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The Better World

Masks of Manners

John & Lynne Diamond-Nigh

Here's what a prominent Englishman says about us: "In America's culture, manners are of supreme importance and recognized as the ultimate guarantee of peaceful coexistence. Americans greet their neighbors, speak politely, are always smiling. If someone bumps into them in the street, they apologize; they cannot take leave of anyone, not even a stranger, without wishing him a wonderful day. And courtesy is the ruling principle of business dealings. In short, American manners exist so that people will fit in, not stand out."

Then, a little mysteriously, he adds this philosophical twist: "The are ways in which individuality is suppressed, and a lingua franca of conformist gestures adopted in its stead. And this has a function, namely to protect the private from the public, to ensure that each person is secure within his space and that the public realm is minimally threatening."

What is his point? Individualism—isn't that something in which we take great pride? The title of Roger Scruton's essay is "The High Cost of Ignoring Beauty." Americans don't take beauty as seriously as they do truth or money or family ties, but perhaps, Scruton urges, we should. Then again, such exemplary manners as ours suggest that, in some respects, we do.

The principle of beauty is really a moderating social form of agreement, a code that has evolved over a long period of time by which we behave toward each other as citizen equals. So we should in a democracy. We attended a wedding in Portsmouth, Maine. Old, old houses lined the quaint lanes, some big, some small, but all conformed to a type, a style, a seamliness that kept one from stealing the show or intruding on the other.

Go to a supper party. There may be a banker there, a grocery clerk, a mechanic, a teacher. Look at the table, precisely and beautifully set with china and cutlery, flowers in a vase,

candles gleaming. Does the banker get a bigger plate? No, each place setting is identical. Same goes for conversation at the table. Nothing in our social rules gives the teacher a right to talk louder or longer than anybody else. Every guest, we understand, gets to participate equally.

That's America. Call that beauty.

We attended a dinner party where an acquaintance brought a new boyfriend. An arrogant and outspoken man, his new Cadillac Escalade was the tiresome (truly tiresome) touchstone of his conversation. The rest of us, we could only infer, with our ordinary cars were little more than pitiable, automotive gnomes. When he left, the word "jerk" floated up like a grateful amen from our mouths. He had offended our Americanness, our manners, our code of fairness and beauty.

But then comes Scruton's most interesting point: that good manners don't just flow outward. In fact they protect us.

Many, many years ago, I was taken as a boy with my "peacekeeping" father to a Palestinian refugee camp. We were guided into a low, smoky hovel where the leaders of the camp had gathered. In the dark of night and on the front lines of conflict, I had no doubt they would be lethal adversaries. But in that setting of host and guest, both of our codes of good manners left me completely at ease.

Away from the public sphere, we can retreat into our homes with a calm assurance that we have left no neon sign on our lawn saying, "The jerk lives here; throw firecrackers at will." If not exactly anonymity, our public grace allows us to slip back into our private world, leaving behind no scent for the curious or the malevolent. 🏠

Lynne is an etiquette and protocol consultant and a humanities professor at Elmira College. John is an artist and designer. Please send questions and comments to thebetterworld@mountainhomemag.com.