



The Functions of Formality

To act formally is to behave according to custom or rule, and we do that more than we realize. Formality serves people well. It signals what is important, and makes for order and dignity. As a bonus, it is a source of pleasure from time to time . . .

□ It is the evening of a concert in a Canadian city. The audience streams into the hall in all manner of dress, from mink stoles to tattered jeans. But when the symphony orchestra takes the stage, the players are dressed uniformly — the men in black coats, the women in black evening gowns. The conductor walks to the podium in white tie and tails.

The scene makes an interesting illustration of the evolution of formality. At one time, most of the audience would have been in formal dress too. But as social habits grew more relaxed over the years, the custom of dressing for concerts was pretty well abandoned. Concert-going was no longer confined to an affluent elite, and the average music-lover could not afford it. In any case, it did not matter a bit what the audience wore.

What the orchestra wore, on the other hand, *did* matter. An experiment in England a few years ago in having symphonic musicians appear at performances in street clothes left audiences upset. They felt that it affected the quality — and especially the co-ordination — of the playing. So the line was drawn: the orchestra observes the formality of dressing for a concert, while the audience does not.

People have been trying to draw just such lines between which formalities to discard and which to maintain for many years, particularly in the relatively open society that exists in Canada. Popular sentiment in this country has always leaned towards dispensing with needless punctilio.

This is entirely within the tradition of a fairly young nation largely populated by people whose origins are in countries with an active class system.

Formality has been used for many centuries by the dominant classes in older societies as a device to keep the less-privileged in their places — specifically, away from the sources of wealth and power.

At the same time, however, Canada is a former British colony to which many British institutions and customs have been transplanted. With these came a degree of formality not generally found in the United States. While pioneer Canadians chuckled at newly-arrived Britons who stood on ceremony, dressing for dinner in log huts and the like, they nonetheless deferred to many of the formalities attached to old country traditions. But as the imperial connection unravelled over this century, Canadian social habits drew increasingly closer to freer and easier American ways.

The process sped up after World War II, which conclusively moved English-speaking Canadians out of the British and into the American sphere of influence culturally as well as politically. The development of suburbs around Canadian towns and cities brought ranch-style casualness into ranch-style homes.

Still, a reasonable degree of formality persisted here until the mid-1960s, when the youth revolution which had broken out in the U.S. spilled over the border. With the majority of the North American population under the age of 30, it was quite naturally a time of challenge to old ideas, including the idea of formality.

“We are witnessing a revolt against formalism, against form itself,” an American social anthropologist wrote in the early seventies. A revolt against

formalism — defined as “excessive attention to or insistence on outward forms” — could only be a healthy move.

Formalism is anti-democratic. Its practitioners use their knowledge of the finer points of etiquette to discriminate against others who do not have their social advantages. On a personal level, they can be very unpleasant companions. No less well-bred and knowledgeable an authority on manners than Amy Vanderbilt has written: “Some of the rudest and most objectionable people I have ever known have also been technically the most ‘correct.’”

A revolt against formalism is one thing; a revolt against “form itself” is something else entirely. In its social context, “form” means a “set way of behaving according to custom or rule.” These days, the idea of “good form” may seem anachronistic and faintly laughable, raising visions of British Army colonels in Victorian India harrumphing: “Not good form to talk about ladies in the mess, what?” But in fact, form both good and bad is practised in relations among members of modern society on streets and in homes, stores, plants and offices minute-by-minute, day-by-day.

If we stand aside to let someone pass ahead of us in a doorway or send flowers to someone who is ill, we are literally acting formally. The function of form in maintaining order in society is more vital than the law’s, because nobody can make a law forcing people to treat one another decently.

That there was a revolt against “form itself” during the heady freedom trip of the past 25 years is undeniable. It spread far from the hippies, political protesters and pop musicians who launched it to the public at large. For example, it was once the worst of form to use obscene language in mixed company. Then, sometime in the late sixties, words that were never uttered in polite circles before were suddenly being bandied about by both sexes.

The basic social forms required a measure of self-restraint which was distinctly out of fashion when “do your own thing” and “let it all hang out” were the rallying-cries of a generation. The watchword of the period was “why?” — why refrain from using certain words, in this case? Why should a student address a teacher as “Sir” or “Mrs. So-and-So?”

These are difficult questions to answer, since so many minor formalities have no evident meaning. The best justification for them was perhaps expressed by August Hare, an English preacher in

the 19th century: “Of what use are forms, seeing that at times they are empty? Of the same use as barrels, which, at times, are empty too..”

It may seem a long way from following standard social forms like saying “please” and “thank you” to our mental picture of what constitutes formality. The word automatically evokes visions of ladies in evening gowns and men dressed up like swallows going through their paces at a glittering ball.

Yet, in dress as in many other things, we act more formally in the sense of “behaving according to custom or rule” than we are conscious of doing. We have certain clothes for work, certain clothes for various sports, certain clothes for social occasions, whether a dinner party or a barbeque. A businessman who puts on a jacket and tie to go to the office is, by definition, being formal. The difference between a Canadian professional woman who wears a jogging suit to run around the park and a European nobleman who dons a morning coat and top hat to attend the races is not one of kind, but of expense.

*Ceremony is never more useful
than when dealing with grief*

In bowing to custom in our comportment, we are essentially bowing to the sensibilities of those around us. A man might be unconventional enough to show up in church on a hot Sunday morning in nothing but a pair of swimming trunks. He might even feel comfortable in doing so; but if *he* is comfortable, he can depend on it that the elderly lady in the pew next to him is not.

All the little formal gestures we make, like sending greeting cards or providing a cake for a child’s birthday, are similarly based on deference towards the feelings of others. They show that we are not thinking only of ourselves. They confirm our membership in society.

The relationship between the individual and the society is at the base of the ceremonies which we more commonly associate with formality. In fact, the very first ceremony most of us attend is designed to introduce us into society, or at least our section of it. This takes the form of baptism among Christians and similar initiation rituals in other religions. The ceremony brings us into a wider circle than our immediate family, and gives us an identity as a member of a group.

Formality thus begins in the cradle and ends in the grave. Funerals, too, concentrate on the place of the individual in the society. They are usually attended by members of the group or groups to which the deceased belonged. The presence of these outside mourners lends support and comfort to the immediate survivors. It reassures them that they are not alone in their grief.

Traditional forms are never more usefully applied than when there is a death in a family. The formula of the burial rites helps to give the survivors a sense of continuity — of life going on — at a time of terrible disruption in their own lives. The measured solemnity of the services places due weight on the significance of what has happened. It carries what Marcus Aurelius called “proper dignity and proportion.” It is proportionate to the fact that something of unique importance — a human life — has passed through this world.

This touches on one of the prime purposes of formality, which is to put a stamp on the things that really are important. We can see this in weddings, which also pertain to membership in society. Whether or not many guests are present, there always must be formal witnesses to the event, which signifies that a marriage is the concern of the community, and not just of the two principals. The dignity of the ceremony underscores the point that the joining together of two futures is not to be taken lightly, though formality goes on to play a role as an aid to rejoicing in the ensuing festivities.

Forms command respect for the things that deserve it

A further use for formality is to give substance to commitments. When a man and woman become engaged, tentative promises are exchanged. But only when they formally make their marriage vows and sign the registry do these promises become legally binding. Whenever agreements which are meant to last are made, formality comes into play with the aim of ensuring that promises are kept.

The law is formal because it needs to be. If every party to a legal action were to proceed according to his or her interpretation of it, chaos would reign. When the law moves off paper and into the courtroom, formality takes on a more general reason for

being. The strict decorum that prevails in court ensures that the rule of law in our system is treated with deference. The charge of “contempt of court” has firm philosophical underpinnings. It is a means of enforcing respect for the principles of justice to which our society subscribes.

Much the same holds true of the forms observed in Parliament and other legislative bodies. Parliament symbolizes our democratic ideals. The ancient rituals carried out within its walls proclaim the permanence of those ideals, which are translated in practice into our cherished rights and freedoms. Parliamentary ceremonies make the statement that the institution itself is immeasurably more important than the members who occupy it. The forms compel them to regard it with a certain awe.

From a practical point of view, formality works to maintain order in the Parliamentary chambers. Without such customs as requiring members to address the speaker and not one another, debates could deteriorate into brawls. Parliamentary forms are more than just rules, such as those that govern any other competitive activity. They are standards of civilized conduct appropriate to a body that represents a civilized political regime.

The authority of the speaker in ensuring that the traditional civilities are observed imposes discipline on the members. The connection between formality and discipline is most clearly to be seen in the armed forces, the most formal bodies in our midst. The forces demand meticulous attention to the correct forms of drills, dress, saluting, address by rank, etc. There is an excellent reason for this in an organization in which the risk of life and limb is a condition of employment. The seemingly meaningless drills which recruits find so onerous are intended to drive home the message that no one is free to do as he or she pleases when the vital interests of others are at stake.

Service people are made to wear uniforms because, as in the case of the orchestra mentioned above, to allow them to go their own way in the matter of appearance might encourage them to go their own way in other matters. Uniformity in dress fosters uniformity in performance, and coordination is crucial in military action. Any failure to work in unison under fire can cost blood.

The formalities that abound in the military are used to build and maintain morale, the element which, according to General George C. Marshall,

"wins the victory." Morale is almost as important in peacetime, when slackness tends to set in among the ranks. The badges and medals, the full-dress uniforms, the parades behind marching bands — all these go into making men and women proud of their unit. As members of the unit, they are accordingly proud of their comrades. And — this is the soul of morale — they are properly proud of themselves.

*We become our "better selves"
and enter into a better world*

Formality acts as an outlet for self-esteem both in its military and civilian applications. When people present their best front to the world, they feel good about themselves. In the current season of graduation ceremonies, "proms," weddings and other social occasions, formality will stimulate pride among families. At these events, fathers and mothers will say to sons and daughters, "I am proud of you," and vice-versa. Much of that feeling will emanate from the smart appearance and gracious manners they display.

Though they might not admit it aloud, most of them will get a thrill out of being part of a scene which is outside of their normal experience. They will enjoy being surrounded by the neat suits, the gorgeous dresses, the vivid corsages and the other glittering features of formality. This is because nothing comes more naturally to human beings than an attraction to sheen and colour. We have an almost atavistic love of spectacle, as witness the vast numbers of television viewers who revelled in the pageantry of the recent Royal wedding in Britain.

The most spectacular time of year in North America is around Christmas, when people decorate their homes and places of business with colourful lights and the air is full of seasonal music. Christmas is highly formal in terms of behaving according to custom, though we rarely think of it as such. Christmas trees, cards, cakes, gifts, carols and even turkeys provide a traditional context in which to celebrate the good will and joy of the season. Without them, Christmas would be just another holiday.

As we are reminded to the point of tedium over our television and radio sets, Christmas is "special." And indeed, one of the main reasons formality exists is to mark out the special from the commonplace. The pressure to follow social form over the holidays takes us away from the workaday world whether we like or not, and usually we like it. At Christmas, we are positively obliged to drop the business of making a living and enjoy ourselves for a while.

When we indulge in formality of this kind, we come in touch with the finer things of life, above and beyond the necessities of existence. To polish our shoes and our manners brings out our "better selves." Our better selves enter a better world than the one we ordinarily inhabit. It is a world of charming niceties and unaccustomed luxury.

Formality stands us in good stead in a variety of ways. It signals what is special and important. It brings order, dignity, grace and pleasure into a normally pragmatic world. It is one of the main means we have of demonstrating respect for the persons and institutions that deserve it. Not only that, but it provides a medium to show respect for ourselves.

In the past couple of generations, we in this country have managed to dispense with some formalities that are no longer (and probably never were) necessary. One example is the habit of writing "correct" business letters that are so stilted that the meaning they intend to convey is unclear. For the most part we have made a laughing stock of the strict formalism which at one time permitted social snobs to assert a self-conferred superiority. This is partly the result of the rebellion against form in recent years.

The excesses of bad form which the rebellion produced now seem to have gone the way of all passing fashions. The hippies and pseudo-hippies tried to create their own forms to replace the old ones, but in the end, nobody paid much attention to them. This indicates that if formality did not exist, we would have to invent it. And what we would invent would not serve us nearly as well as the sensible instrument we already possess.