

# Democracy Beguiled

by James Morris

The United States was not born civil. Its citizens learned how to behave themselves, in public and in private, over the course of a century and more. They did so by acceding to a homegrown version of the rules that had polished and made fit for social engagement their European forebears. A lively and instructive book by John F. Kasson, *Rudeness and Civility: Manners in Nineteenth-Century Urban America* (1990), traces the gradual erasure of the rough edges on Americans and their transformation into smoothies fit for artful maneuvering in the big city. The 19th century was the great age of etiquette education in the United States and saw the publication of hundreds of manuals on manners and behavior. Kasson notes that “the most complete (but by no means definitive) bibliography of American etiquette books” includes 236 separate titles published in the United States before 1900. The conduct advocated by these manuals is presumably the mirror image of the conduct they meant to dispel. Why urge readers not to wipe their teeth with the tablecloth if the practice were not a routine mealtime gesture for some significant number of diners?

The demand for the etiquette manuals was immense because so many Americans were at once unsure of themselves and, characteristically, determined to improve. And history hustled them along. They built their confidence and self-assurance to fit the boundaries of the nation’s growing and sophisticated cities. There was a continent to be tamed, a society to be brought to heel and to the table, immigrants wanting to fit in, get ahead, gain acceptance, be taken for granted, be taken for everyone else. Americans taught themselves how to act at work and play, courting and visiting and consoling. The rules of engagement proliferated and were accepted. Indeed, many Americans came to believe that, after marking the surface, the rules also inscribed the soul.

Propriety kept its 19th-century momentum through most of the 20th. But, as this century runs out of years, the feeling grows that America may be running out of civility and has suspended the rules that once set the terms for acceptable behavior and taste. To be sure, manners are not dead or vanished from society. You have only to watch how most people treat each other in most public social situations to see that. Indeed, we may even be experiencing a current boomlet for them (at 497 pages, the latest Miss Manners volume, *Miss Manners Rescues Civilization*, carries weight, on coffee tables at least). Manners are a little winded, though, and in need



*In our faces*

of a sit-down and some space. If the society is plainly not Dodge City, neither is it the New Jerusalem. Manners continue to evolve, as always, and to shift and take new forms. They are fashion, and each age's fashion is another's eccentricity. They are aesthetics, and few things are as mutable as taste. You can't expect a nation of 260 million souls to have the homogeneity of a neighborhood block association.

Manners have only superficially to do with the right fork and the timely acknowledgment. Observing the old formal rules of etiquette—the ceremonies with gloves and hats and calling cards and permissions to visit, with drafting and answering invitations, with remarking on every success and sorrow—has always been less important than instilling a sensibility of concern and regard. And that more valuable interior sensibility is showing signs of erosion. There exists an uncertainty about critical norms of conduct and aesthetic judgment, and a reluctance to define or invoke them. One consequence has been a widespread, and usually unwitting, coarsening of behavior.


Some of the boorishness derives from the traditional need of the young to demarcate their behavior and provoke some outrage, when they fear all the options to shock may already have been exercised. In off-road vehicles borrowed from their parents, the young make a rebellious stand between the Harleys and the Evian concession. Their best revenge may be a supreme ease with the technology that scares their elders. But who could have foreseen the tribal craze among the young (and the not-so-young) for tattoos and piercings? This is novel. Will the accessorized ear yield to the lopped-off ear, as long hair yields to short? Some bodies are so laden with interpolated bits of steel that you wonder how they manage at airports. What does the attendant do when keys, change, lip-

stick, beeper, bracelet, and watch have been removed, and the curious detector, pointed waistward and lower, still hums in the presence of a hidden stimulus?

Willful disfigurement of the body is thus far at the extremes of expression, but nonviolent display also speaks volumes. Consider how people have allowed themselves to be turned into human billboards. They have the taste (and the money) to buy the best brands of clothes and all the trimmings, and they want the world to know. Crests and emblematic ponies were once sufficient clues to their savvy. No longer. The names of shrewd designers now travel their bodies in packs, across chest, over back, up pant-leg, along pocket, round the side of socks and the waistband of underwear. We wear more tags than kids sent off to camp.

Films of Americans in public (at a baseball game, say) until as recently as the 1960s suggest the crowd is under the sway of an alien force. The women wear blouses and skirts or dresses or, more formal still, suits—and hats, hats, hats. The men are suited too, and hatted row after row to the horizon with brimmed felt jobs, deftly creased. When the crowd rises to cheer or groan, its emotions may become unbuttoned, but its jackets do not. (The art of this movement is lost.)

What has happened since the 1960s? The subsequent scrapping of the rules, the wholesale revision of expectations, has let women wear the pants if they want, zipped or not as they choose, and maybe even ripped. It has rendered the male suit and the felt hat as archaic as tights, doublets, and a wizard's cone cap; they're now the regular habiliment solely of morticians and lobbyists.

 n men, the wide-billed cap, once proper to Little Leaguers, truckers, golfers, and street gangs, has won universal acceptance. In the Mercedes or the pick-up, doing the town or doing the wave, at the market and at the museum, strivin' or just hangin', it has become democracy's very chapeau, morphing distinctions of class and wealth and race and age and sex and interest and fashion sense. It sits on every other head, turned every which way—backward, sideward, aslant—to signify youth and rakishness and insouciance, and frontward when the staff at the nursing home finally make it so and the wearer is not up to recourse.

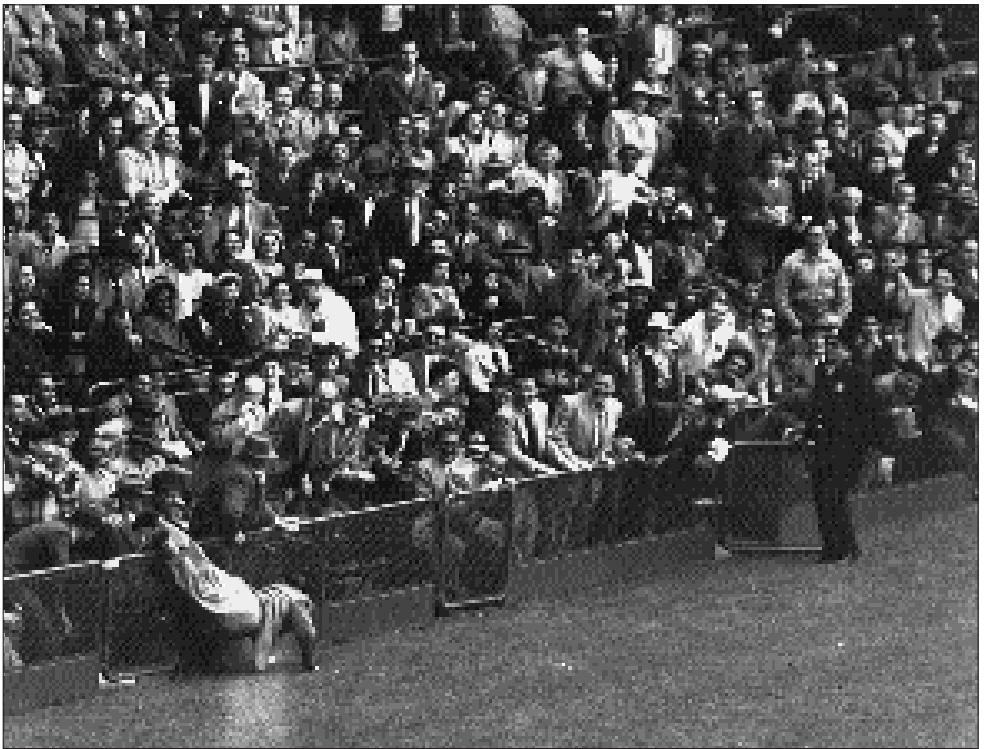
The change in fashion traces an evolutionary lurch in social behavior. People appear in public in clothes that must scare the hangers in a dark closet. The thonged foot, the hairy leg, the shorted thigh, the Spandex-cradled bottom, the polo-shirted paunch, and the chain-encrusted chest are familiar companions on plane and train, in shop and theater. Sweat-suited grannies ride the rails. Americans have been released from the tyranny of stodgy formality, goes the familiar line of defense. It's no wonder adults who believe this cannot sit in judgment on their children. What child would take them seriously? (Not that they have to: "Not in front of the children" now comes out "So, kids, what do you think?")

Some Americans show as little concern for their privacy as for their dignity (and not just those who admit on TV that they can't be left alone with farm animals). On bikes and park benches, on the street, in the air, at restaurant tables, in lobbies and waiting rooms, ordinary Americans now

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speak freely into trim devices. They speak with no self-consciousness, contemporary to the core, and they speak loudly, as if they need to be heard over an explosion or a garage band. (The decibel level of the entire culture has been raised, thanks to technology.) It's doubtful that the etiquette of the cellular phone has been codified yet, much less widely published. So why the sense—at least in some—that what these voluble solipsists are doing in public is a touch crass, though they store their technology in a cashmere pocket or in a niche on the dashboard of a Bimmer? Perhaps, beneath the raucous surface of the age, against all its steep tilt toward informality, there still runs a vein of old refinement, its location a matter of instinct (and sensibility).

**I**n this age of “whatever,” Americans are becoming slaves to the new tyranny of nonchalance. “Whatever.” The word draws you in like a plumped pillow and folds round your brain; the progress of its syllables is a movement toward surrender and effacement, toward a universal shrug. It's all capitulation. No one wants to make a judgment, to impose a



*What strange force compelled this crowd to wear jackets, ties, and dresses to a 1950 baseball game in Brooklyn, New York?*

standard, to act from authority and call conduct unacceptable. But until something like that begins to happen, until standards of intelligence and behavior are defined and defended once again, we had better be prepared to live with deterioration.

The diffidence of manners bobbles along in the slipstream of the larger decline in taste. What we are enduring is not the end of taste, or the end of manners, but simply the ascendancy of questionable taste and regressive

manners. Was it on another planet that a campus free-speech movement in the early 1960s rubbed traditional sensibilities raw with the sandpaper of four-letter words? In polite society, the words are now as natural as breath. Their power to shame, to anger, to provoke, to wound is gone. It has passed, oddly, to possessives like “his” or to words schoolkids once tossed like stones—stupid, fat, ugly, crippled, queer—the mindlessness of their cruelty now judged to be full of harsh intention and ripe for judicial settlement.

But to imagine a past time of exquisite courtesy and refinement, if not 50 years ago, then 100, or 123, is to regret a world of bubbles. That world, if it existed, is as vanished as a politician’s promises, and not worth tears. Other decades had their own absurdities, to which they were blind, their own prejudices that prescriptions about manners helped sustain. In perpetuating the dream of a golden-age post-World War II America—where homes and lives were ordered in rows, where fathers wore ties and got home unrumpled every evening for dinner with the family, and mom’s apron was never smudged despite her kitchen duties, and boys played baseball and tag and, reluctantly, the piano, and girls read books and talked on the phone and slapped any stray male hand—let’s not forget the reality of the kids you were told not to play with, the people who could not be invited to dinner, the topics that could never be discussed, the Sears-sized catalogue of actions that were “shameful” and “unforgivable” and “unmentionable.” Would anyone really trade the present, disheveled as it is, for that speciously safe, ignorant, constricted past?

**T**he answer to the question, of course, is “Yes, *someone* would.” And that’s the crux of the problem. No standard of conduct can be everyone’s standard without causing, in some quarter, resentment and, ouch, diminished self-esteem. Pressured to tolerate all difference and every individuality, Americans are slow to shift the value of any self from democracy’s gold standard. The openness is, at once, America’s glory and the clouded fleck that brings imperfection to its clear eye.

Responsibility—blame and credit both—for changes in national social behavior is not easily assigned. For each cause you catch, another ducks round the corner. Still, from a line-up of suspects (peppered with decoys), you might identify three and argue a case. They do not carry all the responsibility, nor do they collude. But their presence in the same place and at the same time has been of some consequence. The three? A popular culture of immense reach and marketability; modern technology, the innocent bystander made unwitting accomplice in the culture’s manufacture and sale; and maybe even democracy itself.

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**A**merican popular culture gets trotted out so often as the cause of every woe that it risks winning victim status. This culture—trivial, galvanizing, engulfing—deserves no sympathy. It needs scrutiny instead, because it has become so powerful and so seductive, so dexterous at shaping taste and attitudes and behavior, so difficult to avoid or to counter. The floodgates that once kept popular culture in check—including a presumptive self-censorship on the part of its purveyors, and a much narrower pre-TV access to markets—no longer function; they’re rusty



Drawing by Wm. Hamilton; Copyright © 1971 The New Yorker Magazine, Inc.

*“But, darling, many very successful young revolutionaries—our own  
Thomas Jefferson among them—dressed for dinner.”*

with disuse and stuck in an open position.

The country may not get the behavior it deserves, but it does get the behavior it countenances. If violent movies drew no audiences, they would implode and vanish. We actually debate the availability of assault weapons in the society and their allowable firepower. Should the hordes of music groups whose names associate them with violence, or the calculated—to budgets and to box office—and increasingly strained violence of movies come as a surprise? The culture jumbles real death and play death, and both are losing their sting. (Even the meek drive like Messala out to teach Ben Hur who’s boss.)

America accepted the unbuttoning of the 1960s, the me-ism of the ’70s, and the aggression of the ’80s, and it has coddled the practiced cool of the ’90s. Suddenly, we’re all grown-ups here, as imperturbable and understanding as seraphim. Sights that not so long ago would have left audiences open-mouthed with wonder leave them droopy-eyed with boredom. To every age, perhaps, its proper surfeit: in old Rome, worried impresarios probably cut deals for more spears, more tigers, more Christians.

**F**or 30 years, at every stage of the culture’s coarsening, the change has been deplored, at least by some. To no avail. The worthlessness of much of this culture now seeps into the carpet where we step, and we track the residue into every room. Movies, music, television, newspapers, magazines dwell routinely on topics once too hot for whispers. The first prime-time premature-ejaculation sight gag debuted on network TV early one evening last season. And there followed . . . indignation? A crusade? An apology? Nothing of the kind. Nothing at all, really. The black hole of the acquiescent culture sucked the moment in without trace or resonance. If everything can be said and anything can be joked about in a format that beams the speech and the action to tens of millions of homes, why are we surprised that



decorum, civility, courtesy, and taste suffer? No single incident makes much of a difference; the sum of them makes a revolution.

We fail even to notice how radically the terms of the discussion have changed. Sexual promiscuity, for instance . . . no sooner are the words written than one wonders whether the concept still exists, though the practice does. Vulgarity washes over little old ladies, and they shake it off like seals. They would never dream of using such language themselves, and they deplore its pervasiveness, but what can be done?

Pop culture is without malicious intent. It does not mean to topple the society it lives off. It exists only to divert and to turn a profit, not to make a lasting contribution to civilization. (Although that can happen accidentally: Aristophanes did not calibrate his topical humor to scholarship 2,500 years off.) Its traditions have the shelf life of bread. Pop culture thrives on novelty and has to keep pushing the bounds of the accepted to admit the novel. On the compass it uses to locate what the society can be persuaded to accept, the needle heads always to true profit. The motives for the public's acceptance and essential complicity are probably complex. At least, let's hope so. But they are for psychologists, anthropologists, sociologists, and economists to read—texts for whole troops of “ists.” The amateur will note only that each age tends to define itself against its predecessors: “To this they said no, so we say yes.” Novelty lies most often in the direction of the outrageous—the previously unspeakable, unsingable, unwearable, unshowable—and only occasionally, through exhaustion, as an aberration, toward reserve.

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**T**echnology inhabits our age as comfortably as a rent-controlled tenant. It has captivated us. Understandably. We take transforming technological advance for granted. Nothing seems astonishing, only inevitable. We engage with the technology actively at times, as at a keyboard, and passively more often, when we see the world as it is cut to fit a TV screen and a TV mentality, or attend movies that would be unthinkable without technology and that technology in other guises persuades us are cultural events. These movies make hundreds of millions of dollars, in this country and around the world. The coarsened sensibility that appreciates them in America is also one of our leading exports.

The technology is gloriously indifferent, but it has been co-opted by the single-minded commercialism of pop culture to affect attitudes and behavior. Technology provides modern markets a life-support system. Bit by bit, byte by byte, it helps craft the consumer soul. The culture could not be so invasive without technology to lend it a saturating power: TV airs a trailer for a movie whose stars are then interviewed later that evening, a week before the movie opens and is written about in magazines and newspapers, just as the soundtrack makes it to music stores and product tie-ins crowd the counters of burger chains or float in the vast flea-market of the Internet. Before long, a single company will own the network, the movie, the stars, the press, the music company, the plastics factory, the abattoir, and the cyberspace. “Tie-in” is indeed the operative term—tie in and across and up, till the public is bound and submissive. A common taste is created for products, events, candidates, amusements. The sadism of the process is no less noisome for its being accomplished with good old American grit and

flair. But self-control is one basis for manners, and incessant manipulation takes a toll on the sensibility that informs behavior.

Americans believe their freedom to choose is limitless; they do not consider enough how the agenda of choices they are presented, no matter how crowded, frames their terms for action. Advertisers speak of consumers as “targets.” Segments of the public are shot right through with arrows of desire. Some targets you only hit, and some you destroy in the process. An advertising campaign may flirt with pornography, but what’s the difference if the ads succeed? Across the pages of magazines, a rogues’ gallery of fragile young men/women, linked in a conga line of pointless sexuality, have opted for a new cologne over bathing. They do not look nice to be near. But, ah, the target group is struck. Over every televised second of noble achievement at last summer’s wounded Olympics hovered the buzzards of commercialization and spin, to co-opt emotion and swoop and pick at will. Here was the authority of the marketplace in regalia to humble a king.

We surf so quickly through fashion that, in their desperation for novelty, some designers of the 1990s even looked to the 1970s. They were drawn again to disco wear—the shoes so high they lessen oxygen, the pants so wide their wayward whip saws the air. Only to a parched imagination could the 1970s suggest rain. Needs are planted, nurtured, harvested, and then plowed over, to be replaced with tomorrow’s cravings. Affections shift and are easily won, as among adolescents. Nothing is accorded an enduring value—it is this month’s model only—and the consequence is to flatten the value of everything.

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**H**ow else does the culture deaden taste and affect behavior? You can find examples in the commonplace. Consider the absence of aesthetic value in the design of everyday items. Their function is all. The comfortable private environment of the old phone booth—a seat at just the right level and, as the folding door was shut, a light that brightened automatically and a little fan that blew from a top corner—is now just myth. Rows of phone booths have been replaced by rows of nakedly public phone modules, objects of industrial design and probably industrial strength, that resemble urinals hoisted and clamped to a wall. A phone booth invited polishing; a phone module needs hosing down.

An impatience with properties that distract from the substance drives too much contemporary design. Look at what has happened to pens and shavers and watches. Most of these objects exist to be replaced. The function, not the appearance, matters—as it matters just to get the food down, dash through the door first, have your shouted say over others’ whispers.

**W**hat’s aesthetic defers to what’s economical. Theaters have been stripped of detail and reduced in size, and the ceremony of visiting them has diminished. The extravagance of theaters built in the days before television had a civilizing effect. It created an environment where people were made to feel privileged, however briefly, and where they socialized accordingly. Who feels social in a polyplex unit the size of a rec room, with a screen barely larger than a TV’s, a half-gallon of soda wedged through a hole in the arm of your



seat, an oil drum of popcorn locked between your knees, your eyes glued only intermittently to the screen but your feet stuck securely to the floor? The aesthetic dimension of ordinary ritual is lost. The experience *tout court* is what's important. The curlicues that might embellish it have as little relevance as the flourishes that are manners.

This coarsening of the society is an indulgence. It is not the old honest coarseness of frontier settlers removed from society and struggling with bears and the seasons. It occurs in a land of plenty that has turned inward because no external crisis poses a mortal threat or diverts its attention from self. The mirror is its closest friend, and eventual worst enemy. Expectations of daily material entitlement beyond the dreams of Americans 50 years ago are routine. There is simply more *stuff* in America, everywhere in America, not just among the rich, who lead lives of unprecedented ease, but among the majority middle class, and even among those whom official statistics identify as the poor. Because their choices look so prodigal, Americans believe they enjoy great freedom. Yet their movement, random and deliberate, occurs within parameters to which the market governs entrance (and from which it guards egress). In an age of rampant self-esteem—when a book entitled *Yes! You!* could be an exhortation to weight loss, an accountant's degree, the Air Force, or a corporate takeover—Americans have suffered a diminution of self-respect and become a spawning ground of appetites. To say that America is an unbuttoned, liberated society because it appears to have no use for codes of behavior that once supported repression and hypocrisy is to pay insufficient attention to the hold a technologically empowered market has over us. Its grip is the essence of beguilement.

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Manners, like taste, are dependent on an acknowledgment of authority, and, in a vigorous, strutting democracy, authority can be hard to come by. Without being Martin Luthers exactly, Americans concede it only grudgingly. The “says who”/“who are you to say”/“this is a free country”/“that’s just your opinion” line of thought runs like a fault through the society. Rather than rush to judgment of social behavior, as was once all too common, we rush from judgment, disposed to justify or overlook the most appalling lapses. The unthinkable has become not just thinkable but option #2. There are few implausible alternatives anymore in America. If you kill a parent, there’s probably a good reason, and a smart lawyer will help you to remember it.

Criteria and authority are suspect. Direction and control bear the taint of “fascism.” We are reluctant to say “enough” and be accused of that most mortal of all contemporary sins, “imposing your values on others.” The absence of a fuss by any but those who are called “extreme” eases the way to further transgression. And the purveyors will up the ante next time. No one wants to point a finger, and charity’s gain is probably the nation’s loss.

What’s being lost is the sense that there can be national norms for ordinary behavior. A nickel notion of democracy and difference, as if respect for every view meant that no view goes unchallenged, threatens to absolve us of the need for civility. It’s leveling the nation to the mean. In the sphere of manners and behavior, this embrace of democracy’s most superficial

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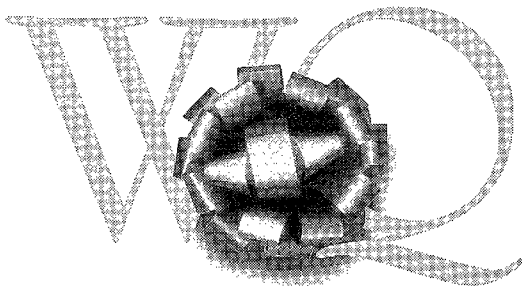
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*The tyranny of indifference*

appeal—its lavish distribution of acceptance and random freedoms—may, perversely, fragment the society. It's a corrosive benignity. It dulls democracy's sharper and truer reality, which depends on honest debate and on differences not indulged but subordinated and sometimes over-ruled.

**A**llow that behavior is just cultural and that its norms are constructed. So what? Our whole lives are lived among constructions, and if societies are to be ordered and interesting, they need rules and goals and judgments and prohibitions, not fixed for all time but stable enough to inspire and temper behavior and supple enough to slip their bonds when reason counsels change. Manners are the face we turn to the world, and looks, of course, can deceive. Most times they do not, if only because most people lack the will and the wit for sustained pretense. What you get is, to a substantial degree, what you see.

Some poems are shapelier than others. Some cars ride better than others. Some teams prevail. We routinely invoke standards against which we measure achievement of every sort. So why do we hesitate to discriminate among forms of behavior or to set standards for day-to-day conduct—not legal standards but mere, invaluable, social standards? The answer invokes the vastness of the country, the heterogeneity of the population, the integrity of the individual, the arbitrariness of all standards, the impossibility of consensus. And yet we permit commercial forces to shape consensus daily.

The idea that calling attention to bad manners is itself unmannerly and that one should teach by the example of one's own propriety is valid on paper and in monasteries. Is it really plausible that the boom-box bearer sharing his taste in music with the population of a large city will look around and think "Wait a second, no one else's luggage is throbbing"? That chatterers at a movie will suddenly feel they are being left out of the general silence? That strangers to either side of you on a plane who decide from their respective window and aisle seats to begin a courtship across your chest will realize they haven't looked at the complementary flight magazine? That the woman at the opera who can extend the unwrapping of a lozenge to fill all the longeurs of *Parsifal* will learn to act with Rossini-like dispatch? These people and the hordes of their thoughtless compatriots across the land require immediate attention. Let the saints teach by example. Ordinary crusaders have their own lesson plans and know that Americans are better taught by a neatly turned put-down or an undeleted expletive.

**B**ut a posse of decorum vigilantes loose in the land is a stopgap measure at best. Manners are a legacy of education, and the society's failure is in its reluctance to provide education, in and out of a classroom, that can be trusted to instruct the young about the world and its history, the nation and its context, to instill critical discrimination and an ease with nuance, to set the terms for everyday conduct, and to rank bad, better, best. An adequate education should leave you on perpetual alert, accustomed to raising the possibility, like a flare at a disaster site, that what you are being told is nonsense, even if it's hardbound and best-selling, and what you are being sold is junk, no matter its label's cachet. Thus guarded and prepared, you will move through the society with a reserve that, at the least, intends no offense.

Then again, who knows? Shaggy-haired parents breed buzzcut offspring, and maybe fashion will gyre around again to old-fashioned coded rules of behavior—the spell broken, incivility deplored. It's more probable that manners will survive as an exercise of intuition, an uncertain progress along the wall of a dim alley. So long as a vigilant sensibility guides the steps, ignorance of what's peripheral is unimportant. All the good will in the world cannot decode the functions of a cadre of utensils in drill formation around a plate, and shrimp may get taken with a cake fork. But the untutored may nonetheless say "thank you" for favors and dress each request in a "please," rise from a bus seat and will it to another, defer instinctively to age and beauty, speak low and woo persuasively.

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**S**everal decades ago, placards with the single word THINK began to appear on desks and walls. The encouragement should have been unobjectionable, but the bald injunction sounded ominous. This new age needs a softer directive. Perhaps plain old CONSIDER (three syllables, to wrestle the three of WHATEVER). The word first turns us inward, toward reflection, before it sends us out to share in the teeming, indifferent world.