



SAINT LOUIS ART MUSEUM

In George Bingham's *Stump Speaking* (1853–54), a common code of civility enables people of many different kinds to meet for political discussion.

THE GENTEEL REPUBLIC

The decline of civility was beginning to reappear as a public concern when we published this historical perspective on the phenomenon in the Autumn 1996 issue. The introduction we wrote then is perhaps even more apt today: “A democracy, more than any other society, is built on mutual trust and cooperation among strangers, on the street as well as in the meeting hall. Creating and sustaining such trust was an important public commitment of America’s early years—one that we seem increasingly unable to make.”

BY RICHARD L. BUSHMAN

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OURS IS NOT THE FIRST AGE TO FEEL pangs of anxiety about the decline of civility, refinement, and manners. Two centuries ago, the currents of revolution stirred similar fears among many of America's Founding Fathers. To these creatures of the Enlightenment, living in their Virginia plantation houses and Philadelphia mansions, manners and refinement ranked with the rule of law, the development of science, and the practice of the arts as the greatest of civilization's achievements. In their darker moments in the years after the Revolution, as a continuing democratic revolution shook the traditional social order, many of the Founders worried that the United States was sliding into barbarism. Benjamin Rush, a Philadelphia physician and signer of the Declaration of Independence, complained that "the principles and morals" of the people had declined and that government everywhere had fallen "into the hands of the young and ignorant and needy part of the community." Rush went so far as to say that he regretted all he had done to advance the revolutionary cause. Thomas Jefferson, John Jay, and Samuel Adams were among the many others who voiced deep disappointment with the

state of postrevolutionary America.

The Founders' consternation grew out of an anxiety foreign to us: They feared that refinement and democracy were contradictory. Gentility, after all, was the product of an elite culture, a way of distinguishing ladies and gentlemen from common people, and thus hardly suited to a republican society.

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These fears, of course, were not borne out. The old social order of prerevolutionary America did pass out of existence. Gentility, however, not only survived but prevailed, becoming an essential element in the success of America's democratic experiment. After 1776, the middle-class people who were empowered by democracy—middling farmers, well-to-do artisans, clerks, and schoolteachers—laid claim to their own version of gentility. Encouraged by entrepreneurs eager to sell them the trappings of respectable existence, Americans installed parlors in simple houses, purchased carpets for

the floors, drank tea from inexpensive creamware, planted shrubs and grass in front yards where there had been weeds and packed earth, and bought books instructing them in comportment and etiquette. From this peculiar amalgam of republican conviction, capitalist enterprise, and genteel practice there emerged an anomalous society: a middle-class democracy with the remains of an aristocratic culture embedded in its core. It was a society uniquely equipped to reconcile the promise of equality with the unpleasant realities of economic inequality and social division.

GENTILITY WAS NOT MUCH ON THE minds of the first English settlers in North America. Their lives generally were governed by more austere religious codes, not to mention the austere material conditions of early colonial life. Then, at the end of the 17th century, a handful of merchants recently migrated from Britain built city houses in Boston and Philadelphia, houses that we would now call mansions. Soon substantial new dwellings in the fashionable Georgian style were going up in these cities and across the Virginia Tidewater, in Portsmouth, in the Connecticut River Valley, along the Hudson, and near Charleston. By the time of the Revolution, barely 90

years after Colonel John Foster built one of the first Boston mansions, every member of the colonial gentry felt he must reside in a mansion furnished with polished walnut furniture, creamwares, and plate—all ornaments of the genteel life.

These new houses were dramatically different from their predecessors. The homes of even the wealthiest people of the earlier era were cramped, low ceilinged, and dark. The new mansions tended to be taller, sometimes rising to three stories, with much higher ceilings inside. They were also more colorful. Earlier colonial houses were never painted, except occasionally for the door and window frames, and were rarely built of brick. The new houses often were red brick or, if frame, were painted bright hues of yellow, blue, and other colors. (Only much later did the white we associate with the era come into wide use.) The windows were large and numerous. The floor plan distinguished the great houses most of all. Where once the main rooms of even the finest house were used for working, eating, sleeping, and entertaining, now certain rooms were set aside strictly for a public purpose, the gathering of polite society.

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Etiquette of Calling.

THE morning call should be very brief. This formal call is mainly one of ceremony, and from ten to twenty minutes is a sufficient length of time to prolong it. It should never exceed half an hour.

In making a formal call, a lady does not remove her bonnet or wraps.

Unless there be a certain evening set apart for receiving, the formal call should be made in the morning.

It is customary, according to the code of etiquette, to call all the hours of daylight morning, and after nightfall evening.

Calls may be made in the morning or in the evening. The call in the morning should not be made before 12 M., nor later than 5 P. M.

A gentleman, making a formal call in the morning, must retain his hat in his hand. He may leave umbrella and cane in the hall, but not his hat and gloves. The fact of retaining hat indicates a formal call.

When a gentleman accompanies a lady at a morning call (which is seldom), he assists her up the steps, rings the bell, and follows her into the reception-room. It is for the lady to determine when they should leave.

All uncouth and ungraceful positions are especially unbecoming among ladies and gentlemen in the parlor. Thus (Fig. 6), standing with the arms akimbo, sitting astride a chair, wearing the hat, and smoking in the presence of ladies, leaning back in the chair, standing with legs crossed and feet on the chairs — all those acts evince lack of polished manners.

If possible, avoid calling at the lunch or dinner hour. Among society people the most fashionable hours for calling are from 12 M. to 3 P. M. At homes where dinner or lunch is taken at noon, calls may be made from 2 to 5 P. M.

Should other callers be announced, it is well, as soon as the bustle attending the new arrival is over, to arise quietly, take leave of the hostess, bow to the visitors, and retire, without apparently doing so because of the new arrivals. This saves the hostess the trouble of entertaining two sets of callers.

To say bright and witty things during the call of ceremony, and go so soon that the hostess will desire the caller to come again, is much the more pleasant. No topic of a political or religious character should be admitted to the conversation, nor any subject of absorbing interest likely to lead to discussion.

A lady engaged upon fancy sewing of any kind, or needlework, need not necessarily lay aside the same during the call of intimate acquaintances. Conversation can flow just as freely while the visit continues.

During the visits of ceremony, however, strict attention should be given to entertaining the callers.

Gentlemen may make morning calls on the following occasions: To convey congratulations or sympathy and condolence, to meet a friend who has just returned from abroad, to inquire after the health of a lady who may have accepted his escort on the previous day. (He should not delay the latter more than a day.) He may call upon those to whom letters of introduction are given, to express thanks for any favor which may have been rendered him, or to return a call. A great variety of circumstances will also determine when at other times he should make calls.

Evening Calls.

Evening calls should never be made later than 9 P. M., and never prolonged later than 10 P. M.

In making a formal call in the evening, the gentleman must hold hat and gloves, unless invited to lay them aside and spend the evening.

In making an informal call in the evening, a gentleman may leave hat, cane, overshoes, etc., in the hall, provided he is invited to do so, and the lady may remove her wraps.

The evening call should not generally be prolonged over an hour. With very intimate friends, however, it may be made a little longer; but the caller should be very careful that the visit be not made tiresome.

General Suggestions.

Calls from people living in the country are expected to be longer and less ceremonious than from those in the city.

When it has been impossible to attend a dinner or a social gathering, a call should be made soon afterwards, to express regret at the inability to be present.

A gentleman, though a stranger, may with propriety escort an unattended lady to the carriage, and afterwards return and make his farewell bow to the hostess.

Should a guest arrive to remain for some time with the friend, those who are intimate with the family should call as

soon as possible, and these calls should be returned at the earliest opportunity.

Unless invited to do so, it is a violation of etiquette to draw near the fire for the purpose of warming one's self. Should you, while waiting the appearance of the hostess, have done so, you will arise upon her arrival, and then take the seat she may assign you.

When a lady has set apart a certain evening for receiving calls, it is not usual to call at other times, except the excuse be business reasons.



FIG. 6. UNGRACEFUL POSITIONS.

No. 1. Stands with arms akimbo.

" 2. Sits with elbows on the knees.

" 3. Sits astride the chair, and wears his hat in the parlor.

" 4. Stains the wall paper by pressing against it with his hand; eats an apple alone, and stands

with his legs crossed.

No. 5. Rests his foot upon the chair-cushion.

" 6. Tips back his chair, soils the wall by resting his head against it, and smokes in the presence of ladies.

The essence of gentility was a compulsion to make the world beautiful, beginning with the individual person and reaching out to the environment.

and reaching out to the environment—houses, gardens, parks, even streets. Thus, even as they built grander, more refined houses, the gentry built new selves to inhabit them. As a boy of 10 or 12 in the 1740s, for example, George Washington was required by his tutor to copy “110 Rules of Civility and Decent Behaviour In Company and Conversation.” It was one of hundreds of “courtesy books” in circulation during this era. The rules covered a multitude of trivial behaviors: “In the Presence of Others Sing not to yourself with a humming Noise, nor Drum with your Fingers or Feet.” Many were regulations required in a deferential society: “In Company of those of Higher Quality than yourself Speak not ti[ll] you are asked a Question then Stand upright put of your Hat and Answer in few words.”

Even among the European aristocracy, the practice of bathing regularly and

wearing clean clothes, much less attending to manners, was a relatively recent innovation. Now everything associated with the body was subject to genteel discipline. Rule after rule told the young man to keep his mouth closed, not to let his tongue hang out or his jaw go slack. The firm, composed mouth, so indelibly associated with Washington, was the facial posture of a gentleman, a model for the treatment of the genteel person’s entire body.

Washington’s manual was one of literally hundreds of such books that circulated through Europe and its colonies from the 16th century onward.* Indeed, most of Washington’s 110 rules were derived from an Italian manual, *Il Galateo*, first published in 1558. In Europe, the courtesy books were used to instruct young gentlemen preparing for life at court or in the households of noblemen. The books facilitated a crucial transition

*The word *genteel* itself derives from the French *gentil*, which entered English usage twice, first in the 13th century when it turned into the English *gentle*, and again in the late 16th century when, traveling to England along with the new ideas about behavior at court, it retained more of its French pronunciation and became *genteel*. The word was linked to a number of kindred terms: polite, polished, refined, tasteful, well-bred, urbane, fashionable, gay, civil.

in the organization of power in Europe, from the feudal system of weak kings to a system which, by the end of the Renaissance, made kings the focal point of military, political, and social power. Nobles who had once ruled with nearly unchecked sovereignty over their own domains were now compelled to attend the monarch at court, where polished manners and beautiful appearances were needed to win favors and privileges.

Gentility was more than a decorative flourish adorning life at court. It was a form of power, a means of gaining favor and of asserting cultural superiority. Lawrence Stone, the great analyst of the English aristocracy on the eve of the Civil War, concluded that the 17th-century aristocracy nearly spent itself to extinction in an effort to keep up appearances under King Charles I (1625–49). They had to refine themselves, their houses, and their entire style of life to maintain their positions at court and in society. Gentility thus arrived in the colonies with an honored pedigree and a mission. It was the culture of the court, of all that was considered high and noble, of the finest and best; it was also an instrument of power available to all who wished to claim it. No group needed such an instrument more than the colonial gentry, whose authority was built on the

unstable foundation of wealth rather than inherited rank.

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But the power of gentility cut two ways. To claim it, the gentry first had to submit to an exacting discipline. Gentility required the construction of mansions, demanded that parlors be furnished with walnut furniture, insisted on the best manners. It was not, moreover, a discipline undertaken merely for personal aggrandizement. Genteel conduct had a public as well as a private purpose. The purchase of beautifully decorated objects was not the whim of wealth or simpleminded mimicry. These objects and the forms of behavior that accompanied them were instruments for achieving a higher mode of living, a way of being polished, refined, civilized.

The genteel idea cut hard against the grain of many of the ideas and forces that pulsed through America in the years around 1776. Nothing could have been

more alien to the spirit of gentility than capitalism, with its demand for disciplined work, frugality, and self-denial. “A Cottage may keep a Man as warm as a Palace; and there is no absolute Necessity of covering our Bodies with Silk,” declared a writer in the *New York Weekly Journal* in 1735. “Is there no quenching of our Thirst, but in Chrystal? No cutting of our Bread, unless the Knife has an Agate Handle?” This is the voice of capitalist rationality elevated into moral injunction. Protestant ministers at times added their own critical voices. But republican politicians were probably the loudest critics. Gentility was an affront to the basic egalitarian impulse of republican culture. “Pray Madam,” John Adams asked his neighbor Mercy Warren in January 1776, on the eve of American independence, “are you for an American Monarchy or Republic? Monarchy is the genteelst and most fashionable Government, and I dont know why the Ladies ought not to consult Elegance and the Fashion as well in Government, as Gowns, Bureaus or Chariots.”

Adams went on to say that an American monarchy “would produce so much Taste and Politeness, so much Elegance in Dress, Furniture, Equipage, so much Musick and Dancing, so much Fencing and Skaiting, so much Cards

and Backgammon; so much Horse Racing and Cockfighting, so many Balls and Assemblies, so many Plays and Concerts that the very Imagination of them makes me feel vain, light, frivolous and insignificant.” A republic favored other qualities, Adams said. It would “produce Strength, Hardiness Activity, Courage, Fortitude and Enterprise; the manly noble and Sublime Qualities in human Nature.”

A REVOLUTIONARY OPPOSITION CAN either destroy the culture of the preceding ruling class or appropriate it. In the American Revolution, the choice was appropriation. While many of the elite despaired at the prospect of vulgarity coming to power, others worked at polishing society. In the years after the Revolution, for example, museums were founded to elevate the public taste and reformers pushed for the creation of public schools, where manners were taught along with the three R’s. Instead of obliterating genteel culture, American democracy allowed ordinary people to make gentility their own.

Once appropriated, gentility was turned to democratic purposes. In the colonies, gentility had set apart a small elite of wealthy, educated ladies and gentlemen who lived in the great houses, dominated society, and occupied high

government offices. Now everyone could possess gentility. Everyone who could adopt genteel manners and exhibit a few of the outward signs of refined life—perhaps a parlor carpet and a cloth on the dining table—could be respectable. In the 18th century, “ladies and gentlemen” designated a distinct class of people who stood apart from the rest. Before long, farmers, minor artisans, clerks, and schoolteachers all answered to that name. By the middle of the 19th century, it included everyone who attended a circus.

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What drove this transformation was a popular desire to emulate those who stood at the peak of society and government, to dignify one’s life with a portion of the glory that radiated from the highest and best circles. But the extraordinary growth of gentility in the United States would not have been possible without the unlikely alliance that was

forged between gentility and capitalism.

Gentility gave Americans a reason to buy the goods that capitalism produced, and capitalism in turn democratized gentility by turning out and energetically promoting affordable versions of the goods that genteel living required. The growth of the gentry during the 18th century by itself fueled startling economic gains. In the 19th century, the spread of refinement to a much larger segment of the population vastly enlarged the market for manufactured goods. Thousands of Americans now needed damask, silk, and fine woolens to replace the rough homespun once deemed quite adequate for dresses and suits. They required curtains for their windows, carpets for their floors, chairs for their parlors, paint for their clapboards, plantings for their gardens. Gentility, in short, established a style of consumption.

The volume of this increased consumption is not a matter of guesswork. In rural Kent County, Delaware, for example, less than 10 percent of those of middling means who died shortly before the Revolution left mahogany, walnut, or cherry furniture—the fancy kind used in parlors and dining rooms. Of those who died 70 years later, between 1842 and 1850, more than two-thirds owned such furniture. There were similar sevenfold increases

in virtually every other kind of genteel household good. No one who died in Kent County on the eve of the Revolution owned a carpet; 70 years later, everyone in the top quarter of the population did, and more than half of the two middle quarters. Similar growth was seen in ceramic dinnerware, bed linens, looking glasses, clocks, and carriages. After the Revolution, Kent County's story was repeated all over the new United States, as striving families amassed the essential tokens of genteel living, creating a vast new market for consumer goods.

JUST AS GENTILITY CREATED A MARKET for the goods produced in the industrialists' factories, so it facilitated a peculiar kind of equality. The greatest threat to democratic equality was capitalism itself, with its vast payoffs for successful businessmen and its relatively meager rewards for most others. Indeed, industrial growth under capitalism depended on great inequalities of wealth to facilitate the accumulation of capital that made large-scale investment possible. From the Revolution to the Civil War, economic inequality in the United States grew increasingly severe, until by the end of the period, the upper 10 percent of property holders controlled more than 60 percent of the

wealth. If wealth alone were the measure of success, as unadulterated capitalist culture implied, then the United States was a profoundly unequal and undemocratic society.

The novelist Catherine Marie Sedgwick wrote that “there is nothing that tends more to the separation into classes than difference of manners.”

But moderating this view of human achievement were genteel cultural values that measured human worth differently. One might not be able to live in the same neighborhood as an Astor or a Biddle, but it was nevertheless possible through diligent effort to lay claim to an equal place in “respectable” society. This view was actively promoted by writers, preachers, and other reformers who worried about class divisions in the 19th century. Catherine Marie Sedgwick, a popular New England novelist, wrote that “there is nothing that tends more to the separation into classes than difference of manners. This is a badge that all can see.”

Sedgwick told uplifting stories of poor men who managed to live genteel lives despite their poverty. Mr. Barclay, the manager of a New York print shop in *Home* (1835), lives frugally in his modest tenement but spends some of his meager pay on good books, music, and drawing lessons, and sends his children to dancing school. When an acquaintance questions the dancing lessons, Barclay replies, “There is nothing that conduces more to ease and grace, than learning to dance.”

Like Sedgwick, Frederick Law Olmsted, the designer of New York City’s Central Park, thought culture was the solution to the problem of inequality. “We need institutions that shall more directly *assist* the poor and degraded to elevate themselves,” he declared. People like himself had to “get up parks, gardens, music, dancing schools, reunions, which will be so attractive as to force into contact the good and bad, the gentleman and the rowdy,” in hope of uplifting the latter. Olmsted’s inspiration was the landscape architect Andrew Jackson Downing, whose ringing 1851 manifesto “The New York Park” set Olmsted’s course when he laid out Central Park later in the decade: “The higher social and artistic elements of every man’s nature lie dormant within

him, and every laborer is a possible gentleman, not by the possession of money or fine clothes—but through the refining influence of intellectual and moral culture. Open wide, therefore, the doors of your libraries and picture galleries, all ye true republicans! . . . Plant spacious parks in your cities, and unloose their gates as wide as the gates of morning to the whole people.”

Many 19th-century Americans took up the challenge and sought to add elements of refinement to their lives. Sedgwick’s publisher said her three volumes were “one of the most popular series of works ever published.” They were successful because hundreds of others were propagating genteel values through etiquette books, magazines, and novels. The tidal wave of print flooding the country bore images of genteel life into every corner of the land. All literate persons were exposed to good manners, and even more were exposed to the ornaments of

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genteel existence by shopkeepers, peddlers, and, later, mail-order catalogues.

The spread of genteel culture muted the class question in the United States, softening divisions between rich and poor and between employers and employees. Any household whose members could learn to wash their hands and to blow their noses with a handkerchief, who could boast even a small parlor and an appreciation of flowers, could claim membership in the middle class. The adoption of the culture of the upper classes, even in rudimentary form, made it possible to claim membership in the same cultural order.

Many were left out to be sure, but many found their way in. Large numbers of working-class people by the late 19th century had parlors, and some even had pianos in them. Their incomes might have been miniscule compared to what those in the better areas of town enjoyed, and their opportunities might have been limited, but they were not of a different order of life. Income differentials in the United States to this day are vast, and yet a huge proportion of Americans identify themselves as middle-class.

There was much in the republican vision of Sedgwick, Olmsted, and other reformers that was unrealistic. The notion that farmers would learn to draw

beautiful pictures and write verses was naive. There was also much that was unforgiving. Their vision, generous though it was, excluded all those who failed to embrace their standards. Olmsted set strict rules of behavior for his new park in Manhattan. It was not to be a beer garden, he warned, and parkgoers were to act like ladies and gentlemen—or else stay home. He asked a lot from a poor, rudely educated population, constantly augmented by immigrants. A large portion of the American populace still looked on gentility with scorn or indifference as an alien culture. Many lacked the means or the understanding to emulate their betters. African Americans fared worst of all. In Philadelphia, New York, and Boston, many of the black urban elite—schoolteachers, barbers, ministers, and artisans—embraced the genteel promise only to find that it brought them no closer to equality.

Yet the middle-class idea—the belief that proper conduct could lift a person into the ranks of the respectable—exerted a powerful influence in the United States. It was transmitted through virtually every channel of society to every corner of society, reaching down to the ghetto schools where immigrant children were tutored in the ways of the new country. As the population of the

country's cities swelled from about 10 million in 1870 to some 54 million in 1920, the premium on simply getting along in public grew. Poor and working-class people had their own ways, but there was no question where the weight of public opinion lay. Around the turn of the century, writes historian John F. Kasson, in the new movie and vaudeville theaters that brought together people from many different walks of life, uniformed ushers patrolled the aisles to maintain decorum, sometimes handing out printed cards admonishing offenders not to talk or laugh too loudly. "Gentlemen will kindly avoid the stamping of feet and pounding of canes on the floor, and greatly oblige the Management," one said. "All applause is best shown by clapping of hands."

GENTILITY'S HOLD WAS NOT ETERNALLY assured, of course. Even as gentility reached its zenith as a cultural force around the turn of the century, its foundations were being undermined. From Freud on, we have been made to believe that the dark passions—lust, greed, fear—are the realities of human life, and that civilized refinement is a thin veneer covering raw forces below the surface. At best, gentility could be seen as a tragic necessity. The assertion

that it is a measure of human progress, along with the rule of law, art, and science, long ago ceased to command assent. After Freud, it was also possible to insist—and many have—that gentility is a mask disguising our true nature, best ripped away to allow a more authentic self to emerge. Although hardly the belief of everyone, this conception of human life prepared the way for the counterculture's celebration of "authenticity" during the 1960s, with all of its continuing fallout for American society.

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The genteel idea was moored not only in ideas. Throughout the 19th century, it was continuously reinvigorated by the presence of an aristocracy in Europe that was still considered the embodiment of elevated life. The writers of courtesy books cited the manners of the "best people" as their authority, meaning the European aristocracy and the American social elite that tried to imitate it.

American captains of industry in the 19th century could imagine no greater glory for their daughters than for them to marry lords. But bit by bit the aristocrats forfeited their illustrious standing, and today even the royals are more notable for their scandalous escapades than their social graces.

Since the retreat of aristocracy, no cultural authority has emerged to take command of conduct and consumption. Instead of buying goods to emulate an imagined superior society, people consume for pleasure, sensation, efficiency, therapy, comfort—a host of desirables—following the whims of magazine writers, admen, pundits, preachers, and pop psychologists. No unified authority presides over culture as it did in Washington's day. Pleas for a return to civility grow out of a vague sense that social life deteriorates without good manners, not out of a serious commitment to submit the sovereign self to "society." The word genteel itself is now a stain rather than a mark of distinction, signifying an excessive concern with nicety, a preoccupation with mere appearances, a refusal to face the hard realities.

With its intellectual and social foundations weakened, gentility may seem doomed to extinction. But it is premature to conclude that courtesy will lose

its hold on our conduct altogether. Because it is held in place mainly by habit, there is no telling its fate in the long run, but an early death seems unlikely.

Although we lament the decline of manners—and observers were issuing such laments even in the Victorian era—gentility has been transmuted rather than obliterated. More than ever, social life is a performance in which, like the gentry of colonial America, we pay heed to appearance, albeit with dress-for-success apparel or fashions from the Gap. All over the country, people expend endless effort on manicured lawns to show their beautiful houses to best advantage and spend significant sums on exotic olive oils and other goods that advertise their cultural sophistication and refinement. Every respectable house must have a room where guests can be entertained and where the good china and silver can be put into play. And while we no longer admire the aristocracy, we still have superior societies that inspire emulation and striving. Part of the magnetic attraction of Ivy League universities is the aura they project of a higher and better society. Obtaining an Ivy League degree is the modern-day equivalent of marrying a title. The Ivies house the new aristocracy.

Powerful cultural forces such as gentility gather momentum over the centuries and roll on through inertia alone. This is as true of malign forces, such as racism, as it is of benign ones. Good cultural habits as well as bad ones are not easily broken, especially when they are taught in childhood. Middle-class children are still made to endure dancing schools, piano lessons, and endless instructions in behavior. Their parents know that at crucial points—applying for a job, interviewing for college, meeting a fiancé’s parents, impressing the boss, persuading a customer—manners count.

Civil behavior, an effort to please, regard for others’ feelings, and virtually all the other principles in George Washington’s courtesy book still give an advantage. Our belief in civility may be too often honored in the breach, but until it no longer influences the way children are raised, gentility will endure, bruised and wounded perhaps, but very much alive. ■

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