

The Reformation of Manners

by Don Eberly

INTRODUCTION

The abolishment of the British slave trade in 1807 is widely regarded as one of the great turning points in world history. Few, however, know the remarkable details of how it came about, much less what lessons it might hold for today. The campaign to abolish the slave trade lasted from 1787 until 1807, a 19-year period during which William Wilberforce introduced the same bill to repeal the trade every year. It would take yet another 26 years, until 1833, to fully eradicate slavery from the British continent.

Wilberforce was born to aristocracy and entitled to privilege, enormously talented, and encircled by rich and famous friends. Shortly after being elected at the age of 25 to the British House of Commons, where he would serve from 1780 to 1825, Wilberforce was urged by a friend to investigate the conditions of slaves. Scandalized and shocked by what he found, and propelled irresistibly forward by a deep religious faith, Wilberforce threw himself at a task that would prove bitterly controversial and recalcitrant: the total abolition of the slave trade.

For Wilberforce, confronting the slave trade meant sacrificing political prestige and upward mobility, enduring ferocious opposition, and facing abruptly ended friendships. Wilberforce's cause would be a popular one today, but in eighteenth century

Britain, slavery was deeply entrenched in the economic system and widely accepted by the public.

For 19 straight years, well-financed interests and popular resistance handily defeated Wilberforce's legislation. Roughly the size of today's defense industry, the slave trade was a pillar in an empire that traversed the globe. Disruption of the practice threatened not only powerful landowners, merchants and shipping firms, but also thousands of ordinary laborers such as dockworkers and sailors.

THE LINKAGE OF THE ABOLITION OF SLAVERY AND MANNERS

How does abolishing the British slave trade relate to manners? The answer is that the two are inextricably linked. Wilberforce knew that government action against slavery was impossible short of a massive shift in the moral attitudes and habits of the people themselves. On October 28, 1787, Wilberforce wrote in his journal words that would radically alter the course of human affairs, first in Britain and later in America: "God Almighty has set before me two great objects, the suppression of the Slave Trade and the Reformation of Manners."

As impossible as the job of abolishing the slave trade appeared, the remaking of a decadent English society seemed even more daunting. The times were characterized by high rates of crime, drunkenness and general disregard for moral standards. Public confidence in the laws was at an all time low, and there was widespread economic and political corruption. The sophisticated classes mocked religion and embraced skepticism toward moral truth as the fashionable outlook while malicious and lewd behavior was commonplace.

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THE CIVIL SOCIETY PROJECT

3544 N. Progress Ave.
Suite 101

Harrisburg, PA 17110

Phone (717) 671-1908

FAX (717) 671-1905

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Slavery, according to Wilberforce, could not be understood in isolation from these debauched conditions. Moral indifference toward the evil of slavery, he discerned, was nourished in a cultural environment of coarseness and crudeness. The “systematic misery” of slaves was considered but one or two links in the chain removed from the “habitual immorality and degradation” that characterized the masses in society at the time.

By recognizing this linkage, Wilberforce was merely reflecting what others from different places and times in history had observed: that laws are, to a very large extent, a reflection of the culture. Perhaps Edmund Burke offered the most famous encapsulation of this: “Manners are more important than laws. Upon them, in a great measure, the laws depend.” Burke continued, manners are “what vex or soothe, corrupt or purify, exalt or debase, barbarize or refine us, by a constant, steady, uniform, sensible operation, like that of the air we breathe in.”

This being the case, Wilberforce concluded that to change the law he had to go “upstream” to the tributaries of moral beliefs and conduct. He had to confront the moral ethos in which the slave trade was nourished. Uprooting a corrupt law required reforming the debased culture that legitimated it.

Wilberforce also recognized that, unlike passing anti-slavery legislation, the work of reforming manners and morals was not the work of the state; such a task would have to be carried out by various voluntary associations within civil society. Over the course of

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Edmund Burke

three decades, Wilberforce personally founded, led or participated in as many as 67 voluntary associations aimed at the reform of manners and morals, resulting in one of the most dynamic chapters in the history of voluntary reform societies. His success at achieving the twin goals — reforming manners and, in turn, eradicating slavery — stands as a monument to the power of voluntary

associations and reform societies in bringing social and moral uplift to a debauched culture.

AMERICA’S MORIBUND MANNERS

Whether America has, in its current ill-mannered state, reached the same low-water mark as Britain at the turn of the nineteenth century is open to debate. Judging from the assessment that Americans themselves make of their current condition, it would appear that this is so.

A survey by *U.S. News and World Report* and Bozell Worldwide indicates that many people believe that the behavior of Americans has worsened. Large majorities of Americans feel their country has reached an ill-mannered watershed. Nine out of 10 Americans think incivility is a serious problem, and nearly half think it is extremely serious. Seventy-eight percent say the problem has worsened in the past 10 years.¹

Americans do not see rudeness merely as a private irritant. They see in disrespectful behavior the portends of a more worrisome social disintegration. More than 90 percent of those polled believe incivility and rudeness contribute to the increase of violence in the country; 85 percent believe it divides the national community, and the same number see it eroding healthy values like respect for others.²

In other words, the abandonment of responsible behavior is no longer seen as isolated to an occasional episode nor is it viewed as a matter of merely private concern with no social consequences; it is thought to be both pervasive and to be affecting the nation’s social health.

Pollster George Gallup, who has long tracked American attitudes about values, has “a sinking feeling” when he looks over surveys. A recent Gallup poll showed a large majority of Americans believe that society has “a harsh and mean edge,” Gallup says, noting that the United States has become “a society in which the very notion of a good person is often ridiculed,” where “retribution is the operative word.”³

Columnist Michael Kelly describes a “Gresham’s law in aesthetics” that operates in our manners just as in economics, which he says works with “breathtaking, ruthless rapidity.” Nothing, he says, “is not fit to print,” not even the act of the nation’s highest leader and chief living symbol of democracy soiling the dress of his adulteress. Kelly proclaims: “The Marxist ideal is at last reached. We live, finally, in a classless society: No one has any class at all.”

Kelly sites as evidence of his “classless society” thesis a number of cultural trends which have been

adopted by the demographic mainstream, whether fashions or the use of vulgarity. What is remarkable about this, he says, is not that deviance is being used to offend the sensibilities of the refined, which has occurred for centuries, but that deviancy may no longer exist as a category. The offenders are not cultural rebels; they are the mainstream culture. “The horror,” he says, “is that we are fast approaching a culture where it is impossible to offend.”⁴

Stories of America’s slipping manners are regularly captured in our headlines and decried by columnists. Language and behavior standards on film, television and popular music have eroded to an unprecedented degree. Nearly every community in America has witnessed increased anger and rudeness in public places, and of road rage occasionally turning violent.⁵

Soccer moms and dads have become so loud-mouthed and ill-mannered on the sidelines, that one youth soccer league in West Palm Beach has adopted a policy of requiring the parents of all kids who suit up for the game to complete an ethics class. The Juniper-Tequesta Athletic Association, which serves 6,000 kids ages 5-18, is now requiring parents to take an hour-long class in ethical conduct, including training in how to show positive support and good sportsmanship. “We just want to try to de-escalate the intensity that’s being shown by the parents at these games,” says the volunteer athletic league president.⁶

Few public spaces are not seen as suitable for broadcasting ideas and images once widely thought of as reflecting bad manners. For example, bumper stickers have always been around, advertising one’s favorite politician or rock band or promoting a charity or social cause. It has been commonplace to broadcast offbeat ideas and causes via this medium. Today, however, bumper sticker messages carry sexual references and insults, the “F” word, and cartoon characters urinating on anything they find unacceptable.⁷

In an article entitled “A Small Plea to Delete a Ubiquitous Expletive,” in *U.S. News and World Report*, Elizabeth Austin plaintively suggests that if American society can agree on nothing else, perhaps establishing the modest goal of removing the now common use of the “F” word from polite circles might be a modest start. Everyone, including people who never use bad language, is now forced to hear it frequently used “on the street, on the job, at the health club, at the movies — anywhere two or three disgruntled citizens might gather.”

Austin adds that the need to work for the elimination of the English language’s most vulgar word would

have been seen as preposterous a couple of generations ago since neither it nor any comparable word would ever have been used in polite company.⁸

For solutions, Austin recommends that those who use it in their private lives simply stop doing so, and that people stop approving of its use. But she also recommends public action. For example, she recommends that police start ticketing drivers who use the word, an action she believes would pass any constitutional test. She further recommends that we be more critical of authors who use it, and that the Motion Picture Association of America gives an automatic NC-17 to any movie that uses the word.

Such an approach still leaves plenty of room for what people are free to say in the locker room or what is said in the privacy of one’s home. The rules of civility have always granted a large measure of latitude.

Social norms always allow deviation from the norm, although at the price of facing social disapproval from those who still possess taste and moral sensibility. What advocates of manners and civility routinely point out is that the norms themselves — even the idea of

commonly accepted norms — have come under assault and are breaking down. A society without civilizing norms will only likely become more brutal and barbaric in time.

More than anything, America is deeply confused and divided over what should be permissible under what circumstances. It’s not that Americans aren’t outraged, as the polls themselves reflect. It is more the case that, as Lee Bockhorn puts it: “Americans have become schizophrenic about manners.” We flock by the millions, he says, “to scatological comedies from the toilet-mouthed *South Park* to the masturbatory *American Pie*.” “At the same time,” however, “polls reveal that a huge majority believe American manners and morals have undergone a precipitous and deplorable decline.”⁹ In other words, programming that large majorities of Americans privately report finding deplorable — be it shock radio, soft porn on television, vulgar language and shockingly degraded movies — is being consumed by sizable numbers of Americans, including many who report finding it offensive.

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MANNERS AS VOLUNTARY RULES OF BEHAVIOR

What Wilberforce understood in his day, and what growing numbers of Americans are coming to appreciate in our own time, is that there is an unbroken link between uncivil and ill-mannered behavior of the milder variety and tolerance for the more barbaric treatment of human beings, illustrated in Wilberforce's time by the slave trade. The corruption of superficial and seemingly harmless behavior can have a far deeper corrupting effect. The attempts by some organizations and movements today to restore civility and recover manners should be seen as an attempt to renew the linkage between freedom and its responsible use with the aid of social rules and restraints. Manners, in other words, serve important purposes in maintaining an ordered freedom in a democratic society.

Manners have a unique history as an informal and voluntary tool for shaping individual behavior and social standards. In 1530 the philosopher Erasmus wrote in his etiquette book, *de Civitate*, that a young person's training should consist of four important areas: religion, study, duty, and manners. Another book on manners from the same era, written by French Jesuits in 1595, was translated into English and was adopted by George Washington two centuries later.

John Moulton, a noted English judge, speaking in 1912 on the subject of "law and manners" divided human action into three domains. The domain of law essentially compels people to obey, without much

choice in the matter, while the domain of free choice grants the individual unconstrained freedom. Between these two domains lies a third domain that is neither regulated by the law nor free from constraint.

This "domain of obedience to the unenforceable" was what Moulton termed manners. Manners were about proper behavior, of course, but they also entailed a larger concept of moral duty and social responsibility. They involved "doing right where there is no one to make you do it but yourself," where the individual is "the enforcer of the law upon himself."¹⁰

What Moulton understood was that cultural conditions could not be reversed by government action or changes in the law alone, but by a recovery of manners. Moulton saw the domain of manners as "the whole realm which recognizes the sway of duty, fairness, sympathy, taste, and all other things that make life beautiful and society possible," things which can be easily corrupted but not so easily corrected, at least not by laws.¹¹

While the state is in no position to restore manners, the quality of public life and of government is inextricably linked to them. Government is forced to deal with the consequences of the breakdown of manners and moral norms. The erosion of cultural norms practically ensures that the state becomes the arbiter of conflict, and will thus continually expand.

MANNERS: SMALL MORALS, LIMITED GOVERNMENT

Every society, to function as a society, must settle on some basic notion of right behavior that is regarded as important and legitimate enough to enforce. Societies have basically two means to enforce right behavior. One is the law, which is a clumsy, heavy-handed and often inappropriate tool. The second, as Lord Moulton pointed out, is manners. As many observers have pointed out, there is an inverse relationship between the widespread practice of manners and the intrusiveness of law.

When the rules for determining what conduct is proper are no longer set by custom, morality, and religion, the rules of society become decided through politics alone.

Judith Martin, leading etiquette expert, sees manners fulfilling a "regulative" function, similar to that of the law. Where manners function properly, the conscience is informed and behavior is constrained without having to resort to policy or the courts. Martin says that manners work to "soften personal antagonisms, and thus to avert conflicts," so that the law may be restricted

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to “serious violations of morality.”¹² Social rules bring respect and harmony to daily situations.

The wide practice of manners can make the job of governance easier. Political philosopher Thomas Hobbes understood manners as “small morals,” and no small protection for a society against what he famously described as “state of nature.” Manners were part of the routine of an ordered society, where civility and respect were practiced voluntarily apart from the compulsion of law. They are the bridges between private freedom and public duty.

A system of manners is a way for a free society to induce people to act respectfully by voluntary means. As Hobbes pointed out, manners contribute to the maintenance of order and balance in society: safeguarding society from the nasty, brutish conditions that characterized man in his uncivilized state while minimizing the need for a highly intrusive state.

As individuals make their decisions less and less in accordance with either private conscience or widely accepted moral standards and more on the basis of the law, society becomes legalistic in its approach to behavior; the law, not morality guides behavior. Under this law-based system of regulating conduct, many are prone to both resort to the law in sorting out differences and to assume that whatever the law does not formally forbid must therefore be permissible. In other words, when the law is the principle arbiter, other gentler forms of regulation — such as ethics and manners — tend to recede.

Judith Martin explains it this way: on the one hand, she says many Americans have come to believe and to put into practice “the idea that any behavior not prohibited by law ought to be tolerated.” On the other hand, she says people resort to the law to correct minor offenses that should be socially regulated by manners: “people who found rude but legally permitted behavior intolerable have attempted to expand the law to outlaw rudeness.”¹³

Ultimately, says Martin, attempts to eradicate rudeness or obnoxiousness through the law poses a threat “to the freedoms guaranteed by the constitution.”

Social regulations such as manners not only govern more softly than the law, they are more flexible. Social regulation leaves room for nonconformity, which the law does not, and requires no costly governmental apparatus. The state’s rules are absolute and binding, enforceable through arrest and imprisonment. Thus, when conflicts arise in a society governed by a pervasive law rather than social constraints, these conflicts — whether on highways, school playgrounds, or in

malls — quickly escalate and must be resolved by external authorities. Illustration of this phenomenon at work is the increased number of security personnel serving in locations where they were never needed before, such as in schools and at sporting events.

In many respects this need to balance order and liberty by voluntary means, was seen by the American constitutional framers as the central challenge for the Republic, and one which they hoped and expected succeeding generations would take up. The framers frequently used terms such as habits, dispositions, sentiments, and manners to describe the kind of self-regulating behavior that would maintain public order while minimizing the need for costly, intrusive government.

The constitutional framers knew they were putting more confidence in the people than might be justified by the experience of history, and that freedom could only be maintained through appropriate order voluntarily maintained by the people. The founders had little doubt about the durability of the formal framework of constitutional government, but voiced concern about the willingness of the people to undertake the rigors of self-government. The free society requires a capacity not only to regulate one’s own passions, but also to have regard for the rights and opinions of others.

The founders of the American democratic system were attuned to manners and related topics. While they contributed some of the most profound political theory in such documents as the Federalist Papers, many of their private writings were filled with references to such things as habits, sentiments, mores, dispositions, and manners. These were the ingredients of an well-ordered society in which individuals took it upon themselves to govern themselves.

At least two founders, George Washington and Benjamin Franklin, contributed their own original thoughts and writings on manners. As noted earlier, Washington translated onto a small plain notebook 110 “Rules of Civility and Decent behavior in Company and Conversation.” In Washington’s day, civility was furthered through a set of voluntary rules whereby a person seeking social advancement and distinction learned to display deference to the interests and feelings of others.

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The first principle of manners, according to Washington's rules, had to do with public leadership and conduct: "Every action done in public ought to be done with some sign of respect for those who are present."

Rules of civility were consciously adopted by Washington to win the respect of his fellows and to advance in leadership.¹⁴ By means of a strict code of courteous behavior, Washington established a towering command as a leader on the battlefield. The first principle of manners, according to Washington's rules, had to do with public leadership and conduct: "Every

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Manners and simple courtesy added grace to what was a natural gift for iron-willed leadership. Manners were also the means by which he imposed upon himself self-regulation, ultimately mastering what was widely known to be a severe temper.

MORAL HABITS BECOME INTERNALIZED

As mentioned above, when rules are established by law they can produce superficial compliance where the person is motivated by avoidance of punishment. By contrast, there is evidence in the case of manners of some internalization of the values. Aristotle held that people are essentially conditioned to be good by developing positive habits, what some modern sociologists refer to as "habituation." He said: "only a blockhead can fail to realize that our characters are the result of our conduct." In other words, people become good by doing good.

Edmund Burke, writing in the eighteenth century, said much the same thing in pointing out that morals, to some extent, depend upon the maintenance of manners. Manners, he said, "give their whole form and color to our lives." "According to their quality," he said, "they aid morals, they supply them, or they totally destroy them."

Mark Caldwell, in his book *A Short History of Rudeness: Manners, Morals and Misbehavior in Modern America*, supplies evidence of this connection between manners and morals, although he says the connection is "deceptive, sinuous, and complicated." He cites a variety of examples in history of how attitudes and beliefs adjusted themselves according to newly expected behavior. For example, the movement to consider racial discrimination unacceptable has led to

improved moral attitudes about race. Caldwell concludes that attempts to turn "optional niceties into duties in the hope that this will stiffen our moral spines" has support from the experience of history.¹⁵

Critics of manners are quick to cast doubt upon this phenomenon by suggesting that rather than supporting moral attitudes, manners are merely a cover for hypocrisy and repression. In other words, manners are discounted as phony because they are thought to bear no relationship to inner character. The defenders of manners will readily admit that hypocrisy is one human behavior that does exist, but quickly add that it is not entirely lacking in social usefulness. Even if the hypocrisy charge is true, a certain amount of what virtue czar Bill Bennett calls "constructive hypocrisy" is necessary because every civilization needs to keep certain perversions under control.¹⁶

University of Texas Associate Professor of Government J. Budziszewski is among those who believes that practicing courtesy will not only take the edge off some of society's coarseness, it will begin to fundamentally change people. Though courtesy can "mask" some of the unpleasant things one might feel, Budziszewski says this type of mask is not hypocritical, as many would define it, because it has a high purpose. "Masks, of course, can be used to deceive, but in courtesy that is not the aim."¹⁷ It is to guard against wanton disrespect of human beings.

As C.S. Lewis, Gilbert Meilaender, and a host of other scholars and social critics have explained, masks are worn partly in hopes that our true faces will gradually grow to fit them, and partly to set a good example in the meantime. "If you please," "thank you," and "the pleasure is mine" may be mere formulae, says Budziszewski, but "they rehearse the humility, gratitude and charity that I know I ought to feel and cannot yet." Courtesy, he says, finds its place in a world where people "would like to be better than they are."¹⁸

CULTURAL FORCES BEHIND THE CORRUPTION OF MANNERS

The wide acceptance of manners has always waxed and waned throughout society. Their waning in recent decades has been brought about by cultural and philosophical influences, some of which may have been inherent in the American system from the beginning, and some of more recent origins.

Alexis de Tocqueville praised many aspects of the American system of democracy, especially its driving impulse toward equality, but wondered how a

society that would do away so completely with social distinctions could preserve a sense of mutual respect and obligation when it came to social conduct.

Tocqueville speculated that America's incessant drive toward equality would produce a dynamic, opportunity-rich society, but that it would do so at the expense, in effect, of manners. He warned that Americans would use their freedom not merely for purposes of individual industry but in pursuit of "petty and paltry pleasures."

Weakening institutions

Another factor of more recent origins is the weakening of those institutions, which typically transmit manners and morals. Michael Sandel states that worries about incivility express a deeper fact that the moral fabric of community is unraveling around us. "From families and neighborhoods to cities and towns to schools, congregations and trade unions, the institutions that traditionally provided people with moral anchors and a sense of belonging are under siege."¹⁹

As Sandel and others argue, it is not enough to have a clear concept of what manners and morals are. They depend upon effectively functioning value-shaping institutions, with real legitimacy and authority, to be transmitted. "You can't have strong virtues without strong institutions," says University of Chicago ethics professor Jean Bethke Elshtaine, "and you can't have strong institutions without moral authority."²⁰

The erosion of authority and community norms picked up momentum in recent decades as an ideology of individual autonomy became widely embraced in the culture, the objective of which has been to liberate the individual from all inner as well as outer restraints, including commonly held social standards.

Much of the authority that was once enjoyed by family, religion and the civic community has been transferred to the individual. Says Allen Ehrenhalt, "there may be a welter of confused values operating in the 1990s, but there is one point on which all Americans speak with unity and unmistakable clarity." We have become, he says, "emancipated from social authority as we once used to know it."²¹ This is true, says Ehrenhalt, throughout every segment of America, whether the urban ghetto or the middle or upper classes of America, and it is grounded in an excessive orientation toward individual autonomy. The worship of individual autonomy and the suspicion of authority "has meant the erosion of standards of conduct and civility, visible mostly in the schools where teachers who dare to discipline pupils risk a profane response."²²

A culture that is in search of greater emancipation

from all restraints is likely to see such things as manners as a barrier, not an aid, to individual development. Says Bennett "the messages being so powerfully promulgated is basically this: the *summum bonum* of life is self-indulgence, self-aggrandizement, instant gratification; the good life is synonymous with license and freedom from all inhibitions; rules are undesirable and made to be broken; and self-fulfillment is achieved by breaking them."²³

Repudiating an older culture of conformity

Some would say that the erosion of social standards over the past several decades is an understandable, if somewhat excessive reaction, to a culture that previously erred on the side of a conformity that stifled individual expression. The excessively constrictive standards of the 1950s were thrown off by the "baby boom" generation, which is now demographically dominant. For many in this generation, the call to manners cannot be confused with a return to a previous era with all of its limits and social rigidity. Many in this generation have second thoughts about the social revolution they spawned, but few are willing to go back to where things were.

And how different those social standards were. Writing in the fall of 1996 in the *Wilson Quarterly*, James Morris describes films from the postwar era that show Americans in public places, like baseball games, almost as though "they're 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." Rules were set by people in communities, not the halls of Congress: "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.'"

No one, "wants to make a judgement, to impose a standard, to act from authority and call conduct unacceptable." Until standards of intelligence and behavior are defined and defended once again, "we had better be prepared to live with deterioration."

Morris doubts Americans will exchange the present for a past considered "speciously safe, ignorant and restricted." Manners depend on acknowledging authority, but authority is hard to come by in "a vigorous strutting democracy." No one, Morris adds, "wants to

make a judgment, to impose a standard, to act from authority and call conduct unacceptable." Until standards of intelligence and behavior are defined and defended once again, "we had better be prepared to live with deterioration."²⁴ Modern skepticism toward moral values has reduced what was once widely considered objective standards of morality to matters of personal taste, preference and individual choice.

If the 1950s were stifling, as most would agree, Morris says the present age is its radical opposite. "In this age of 'whatever,' Americans are becoming slaves to the new tyranny of nonchalance." For 30 years every facet of the culture has steadily coarsened. Movies, music, television, newspapers and magazines dwell routinely on topics that, according to Morris, were "once too hot for whispsers."

An older culture of almost stoic self-denial, which erred on the side of restraint, has been traded in for a culture of self-realization and sensuality in which there are no universal values to which all consent, only individual preferences and desires. Popular culture broadcasts this new tendency by encouraging everyone to ignore the rules. Calvin Klein targets secularized images of youth as "people who do only what they want to do." Saab sells cars by telling us to "peel off inhibitions; find your own road." Nintendo urges children to "be heard; play it loud" as a boy spits at the camera. Healthy Choice Cereals suggests that to be happy "you gotta make your own rules."

If manners are about anything they are about concealment of what is private, especially one's body and its functions. Manners, much like clothing for the body, provide an outer covering of unpleasant or debased tendencies. Most will acknowledge that up until perhaps the mid-twentieth century, American culture encouraged people to repress aberrant thoughts and behaviors. Now, says James Wolcott, "the problem is the opposite; getting people to put a cork in it. What was once quite possible to accomplish has become impossible to stop." Even our deepest darkest secrets, "our once hidden shames," become easy pickings for publicity hounds. Because popular culture is now filled with "so many memoirs covering so many addictions and afflictions, the confessions have gotten kinkier and more gossipy, as writers add extra salsa to stand out from the growing herd."²⁵

In this environment, to be well mannered is to appear to engage in repression toward oneself. To expect manners of others is to risk appearing moralistic and judgmental. Wendy Shalit, a scholar and author who is attempting to restore public support for modesty,

states that "compunction is not a dysfunction."

Reacting to the appearance of the completely naked, pregnant body of super model Cindy Crawford on the cover of *W Magazine*, Shalit observes: "Cindy Crawford declares that she is 'comfortable with her body' and shows it to the whole world. But there is good reason to protect the private realm and keep sex sacred: not because you are ashamed but, on the contrary, because you want to reveal yourself only to the one who loves you."²⁶

Closely linked to manners is the capacity for shame and the desire to achieve respectability. Amitai Etzioni, founder of the communitarian movement, recommends the use of shame in confronting anti-social behavior, for example by publishing the names of men who solicit prostitutes; requiring drunk drivers to have labels on their license plates; or even dunce caps for serious troublemakers. "Like any other tool, it can be abused, but that doesn't make it wrong in principle. Compared to jail, shame is a very benign tool."²⁷

The loss of interest in manners can be tied directly to declining concern about respectability in any number of areas, including such basic things as fashions. For example Mark Caldwell describes designer jeans as "a skeleton key to the mystery of manners." For the lower classes, the jeans are merely tacky. For others, however, the imitation of their economic inferiors becomes a social statement. In other words a lowering of dress standards and a lowering of manners and language can and do go hand in hand.

"Something as frivolous as a walkman brings millions of people pleasure every day. But by shutting out the people we encounter on the street, we inhibit an essential piece of what we think of as our humanity. Compassion, generosity, and empathy are all in part tied to our ability to find common ground with those around us. And it is much harder to find common ground without common courtesy."

David Masci

The Anonymous Society

Another factor in the loss of manners is the speed and rootlessness of modern life. People are less inclined to worry about manners when they aren't personally known, or when they are under pressure. People may simply have less time to be well mannered, says Ted Anthony. "Technology, mass media, and a desire to do more, do it better and do it yesterday have turned us into hurriers." He describes the twentieth century as "a hundred year madness:" "it started with horses and hours. It ends with Maseratis and microseconds, with cars speeding across highways, airplanes streaking across skies, microprocessors burning across desktops. This century's mad dash of innovation has produced all of these things — and the most frantic human era ever." "This overwhelming desire to get from A to B, it's madness," causing us to be oblivious to one another.²⁸

Technology itself, which is driving this accelerating process, may be a factor in our declining regard for others. Says David Masci "something as frivolous as a walkman brings millions of people pleasure every day. But by shutting out the people we encounter on the street, we inhibit an essential piece of what we think of as our humanity. Compassion, generosity, and empathy are all in part tied to our ability to find common ground with those around us. And it is much harder to find common ground without common courtesy."²⁹

Added to speed is the anonymity that exists in a transient, uprooted society. Americans simply don't know each other the way they did when they had less busy lives and when most lived in one community for a lifetime. "Hello" and "excuse me" are less likely to be said among perfect strangers. When you know fewer people, the world is bound to appear riskier. According to Mark Caldwell, "Learning manners and living with their consequences would be easy if people and their social systems would only stay put. Most group relations are never stable anywhere; America is and always has been more volatile than the world average." Mobility and the technology that made it possible, says Caldwell "heightened civilization in one way, but put the skids to it in others."

Renewal movements

Periodically throughout American history, society has realized the importance of "the unenforceable" social rules and embraced renewal movements to revive them. In nineteenth century America, for example, books and manuals for the application of manners to every aspect of life flourished. One bibliography assembled during this period counted 236 separate

titles on manners.³⁰ When Emily Post's famous book, *Etiquette*, was published in 1922, it became such a publishing success that it rivaled Sinclair Lewis' *Babbitt*, also published that year.

Today's manners movement has arisen in very much the same fashion. Manners are offered as at least a partial corrective to the excesses of a generation that spent its youth determined to throw off social conventions and constraints. A growing interest in manners is reflected in the popularity of books on the subject and a widening network of civility advocates.

These contemporary authors carefully avoid appearing stiff or Victorian, and instead link manners to a widely expressed desire for greater social harmony and mutual respect.

Modern day manners philosopher Judith Martin, who has written extensively on the subject, says manners are defined as that "part of our fundamental beliefs or wants that include such notions as communal harmony, dignity of the person, a need for cultural coherence, and an aesthetic sense."³¹ Etiquette is the set of rules that emerges from these fundamental beliefs.

Evidence that a search is on for more civilized social customs can be found in the popularity of films, such as the Jane Austin series, based in highly mannered societies where the characters suppress their emotions and urges, and express fastidious regard for others. Further evidence can be found in the astonishing success of *The Rules*, a runaway best seller which establishes for women new (actually old) rules of conduct in courtship in order to secure the respect and fidelity of one's suitor. *The Rules*, says Maggie Gallagher, "violate the most sacred precepts of the 1960s about sex and love: that men and women are the same; that love means letting it all hang out; that people shouldn't play games." By games, she meant essentially the rules of polite romantic encounter, grounded in mutual respect and mannerly conduct.

A growing interest in manners is reflected in the popularity of books on the subject and a widening network of civility advocates. These contemporary authors carefully avoid appearing stiff or Victorian, and instead link manners to a widely expressed desire for greater social harmony and mutual respect.

The return to manners reflects a growing awareness that the loss of standards in courtship have been costly, especially to women. In her book *A Return to Modesty*, Ruth Shalit describes the dreadful consequences of declining respect for women in areas of courtship and sex, and predicts a counterrevolution in women's attitudes: "In the face of all the cultural messages that bark at them that promiscuity and exhibitionism are liberation, they are slowly but surely coming to think the opposite."

Promoting the rules of respect may also be good for commerce. Sensing that courtesy might strengthen the city's tourism industry, New York City civic leaders launched a campaign to encourage its citizens to be nicer to the 25 million visitors who visit the city each year. "Instead of Making a Wise Crack, Smile" the campaign encourages, and "Turn your Back on Tourists and They'll Turn Their Backs on New York." Thanks to the program, cabbies get a new supply of air fresheners, while cops, airport personnel, and subway workers get sensitivity training.

The history of manners suggests that they inevitably rebound when as conditions require, as if by some law of nature. Mark Caldwell describes an "innate and unconscious human law" that seems to conserve manners, even against the odds. He observes that as the Internet has already begun to demonstrate, even a social space created with conscious lawlessness quickly demonstrates a need for order and generates a rough code of manners."³²

CONCLUSION

Over the course of his decades-long campaign to renew English society, Wilberforce created, led or participated in at least 67 benevolent societies which promoted the social reformation in dozens of areas, including public health, aid to the poor, education reform and the humane treatment of animals.

Some societies were religious, some secular, including the Society for the Reformation of Manners. When William Wilberforce set out to reform the manners and morals of the people he did not draft legislation or form a political action committee. There was already plenty of that. Instead, he collaborated with social reformers in developing society-wide campaigns to effect attitudes and behavior.

Proclamations promoting public virtue had been issued annually by King George III, but widely ignored. Wilberforce persuaded the King to reissue one such proclamation, bearing the ungainly name "Proclamation

for the Encouragement of Piety and Virtue and for the Preventing of Vice Profaneness and Immorality." This time, Wilberforce decided to accompany the proclamation with the creation of local "societies" for the purpose of reforming manners in localities all across England.

Wilberforce added real community-based campaigns to an otherwise abstract and largely ignored official declaration, and the result was an elevation of the people's conduct and refinement of their tastes. The reform campaigns provided direct help to 'persons of dissolute and debauched lives.' The theory behind these reform societies that seemingly small things, including manners, matter. Minor offenses against the common good were seen as the fertile ground for more serious crime.

Wilberforce's many councils were usually organized around odd bedfellows and peculiar coalitions. Wilberforce insisted that his "measures, not men" motto would be the means by which persons of all persuasions and stations in life could be recruited to his social reform movement.

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Introducing Our Author:

Don Eberly



Don Eberly is a nationally recognized voice on issues of citizenship and community, and a leading contributor to the growing debate over how to strengthen social institute in America. His writings on issues of society and culture include dozens of essays and articles and

four books, most recently *America's Promise: Civil Society and the Renewal of American Culture*. Don has founded or co-founded several nationally recognized initiatives promoting civic, democratic and economic renewal, including the Commonwealth Foundation and the National Fatherhood Initiative, a non-partisan civic initiative seeking to renew responsible fatherhood in American society.

Don is an affiliate scholar at the Institute for American Values, and a fellow at the George Gallup International Institute. He has held key staff positions in Congress and the White House, and regularly advises senior officials in national and state government.

His work has been covered by many of the major media outlets in the country, including the *Wall Street Journal*, *Newsweek*, the *Washington Post*, the *L.A. Times*, *National Public Radio* and *CNN*. He speaks regularly to business, civic, and policy groups. Don holds graduate degrees from George Washington University and Harvard University.