be egotistical boors, while TV commentators in that field spread the message that winning by fair means or foul is all that matters. Interviewers on public affairs programs grill their subjects — or their victims — with a maximum of pugnacity and a minimum of grace.

It is all part of a peculiarly aggressive and argumentative age, and aggressiveness and argumentativeness are the enemies of courtesy. When the preferred method of dealing with problems is "confrontation," good manners can hardly be expected to thrive. Everybody seems to be using his elbows, calling names, and shouting down his adversaries. Hyperbole and invective have taken the place of polite, reasoned discussion. Children are exposed to the kind of childishness they should be growing out of: if you don't get your way, scream.

If the Titanic *were sinking, the men would leave first*

"I don't give a damn about what other people think of me," a well-known pop singer was recently quoted as saying. She might as well have said that she doesn't give a damn about other people, period; it amounts to the same thing. A certain degree of submersion of one's own will in deference to others is implicit in any effort to be kind and civil. If you insist on doing just what you want, you are liable to trespass on other people's sensibilities, if not their rights.

Ralph Waldo Emerson pointed out that good manners are made up of sacrifices. It is an open question whether people are willing to make the necessary sacrifices at a time when so many of them subscribe to the motto, "look after number one." Certainly the narcissistic self-assertiveness of what Tom Wolfe has called "the 'me' generation" flies in the face of the idea of self-sacrificing gallantry. It has been seriously suggested that if the *Titanic* were sinking today, the ablest men would scramble for the lifeboats first, leaving the women and children behind.

If you don't respect someone, you might not respect anyone

It is a principle of gallantry — of "being a gentleman" — that the stronger should employ their strength to protect and help the weaker. Conversely, they must not use their strength against the weak to get their own way.

Still, some adjustments may be needed in the traditional niceties associated with the concept of "the weaker sex" to accommodate female demands for equality. A recent article in *Management World* on non-sexist communications in business, for instance, tells men not to moderate their language in front of female colleagues, not to stand aside as they are getting off elevators, and not to light their cigarettes simply because they are of the opposite sex. It sensibly concludes, however, that if a man wants to do such things, it might make life more pleasant for all concerned: "If you want to help someone with their coat, assist someone in being seated, open a door for another person, by all means do it... The advantage of these new business manners is that the decision to extend these courtesies is up to you — business etiquette does not require it!"

The drive for sex equality brings up the question of whether there are such things as ladies anymore, and whether there should be. According to some feminists, ladyhood is just another of the bonds designed by men to tie women down in an inferior place. A man who treats a woman "like a lady," they say, is perpetuating male domination. Be that as it may, it would be a pity if a course cannot be found to retain some of the graciousness of polite relations between the sexes without the discrimination.

The system of ladies and gentlemen runs largely on the concept of respect. This originated in aristocratic times, when persons of noble birth were

deemed to be respectable regardless of whether their conduct warranted it. Later it was extended to ordinary women, office-holders, and people of some distinction. Later still, it came to be taken for granted among the more enlightened that everybody was entitled to respect until they showed they were not.

Some individuals today have taken it upon themselves to shift the burden. In the process of thumbing their noses at traditional values, they have come to the conclusion that nothing and no one is worthy of respect until it has been earned in their eyes. In the era of the debunker, those formerly held in the highest regard are under the deepest suspicion. The trouble here is that if you don't respect something or someone, you are likely to respect nothing or no one at all.

Behaving as if everybody is your maiden aunt

The symptoms of this generalized disrespect can be seen in the professional tennis players who have stripped that sport of its grace and dignity. They started out insulting the traditional figures of respect, the court-side officials; after getting away with that, they began directing insults at the crowd. In the same bag with them are the graffiti scrawlers and the people who display scurrilous or lewd slogans on T-shirts and bumper stickers. It is as if they are waiting for some old lady to come along who will be suitably horrified. It is the shotgun approach to bad manners, posing an affront to anyone it happens to affect.

Shocking behaviour has become tolerated as a vent for self-expression in the absence of any more demanding way of expressing oneself. It used to be confined mainly to madmen and artists, who were granted a certain licence on the grounds that they were special cases who could not be expected to conform. "Much is forgiven a poet that is totally culpable in a dustman or journalist," as Anthony Burgess put it. Now, however, outlandish and even disgusting conduct has become an art form in itself, as witness the punk rock cult.

Many of the more extreme manifestations of individual freedom are offensive at least to a portion of the population. When it comes to knowing what is offensive, there is a good rule of thumb in Professor Higgins's dictum that one should have the same manners for all. If you do not say or do anything ordinarily that you would avoid saying or doing in front of your maiden aunt or a clergyman, the chances are that you are behaving courteously to everyone.

With all the forces now working against it, is courtesy dying? It might look so to those who deplore the evident decline in the old social graces, but it is salutary to speculate that the first such sentiments were probably expressed in inarticulate grunts around a fire in a cave. As social conditions change, so do manners. An aristocratic banquet in centuries past, when people ate from communal plates, doubtless would prove disgusting to the least genteel citizen of a present-day western nation. Still, a 16th century book of etiquette which warns its readers not to "poke everywhere when thou hast meat or eggs or some such dish" shows that the spirit of courtesy has been constant through the ages. For "he who pokes about on the platter, searching, is unpleasant, and annoys his neighbour," it says.

Try not to be unpleasant, try not to annoy your neighbour. This makes a good start towards genuine courtesy, no matter what the present outward forms of politeness may be. If you add that you should try to act with solicitude for the feelings and well-being of others, then you will know how to be courteous. But to do so takes self-control, self-effacement and self-denial, virtues that seem to be out of style these days.

But are they really? Despite the highly conspicuous minority who abuse the new freedom to make nuisances of themselves, contemporary western society shows more concern about people than any society before it. And concern about people is essentially what courtesy is all about. If the good-hearted majority becomes less prepared to countenance anti-social behaviour, if the age-old power of public disapproval is brought back into play, there will be little to worry about. There will be courtesy — and if there is courtesy, manners will look after themselves.

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