

What Use Are Good Manners?
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Being "polite" is not just a matter of saying please and thank you. Courtesy has always been the lubricant that makes the wheels of society turn smoothly. There is a movement today to conflate honesty with rudeness, mocking the "politically correct." Political correctness is an exaggerated monitoring of words and thoughts that might offend others. The revolt by some against political correctness is that these constraints sometimes muzzle debate. However, the revolt against "political correctness" has now morphed into rudeness and insult.

The general reason for being polite is that it invites reciprocity and serves as a social medium for good behavior. But manners (including speech) go back to the earliest human civilizations. Blasphemy may be the oldest form of socially banned speech. In antiquity, everyone feared the gods (thunder, storms, and evil eye). A member of a group could bring disaster not only on himself, but on the entire group, by saying something hostile about the god or gods. The ancient Hebrews were so in awe of their god that they never spoke or wrote his name directly, although this prohibition is still observed in custom by religious Jews. Militant Muslims today violently punish anything regarded as insulting speech about the Prophet Mohammad, as well as about their god, Allah.

"Respect" is the next most historic demand on polite speech. Leaders demanded courtesy and deference from those below them. Deference was shown by bowing and through certain formulas of speech (calling leaders "Your Grace, Your Majesty, My Lord, My Lady"). Violating these courtesies would invoke punishment.

Gender roles invoke demands that women use special speech in the presence of men, particularly men who rule over them. Wives everywhere (except in the most enlightened western world) face beatings and worse if they do not show polite deference in speech and action to their domestic bosses. The Japanese are the best example of this in that there is a specialized language used only by women. A man might say: "Open the window." A woman would have to say: "If it is not too much trouble, would you mind opening the window for me?" (Even today in Japan, a woman who uses direct male language is criticized and regarded as coarse.)

During the 19th century in "polite society" (upper and middle class), men were taught to modify their speech around ladies. Women were considered too delicate to endure swearing, coarseness, or discussions of politics or sexuality.

The Black and Feminist movements that erupted in our country in the 1960s gave rise to lexicons of forbidden speech, which came to be called "politically correct." Common insults (Nigger, Kike, Mick, Chink, Jap, Wetback, Raghead, Bitch) were condemned (rightly) as unacceptable. But the baby was tossed out with the bathwater when some fierce feminists even condemned such courtesies as men holding open a door, calling them Miss or Mrs., or even using such a term as "lady," considering it "classist."

As well-intentioned as this movement was, it was inevitable that there would be a backlash. The first backlash was in the Black movement itself, when vulgarity became chic in street culture and popular arts. This vulgarity went universal with Hollywood and other popular arts venues, and insulting language triumphed over polite discourse, which was deemed "phony."

Where does this leave us today? Young people see, hear, and watch our popular media using wall-to-wall vulgarity. Although government elites in the United States and Western Europe try to promote polite speech and condemn racist and sexist utterances (being "politically correct"), they are losing the battle to demagogues and "people of low information" (ignorant) who scorn these prohibitions.

I never thought that I would hear candidates running for president (who should be elites by virtue of education and upbringing) using the kind of language uttered in the Primary debates. Donald Trump has opened that door and now we are seeing rudeness designed to offend. But this practice first arrived when a Congressman shouted "you lie" as our President gave the State of the Union address.

There is no civil society without courtesy. We will miss it when it is gone.

682 words

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