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Courtesy: a Saving Grace

IF YOU LANDED from your spaceship on another inhabited planet the first thing you would mention in a letter home would be the way the people behaved. That would be the most important thing to you. And how you departed yourself would be the topic of their conversation.

Cultured and fine manners are everywhere a passport to friendship and respect. In any social situation it is graceful in men and women to think and speak and act with propriety.

Good manners are the necessary guards of the decency and peace of society, a matter of public concern, and yet we hear and read less about their cultivation than we do about dieting and daily dozens and all sorts of things to preserve and enhance physical beauty.

The Criminal Code of Canada lists many punishable offences against public order and the person, but there is no entry in its index under the word "courtesy".

Courtesy is to be found in the space between positive law — rules which we must obey — and free choice — where we claim and enjoy complete freedom. In a memorable speech on "Law and Manners" Lord Moulton called this "the domain of Obedience to the Unenforceable". The inclination to behave well in this domain is strong in the hearts of all except the most depraved people.

Courtesy is not the whimsical invention of a past generation but a long-standing manner of life. Moses did more than bring down the Ten Commandments from the Mount: he prescribed the conduct of a gentleman; respect for the deaf, the blind and the aged; abstention from tale-bearing; civility to visitors and strangers.

Courtesy, defined as gentleness and politeness, is the settled medium of social exchange, just as money is the medium of economic exchange.

Custom and convention control a great sector of human behaviour. What we usually refer to as the conventions are rooted in considerate regard for the comfort and feelings of other people. They include

appropriate dress, moderation of voice, good table manners, and care not to inconvenience people. Convention is not the essence of life, but it is, as Arnold Bennett put it, the protecting garment and preservative of life. We feel secure when we live with others who share and observe the same culture pattern.

Part of courtesy is politeness. Politeness is like an air-cushion: there may be nothing in it, but it eases our jolts wonderfully. A "please" and a "thank you" may seem to be trivial things, but they sweeten services and are agreeable to people.

Thomas Jefferson, third President of the United States, said of politeness: "It is the practice of sacrificing to those whom we meet in society all the little conveniences and preferences which will gratify them." An extreme view was presented by Donna Clara in a Spanish play: "It is almost better to do ill with a good outward grace than to do well without."

Chivalry

Our idea of chivalry includes knights in armour, tournaments, great deference to ladies, and conflicts in behalf of the weak. The basic principle of chivalry is that the strong must use their strength with generosity, modesty and self-respect to protect the defenceless.

We might lay alongside that the description of a gentleman given by Cardinal Newman: "He is never mean or little in his disputes, never takes unfair advantage, never mistakes personalities or sharp sayings for arguments, or insinuates evil which he dare not say out."

Together, these ideas of chivalry and gentlemanliness are in the spirit of the Beatitudes: meekness, integrity, kindness, peace-making, and goodness.

It will be said, of course, that times have changed, that knighthood is out of flower, that meekness has not inherited the earth, and that the competitiveness of everyday life leaves no time for frills. Yet the book shops display scores of nineteenth century novels, and some of these are prescribed reading in schools:

why? One reason may be our yearning for the old-time graciousness.

Claire Wallace, newspaper columnist and radio personality, wrote in her book called *Canadian Etiquette* (Greywood Publishing Ltd., Winnipeg, 1967): "There is a greater informality in life today, in conduct, in clothes, and particularly among young people. Yet this does not alter the fact that good manners and living by the rules of society are important."

One quality of refinement cannot be denied its place in the life of anyone who wishes to live decently and chivalrously. Tact, which means sensitive awareness of the feelings of others and consideration for them, is the most effective quality to make people likable.

This is the attribute that prompts forbearance in our differences with people so that we keep the door open for them to become our friends. It allows them to "save face". There is nothing worse that can be done to a person than the destruction of his self-respect. It is, then, an elevated expression of human feeling, as well as a good exemplification of courtesy, to give him a line of escape or of redemption.

Goodwill sums up the principles of courtesy so far considered. The true source of good breeding is thoughtfulness for others. In everyday life this means going out of your way to make things pleasant for someone who is lonely or out of his depth or shy; it means making a deliberate and planned effort to assist someone to satisfy his wants; it means that when we cannot oblige someone we speak with understanding and kindness.

An habitual state

The habit of good form can come only by long-continued use, so that charming manners become subconscious. The well-bred person does not have to think before saying "please" or "thank you" in asking for or accepting a service.

Courtesy is most excellent when it is least obvious. We recall the delightful description of Chang, in *Lost Horizon*: "Courtesy hung about him in a fragrance too delicate to be detected till one had ceased to think about it."

Cultivate a careful instinct for propriety, so that you behave becomingly in situations in accord with their grave or gay character, avoiding what is unfit as carefully as you observe what is suitable.

If you find that you are awkward in good company, that you are more at ease with third raters than with people of a higher order, it may be because you have allowed yourself to drift into unrefined society. The remedy is to so order your life that you meet and associate with people of the sort you admire.

Are there any rules?

There comes a time in everyone's life when he

wants desperately to know how to do the right thing in an unfamiliar setting. Society has agreed upon a certain basic set of rules, called etiquette and convention, but no list of good manners can be made that is applicable to everyone in all circumstances.

Some people belong to the "extended pinkie" school, believing that how one holds a teacup or a wine glass is a symbol of their status in society. This is a ridiculous interpretation of etiquette. Our way of doing things grows out of our observation of what we admire in others and our inherent feeling for what is important and what is right. Good manners are within us—that is why we use the phrase "well-bred"—but how to give them expression can be learned.

Nonconformity to the niceties of society is not a sin, but it is a public nuisance. Orderly social relations are needed so that people can live and work in reasonable harmony. While everyone is free to behave socially as he likes, that does not give him license to act in a way that detracts from the well-being and ease of other people. There is something of the clown in a person who goes out of his way to act differently from the company he is in, and the hallmark of a vulgarian is his love of attracting attention to himself. Sir Winston Churchill once said of a member of parliament: "The honourable Gentleman is trying to win distinction by rudeness."

To be disagreeable is high treason against your role in civilization. Examples of this crime are: to say some sickening thing offhandedly and make the victim writhe, or to provoke others into breach of good manners, or to indulge in crude behaviour or language. There is no possible excuse for vulgarity.

Being a poseur, which means one who gives himself airs, is fatal to the desire to be courteous. If you want to live comfortably with others you will sometimes have to seem less superior than you are.

At home and in public

No degree of friendship can justify or condone discourtesy. It is impertinent to presume upon family relationship to indulge in rough manners or to be thoughtless of the comfort of others.

Parents who are dissatisfied with the behaviour pattern of their children must ruefully face the fact that most children conform to the behaviour standards their parents display to them.

Courtesy is not learned from a stream of prohibitions, but by example. When children are "kept in their place" too vigorously under the guise of teaching them manners, they will go out of their way to rebel.

Young people should be encouraged to regard the home as the place where they can acquire skill in the social graces that are necessary to harmonious living outside the home. Every child should be made aware that in school and in business he is in a goldfish bowl, open to inspection and criticism from

every side; that he owes it to those around him to behave courteously, because that is the only way they can get along comfortably with him; and that he owes it to himself to behave in a cultured way so as to maintain his own good opinion of himself.

Courtesy is not a refinement reserved for a circle of friends or acquaintances. It is not a veneer to be put on for social occasions. It is used toward the sales-clerk or telephone operator, the bellboy or the maid, the cab driver or the newspaper vendor, the bus driver or the school teacher, just as naturally as toward a host at dinner.

On the street, in stores, on escalators and in offices you are rubbing shoulders with people, and you have an obligation to do so gently. The distress that inconsiderate customers inflict, and the pleasure that considerate ones can give, is of great concern to those who serve them.

Rules of the road are designed by highway experts in the interest of safety, but they are also related to good manners. If a driver is well-bred, his poise, considerateness and good judgment set him on a pedestal above the majority. This is a sector of life in which good manners can be practised.

Here are some suggestions for the exercise of courtesy in public. In these days when smoking is being abandoned by so many persons it is time to return to some of the courtesies observed before smoking became so commonplace: asking permission to smoke; noting the absence of an ash tray in your host's living-room as a hint that smoking is not desired; making sure that the smoke is not drifting across another person's face.

Punctuality is not only courteous, it is a compliment you pay to the intelligent person and a rebuke you administer to the stupid. To look upon lateness as an asset is very much like regarding a mental or physical deficiency as an endowment.

Have your bus or train ticket ready for the conductor, a courtesy not only to him but to fellow passengers. On an escalator, keep over to the right so that people who are in a hurry may pass you. When edging out of a seat on a bus or a train, it is proper to say to the person in front of whom you are passing: "Please excuse me".

Look behind you when passing through a door, to prevent its shutting in someone's face. At concerts, do not unwrap candy bars with crackling paper, do not beat time with your foot on the seat in front of you or on the floor, do not wear jingling bracelets; do not carry on a conversation, even in a whisper.

Be alert for opportunities to express sympathy, in person or in writing, with the survivors of someone who has fulfilled his contract with the world.

Showing courtesy toward elderly people is not displaying pity, but thoughtfulness. Aristotle, the great Greek philosopher, said it this way: "To all our elders also the honour befitting their age, by rising up

in their presence, turning out of the way for them, and all similar marks of respect."

In business

Courtesy is a habit that is useful toward success in any business or project. It provides the ability to work efficiently and pleasantly with other people.

The aggressive, domineering personality, careless of the rights or even the susceptibilities of others, is an extreme to be avoided at all costs. It is worth making an effort to "treat every man you meet with such consideration that his memory of you will be pleasant." That is not a quotation from some head-in-the-clouds philosopher, but a maxim written in the first volume of the Alexander Hamilton Institute course in Modern Business by the late Dr. Joseph French Johnson, Dean of the New York University School of Commerce.

All thoroughbred people are considerate of the feelings of others no matter what the station in life of the others may be, and employers and managers have an undoubted duty to be courteous to those who work for them. Courtesy softens the giving of orders and takes off the sharp edge of power.

Some techniques

Spreading out from the core conception of courtesy that it is thoughtfulness for other people and carefulness of their feelings, there are many techniques for its expression, techniques to be practised until they become part of habitual behaviour.

One who is sensitive to the needs of people will take the initiative in showing interest and liking. It was the French philosopher Auguste Comte who coined the term "altruism", which means the placing of others above self, of their interests above one's own. Teachers of all faiths and moralists of all schools have emphasized our duties to others, and self-forgetfulness has a big part to play in bringing courtesy to maturity.

Indifference is the most hurtful affront we can give people. They crave personal recognition. It is ill-mannered to ignore people in the home or office, to pass them without greeting, to look at them with blank eyes, to talk around them as if they were not there. Here is one way in which everyone can contribute to the pleasantness of life: by recognizing people as fellow human beings with a greeting or good-bye or a wave of the hand.

A further step forward is taken when we are genuinely pleased when something enjoyable happens to an acquaintance and tell him so. Nothing is less burdensome than to give praise where we reasonably can, and even to magnify somewhat what has been well done or well tried.

Good breeding gracefully remembers the rights of others. It takes into account the desires, opinions and reactions of people and is magnanimous in assessing them even though they appear to be mistaken. In a

free way of life dissent is inevitable and is not to be condemned, but the extent to which a persistent effort is made to achieve harmony is a measure of the desire of a person to become chivalrous, polished and fully civilized.

Diffidence is a good tool for the wise, brave and clever to use. It softens those who would criticize severely, it conciliates those who are haughty, and it waters down envy.

There is no more severe test of a person's chivalry and integrity than how he behaves when he is wrong. An apology should not be stilted or half-hearted. The injured person does not wish to humiliate the wrongdoer: he wants to be healed because he has been hurt. He will readily forget an insult or an injury upon learning the doer's regret.

Patience is an ingredient in courtesy. One must not expect that there will always be heavenly harmony around him. Every person has dark moments, brought on by frustration in a piece of work, disappointment in a pet project, or inability to cope with a crisis. When a companion or workmate is withdrawn and unresponsive, say to yourself that this may be a day when several of his problems have raised their heads at the same time, and be patient.

Discretion is a shining quality essential in courtesy. There are times when it is the greatest kindness to turn away our heads and pretend not to see. No matter how close a friend may be, it is not chivalrous to force sympathy or help on him.

Conversation and argument

A social conversation requires only that we apply the simple rules of common decency: that each speak; that nothing too distressing be said; and that obedience be given to whatever conventions are special to the occasion.

A courteous conversationalist is not a babbler, a boaster or a boor. He does not chatter about insignificant happenings like household troubles, business irritations, the big fish that got away, and such unpleasantries. He does not reply to the formal question "How do you do?" by launching out upon a description of his current ailments. He does not over-estimate the importance of his own viewpoint, but tries to make everyone present feel part of the discussion. He does not carry the dagger of sarcasm in his mouth. He tries to inject a milligram of charm into the conversation.

Argument sours and spoils conversation, said Benjamin Franklin. "Persons of good sense seldom fall into it." But if an argument develops keep some maxims of courtesy in mind. Preface all statements of difference of opinion with a conciliatory word. Listen, think, concede, be moderate, tell what your authority is, and leave the door open so that your opponent can come over to your side without losing face.

Do not be witty at the cost of others: it is hateful to make a joke that can hurt someone, or to laugh at a mistake he makes.

If you are in the position where you must criticize another because it is your duty to do so, begin with honest appreciation of what has been, done well or honestly attempted. Say what needs to be said, not all that you could say.

Personality and poise

Personality is the sum total of the effect we have on other people. It arises from our habits of thought.

People will judge you first by your graces and may then scan your intellectual merits. It is worth while, therefore, to eliminate little personal whims, habits and traits that smudge your social polish.

Serenity and poise become the constant companions of the person who is courteous. He develops harmonious adjustment of his faculties, and out of this grows emotional stability. If someone makes a thrust at him which he cannot parry, courtesy is the shield upon which he receives the blow.

We may be affronted and infuriated by others' behaviour, but what they do is not under our power to control. Our own strength is to react fittingly: like the philosopher who, when kicked by a mule, overlooked the insult on considering its source. The poet William Cowper said it more poetically: "A moral, sensible and well-bred man will not affront me, and no other can."

Little things

Courtesy, after all, consists of little things. It is lacking in any masterful quality, but it wins friends in the collisions and minor adjustments of daily life.

No one is likely to say "thank you" too often. When any service is performed there should be no hesitation in expressing appreciation with a smile.

Both democracy and industrialism demand a greater individual display of courtesy and mutual tolerance than the human animal was accustomed to practise in less complex societies.

We need to make allowances: to learn not to peer at people looking for faults. St. Bernard, who was in the twelfth century practically dictator of Christendom, wrote angrily of Pierre Abélard that "he sees nothing through a glass darkly but stares at everything face to face."

The purpose of the courteous person is to be in manner gentle, in temper tolerant, in behaviour civil, in mood humane, in outlook broad and comprehending.

Raphael, great Italian painter, said that he drew men and women, not as they were, but as they ought to be. What a good hint this is for those who seek to be courteous — treat people as if they were what they could be!