

Sermon for January 23, 2005. By Lone Jensen

(Putting on hat and gloves)

Whatever happened to civility? Or what has Miss Manners got to do with religion?

Let me see: hat, gloves and pearls I guess I am ready for this. Imagine this, a dress code in a Unitarian Universalist congregation in Arizona not in January but in July! No way, I am afraid, in fact I have in the past told a potential visitor that they can easily recognize me as the minister, I will be the one not wearing shorts! Dress codes can be oppressive or a sign of respect, as in many African American congregations in the South where dressing up is done to show respect and pride. Whenever the UU congregation I served in Wilmington North Carolina had joint services with our African American sister church the strongest contrast frankly was not in skin color but in manner of dress. Our casual tribe, with a few shining exceptions, often looked a bit like poor lost refugees from an LL Bean catalogue among a splendidly attired royal crowd.

Now I am not about to tell you how to dress any more than I would tell you what to believe. As the ultimate arbiter of good manners, Ms Manners, alias Judith Martin, I too am of the opinion that a good and generous heart is what really matters. She points out however, that people with devious, dark hearts but with

exquisite manners may make more entertaining and pleasant dinner companions. No doubt conversations would be more interesting in Hell than in Heaven, as Mark Twain pointed out. Manners are both culturally determined and only surface deep and yet. The face we present to the world, gentleness and a gracious attitude can make even a chance encounter among strangers a delightful experience. Oh, there are days when I miss the South. Yes, Maa'm, I sure do, for its ingrained way of gracious manners. Especially after yet another encounter with a store clerk who begins their sentence with an already exasperated: So what do you want? Oh sure manners can deliver poison pills dipped in sugar as in: She really doesn't know how to dress, does she. Bless her heart!

But what has all this got to do with religion? How we treat one another surely does. A traditional Buddhist greeting is the bow to one another, a bow to the Buddha nature in all of us. For us as Unitarian Universalists, guaranteed dogma free, without a fixed and immovable creed to unite us how we treat one another is even more important. If we believe that every single person has value and inherent dignity, even those we will never agree with, then that has implications for how we greet and meet and speak to and about one another. From a gentle heart springs forth gentleness in being.

Now civility, public service as a calling, politeness, generosity as a justice issue, ordinary courtesy, the kindness of strangers are

virtues that still exist among us. I have experienced them and many of you in this room practice them on a regular basis. But they can seem to be endangered behavior. There is a spirit of meanness competing for attention and often encouraged. And it seems to me that selfishness, which is not the same as loving oneself, has been elevated to a virtue. Look out for number one! This shows itself in daily encounters, in shops and workplaces and it becomes manifest when our country seems so intent on hanging on to what we have. A spirit of generosity, a willingness to solve some of our social problems in effective ways is there but it is drowned out by other louder voices. Manners matters also because incivility in small things lead to incivility in the larger society.

Here is an example. Violent crime has actually fallen and yet we fear it more. In fear of terrorism we become ourselves determined on getting revenge. Sex and violence sells. As with what has to be one of the worst toys of all times: Death Row Marv produced by Mc Farland Toys and marketed for age 13 and up. For \$20.00, less than the price of some high school textbooks, and with the help of batteries you can enjoy the thrill of executing Marv. You too can throw a tiny miniature switch and watch him convulse in the toy electric chair and hear him say: *Is that the best you can do?* And as a bonus his eyes will glow red as he fries.

These toys sold well. And we wonder why there is lack of compassion and sense of reality when it comes to violence? But the disregard for others extends further. A common nightmare is recalled by Brenda Winegardner trying to get her computer fixed. In her dream she wanders between reality and virtual reality, from voice mail to e-mail to a customer service counter trying to get someone, any one to answer a simple question. Only it is not a dream, it is reality. It can make you think violent thoughts. The other day we tried to get the number of the gift shop in the San Diego Zoo. Well we got captured in several feedback loops learned all about opening times and special shows but never could get a regular person or the number we wanted. Often when we do encounter a human we are met with rudeness, incompetence or plain indifference. Sounds familiar? You are not alone.

Is there a general decline of civility? Yes, but why is it so? Our technology and automated phone systems come with a price. Sometimes I feel like a mouse in maze run by some mad scientist to test endurance, stress and intelligence as I search from one mail voice box to another trying to find my way. Customer service jobs usually are low paying and thankless. How would you like to listen to irate customers all day?

Miss Manners to the rescue! She even has answers for how to avoid the temptation to fire off ill considered e-mails as if

somehow what you say in cyberspace does not count. Worried about the whole gay marriage backlash? Question: What do you say when you are introduced to a same sex couple? Answer: How do you d, How do you do! How do we create a civil society? Begin with ourselves. What is in your heart when you speak to others? If we have a society where people do not feel heard and feel they will have little effect on the outcome that is a prescription for indifference and occasionally misdirected compassion. A few years ago in a Brooklyn rent controlled apartment there lived a monkey, a pet named Cookie whose owner is fought a notice to put her in the zoo. (The monkey not the owner) Cookie was dressed in red frilly miniskirts and fed among other things ice cream. The neighbors rallied and formed human chain around to prevent the monkey's abduction by city officials who insist that New York is no place for wild animals Unless, I suppose, they walk upright. I have no problem with the monkey. But there are hungry children in this country who get less compassion, there are homeless working families.

I believe that underlying much of this incivility is fear. In a society that measures someone's value by the amount of money they make or have money, possessions become a measure of worth and self-value. It is ultimately a moral, ethical and religious issue. A strange morality has overtaken this country, a sort of throw back

to a twisted Calvinism. No, I am not saying that Calvinism, although I disagree with many of its doctrines, is twisted but this understanding of it surely is. The idea is predestination, that someone's status in life is a reflecting of their favor or disfavor in the eyes of God. Which is not really a very Jesus like thing to say since his status in life was as a poor despised, rebel and radical. Peace maker. People will go through incredible things to get rich, desert island prime time humiliations, board room humiliations, reality shows where they are covered with ants or on a quest to find what they have been told will make them finally feel worthwhile: money. A civil society in my mind is judged by how we treat the most defenseless. If this is true we are not doing well. We have poor and homeless among us. Many people have no health or disability insurance and are only one paycheck away from disaster. What kind of civilization are we creating here?

Out there on the freeways cars seem to get bigger and bigger every day. Some are tanks really and actual Humvees as if we here in the Valley, were really at war too. Does driving feel more and more like going into battle? How do we deal with rage on the roads? Ask Miss Manners:

My husband and I were walking down the street when a man and his friend in a truck drove by and started whistling at me, leering and catcalling. I looked at my husband and he said nothing

and ignored it. And I was furious. Should I have been angry at my husband for not sticking up for me?

She answered: Let us hope that your virtue was not in question. Only you can lose it -- for example, by chasing after truck drivers, in which case nothing your husband could do would help. Had these people confronted you directly, you would be right to expect your husband to protect you -- But as Miss Manners keeps trying to tell the road-rage crowd, drive-by insults must be ignored, as they cannot be safely redressed.

There are correctness and true manners of the heart. A Cajun was visiting Harvard and asked a Professor. Cher, Could you tell me, where the library is at? My good man, answered the professor Don't you know that you are not supposed to end a sentence with a proposition? OK, said the Cajun, Where is the library at, possum head?

Sometimes we get so wrapped up in our own idea of how things should be that we fail to see the blessings we do have. Again let me turn to Miss Manners.

Dear Miss Manners: I have faithfully sent birthday and Christmas greetings, sometimes with a gift, to my nephew his whole life. He usually sends a note of thanks. But he is a globetrotting academic whose failure to reciprocate properly is hurtful. He nearly always misses such occasions, but out of the

blue will send a random gift of flowers or a silk scarf whenever he feels like it with a short "thinking of you" note on dates that have no significance for me or him whatsoever.

My husband feels I should acknowledge receipt of these gifts, but I haven't been inclined to do so. Yet, he just keeps sending them.

Would it be rude to tell him to stop?

Miss Manners answered: Here you have a nephew who thinks of you, who sends you presents, and who thanks you for the presents that you send him. If you would seriously prefer a nephew who leaves a list of dates with a personal shopper and doesn't think of you at odd moments, you can probably arrange a trade, as those kinds of nephews are plentiful.

She is right. Here we are this morning with so many more blessings than we can account for. Let us practice true civility. And remember that isolation and fear is not a place from which anybody makes good decisions.

What will it take to change society? Many small steps and they begin with changing our selves, our attitudes. We Unitarian Universalists are mostly middle to upper class people whose idea of poverty seldom comes from personal experience.

Generosity is justice. Giving and helping those who need it most, who are most vulnerable, children, the severely mentally ill, those who are trapped in addictions, a society in my book is measured by

how it treats those who are in need. When we in our affluence, safety and materialism turn our back on what still needs to be done, we turn our back on our best self, on our own goodness. I have done it, have you? How do we develop true civility? I know we are basically good and generous people. What will it take to awaken that spirit within each of us? So that we might fulfill our religious task which is to help to heal this world.

Begin by recognizing that Buddha nature in each of us and that inherent worth and dignity of every person. Especially those we do not particularly like or agree with. Good manners spring from a good heart.