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In search of good manners

By Cory Franklin and Barry Rosenbloom

May 5, 2009

Scene: The Daley Center.

Characters: Four people, two fortyish men and two elderly women, wait for an elevator.

Story: The elevator door opens. One of the men pushes in front of the women. The women, taken aback by the lack of courtesy, stand bewildered for a second before entering the elevator with the second man. The rude jerk exits first, oblivious to the others. The second man apologizes to the women and as he escorts them out says, "Not too many gentlemen around anymore." The women nod in rueful agreement, observing how sad it is that common courtesy and good manners seem to be disappearing.

First Name

Last Name

Age

Not that this is a new observation. People have bemoaned the loss of manners for centuries. The Roman playwright Plautus commented of 2nd Century B.C. Rome, "Manners go on deteriorating." There must have been a problem with social behavior in Confucius' China, for he observed: "It is good manners that make the excellence of a neighborhood. No wise man will settle where they are lacking."

We're not making progress and that Daley Center elevator set piece is in line with our current pernicious trend of vanishing good manners. Elevator confinement reveals all sorts of telling behavior because confining spaces force people to adapt in order to survive. This may explain in part the gentle customs and ritualized behavior of Japan or the undeniable aggressiveness of Manhattan. But behavior is difficult to predict -- one encounters all manner of manic pushing and shoving on the Tokyo subway and visiting Manhattan you realize polite New Yorkers are one of the city's charms. The disappearance of good manners is everywhere and the reasons are hard to explain.

One problem is the desire to see all forms of bad behavior through the prism of politics. Conservatives remain convinced the deterioration of social order commenced with 1960s liberals. For their part, liberals believe bad behavior is some sort of nefarious conservative plot encouraged by louts like Rush Limbaugh and Bill O'Reilly, genetically predisposed to give offense to any officially protected group. In truth, bad manners respect no political boundaries. We could all do with a little less of the Dick Cheney/Rahm Emanuel charm-school attitude.

Then there remains a concern for petty behavioral trivialities at the expense of real courtesy. Recently, George Will bemoaned the fashion trend of everyone wearing blue jeans instead of dressing like Fred Astaire, while Garrison Keillor banged his cup on the table complaining people don't read e.e.

cummings anymore. These minor transgressions represent the etiquette equivalent of jaywalking -- at worst behavior misdemeanors (and in the case of not reading e.e. cummings, society should consider decriminalization).

The village where one of us resides wants to create a financial curriculum for the local junior high school. School officials want to teach students about mortgages, equities, credit and the like. The adults, in typical fashion, have it backward. There will be plenty of time to teach kids about money. It would serve everyone better to send the kids back to Emily Post and teach them courtesy and better manners.

A small investment of effort in practicing manners would yield remarkable returns every day. Confucius was right -- respect, given and received, makes for an excellent neighborhood. Just do it.

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