

VILLAGE VIEW

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A pocket dictionary, approximately the size of a pocket calculator, was loaned to me a few weeks ago. It was loaned, not given, both because it's of sentimental value to the lender, and it was published almost a hundred years ago, its age.

It describes itself and its less than 200 pages, closely packed with tiny print, as a dictionary containing 45,800 words and definitions and, in a way, it has that many. Through a somewhat complicated process of references, various possible extensions of words can be found between its covers, more than doubling the actual entries.

Of greater interest than its usefulness as a dictionary (except as a curiosity), however, are some of its other contents. In the back, for example, is a section summarizing rules of etiquette. While good manners are supposed to be learned at Mother's knee (or over it), behaviors and society's expectations do change.

Stepping back several decades and discovering proper deportment for ladies and gentlemen in an earlier era, a gentler but stricter period in America's social history, is enlightening.

The subject is introduced in a way me might still consider applicable: "Politeness may be defined as true kindness, kindly expressed." Surely that's true today. But look again; what constitutes true kindness, kindly expressed, has undergone a revolution of sorts.

Never appear in the presence of others with unpolished boots. Be especially neat and tidy at mealtime. Curl-papers, dressing gowns and bare shirtsleeves should never be seen at the table. Avoid extravagance and extremes in fashion, and do not select pronounced colors. Leave off jewelry, trinkets, and all unnecessary ornamentation and vain show. Let there be such harmony and moderation as to make the apparel unnoticeable.

So much for appearance? No, not quite; there's a bit more:

A ruddy countenance and an easy, graceful carriage are more to be admired than trails, small waists, and delicate feet. Shun cosmetics, hair oil and pomades. Nature's gray has more beauty than any hair dye can possibly lend. Frizzes and bangs are relics of barbarity hardly befitting the enlightened age in which we live. Keep hair and beard well brushed and trimmed, and do not give the mustache a dudish twist. Avoid soiling the hands unnecessarily, but never be ashamed of the marks of honest toil.

Recommendations for introductions have changed little; present gentlemen to ladies, younger persons to elderly, and

so on. But then we get into gloves. "The handshake should be warm, but not too vigorous. A thick glove calls for an apology, but a thin one does not, for it is awkward to remove a glove." And mark this: "Out-of-door introductions should be so quiet and unceremonious as to attract but little attention, and if introduced to a lady, a gentleman should lift his hat."

And after having been introduced? "It is the lady's place at subsequent meetings to recognize the gentleman first, and she should do so unless she chooses to drop the acquaintance. If a lady bows to a gentleman on the street, he should bow in return and lift his hat."

In days before telephones made obsolete protocol for arranging to pay a call, there were specific rules. People let it be known which days of the week they'd welcome callers. A gentleman caller was expected to remove his overcoat and overshoes and lay aside his umbrella in the vestibule; however, he retained his hat and cane if making a short call. He sat only after being invited to do so. "Avoid all undue familiarity," he was advised. Forbidden were lounging, tipping in a chair, sitting cross-legged, fidgeting, fussing, drumming fingers or cane, or shifting the feet."

Even conversation was scrutinized:

Speak of topics of interest to all who are present: do not talk with one person to the exclusion of others. Do not monopolize the conversation or answer questions addressed to others. Keep self out of your conversation as much as possible. Pay no attention to slights or neglects; never sulk or display ill-temper. Do not contradict, dispute, or exaggerate. Jokes, puns and anecdotes are all in bad taste. Avoid listlessness and indifference. Never rise to go and then sit down again. Do not linger, but when the proper time comes to withdraw, do so, on short ceremony but not abruptly.

If invited to a meal, one was to assume an easy and graceful position, neither too near the table nor too far away. Some things have not changed; it was expected one would eat with fork and spoon, not from the end. Elbows were to be kept close to sides and off the table. Noises (sipping, smacking, snuffing, coughing or sneezing) and allowing the feet to contact those of others, have indicated lack of good manners for at least a century.

The proper way to eat corn-on-the-cob is to hold it in one hand only, first having broken a long ear in two. Although table manners remain much the same today, it appears far less attention is paid them than may have been the case in the Victorian Age.

And, just as a gentleman's behavior was set forth, so was that of a lady.

She surrounds herself with a congenial atmosphere and, at the same time, maintains a dignity to shield her from insult and undue familiarity. She is quiet, unobtrusive, and never does anything to attract attention. She may take the arm of a gentleman only in the evening or when her safety or convenience requires it, unless aged or infirm. No lady should take the arm of two men at the same time, but a gentleman may take a lady on each arm. "Do not" for public behavior included eating away from the table. (Have you walked through the Mall recently?), smoking near non-smokers (This one is coming back), asking questions of non-officials, calling out to another, talking or laughing loudly, and standing about idly. When traveling or attending public entertainments, everyone was admonished, "As upon all other occasions, take the Golden Rule with you, and never let it become inoperative or fall into disuse."

Finally, on the question of right and wrong, a single paragraph puts it plainly:

There is no great, no small in right and wrong. Whatever is wrong if done to a thousand men is wrong if done to one; and whatever is wrong when carried to its ultimate and is no less wrong in its inception. There is no injustice in respecting the rights of the few, although it displeases the many; but to please the many at the expense of the few, is a great injustice to the few; and an exhibition of tyranny toward a few, rightly considered, is a menace to all. 'It is better to be beaten in right than to succeed in wrong.' Have principles of right by which to live, and then live by them. Do right though the heavens fall.

It is, perhaps, in this perspective our mores have changed the most. Today, whether right or wrong, whether fair or unfair, whether just or unjust, the rule of the majority prevails and has achieved a dignity based on numerical strength instead of moral conviction. Is it not time for a reassessment of some priorities and a return to doing right for right's sake rather than to satisfy the insatiable appetites of the many (perhaps becoming a majority) who do wrong to satisfy the hedonist within us all?