

What Happened to Manners and What to Do About It

There was that guy in high school who went on an overseas trip. He came back and regaled everyone with the glorious things over there that are so much better than they are here. We all hated that guy.

I'm that guy today.

Life in Seoul

I just returned from my first visit to Seoul, South Korea, speaking at a conference on digital economics. The event attracted some 2,000 attendees, mostly students who listened attentively and networked for 3 days of speeches, interviews, and debates.

There are many wonderful things that stood out to me from the trip. The prosperity of the place was exciting, the swirl of new ideas and technology, the fabulous food, the obvious industriousness of the city – it all made an impression. South Korea [ranks](#) as “mostly freed” on the index of economic freedom, so this makes sense. In particular, the country ranks much higher than the US on business freedom (93 for South Korea as opposed to 83 for the US).

But more than anything, what shocked me was the seeming universality of attention to manners on the part of basically everyone. The decorum of social engagement was everywhere present. It's obvious even when hailing a city cab. The driver hops out and opens your door for you. Strangers greet you and everyone with overt acknowledgments of the dignity of your humanity.

This is inconceivable in the US. We don't know what we've not experienced.

But it's about more than that. Cocktail parties in Seoul were effortless social occasions because people move easily from person to person, exchanging bows and cards and pleasantries. People stand when others arrive for dinner. There is constant motioning for others to walk ahead. Expressions of deference, humility, and respect are everywhere.

The grace and decorum of everyday life penetrate to every aspect of society, wherever you are in the city. I deliberately left the posh areas of the city to wander through alleys in the downtown commercial districts to observe. Let's see how the plain folks behave! It was the same there too. And I don't mean just the treatment of me but everyone's treatment of everyone else.

The effect on the overall happiness of daily life is palpable and notably different from the US where, for unaccountable reasons, old rituals of social engagement seem nearly to have vanished. The ubiquity of manners in Seoul grants ease to life. I found myself slowly decompressing, trusting, feeling valued, expecting smiles, and very much inspired to learn the routines myself so that I could reciprocate.

I should add, too, that the manners were also reflected in the common dress in the city, which was very high by US standards; even the casual clothing was neat with careful attention to neatness, fashion, and detail.

Air We Breathe

The whole experience reminded me of a line from Edmund Burke: "Manners are of more importance than laws.... The law touches us but here and there, and now and then. Manners are what vex or soothe, corrupt or purify, exalt or debase, barbarize or refine us, by a constant, steady, uniform, insensible operation, like that of the air we breathe in."

The great economist Henry Hazlitt agreed:

It is true that a part of any code of manners is merely conventional and arbitrary, like knowing which fork to use for the salad, but the heart of every code of manners lies much deeper. Manners developed, not to make life more complicated and awkward (though elaborate ceremonial manners do), but to make it in the long-run smoother and simpler—a dance, and not a series of bumps and jolts. The extent to which it does this is the test of any code of manners. Manners are minor morals. Manners are to morals as the final sandpapering, rubbing, and polishing on a fine piece of furniture are to the selection of the wood, the sawing, chiseling, and fitting. They are the finishing touch.

Now, you are probably ready to dismiss all this with a shrug: that's just their culture. And that would be right but that raises another question: why is it their culture? And why has the rise of extraordinary prosperity not shredded through it?

Actually, that's probably the wrong question, born entirely of the US experience. In particular, people chalk up the remarkable brutality of social media – we are discovering too that algorithms cannot force people to be decent – to a spoiled population, granted access to everything with zero expectation of mutual obligation. Maybe there is something to that but that cannot explain the whole.

More broadly, we tend to ascribe the crassness of daily life in the US to material decadence. Life is too easy so we no longer think we even have to try. We let ourselves go. We treat others poorly. We don't expect to be treated well ourselves. We have all we need, and so easily, so there is no longer an incentive to cultivate higher sensibilities. We no longer need to be personally aspirational. It's inevitable right?

Obviously, based on my experience in Seoul, it is not inevitable that high levels of prosperity correlate with loss

of manners. Much less is it the case the market economy somehow erodes our sense of personal dignity; [quite the opposite](#).

Choice in Philosophy

To replace decency with brutality is instead a choice we make. Those choices are based not on our income but rather on the ideas we hold about ourselves and others. And here is where the most striking changes have been consolidated in the US. We've gone through a philosophical shift over the decades and we are now reaping what the philosophers have sewn.

Judith Martin (Miss Manners) [offers](#) an interesting sketch of some latest changes. Among them is that the value of authenticity has normalized what was once considered vulgar. We have decided that being ourselves (including all the shabbiness that implies) is vastly more important than finding ways to behave more decorously and decently. We have celebrated frankness and discounted discretion. We claim we want honesty in all things even when that comes at the expense of respect and deference. We want everyone to be open-minded (what is truth anyway?) but this has displaced reverence for scholarship and knowledge.

These are seemingly small changes, based on a big shift in foundational ideas, but they eat away at the small and informal courts of taste and manners that once governed our daily interactions with others.

I can recall the shock I experienced when [bumping into](#) a 1939 book on personality. The author was very blunt: the point is not to become who you are but to improve yourself according to the highest standards. The personality is not something you discover but create. I'd never heard such thinking before. That's because it vanished only a few decades later.

Blunt Instruments

There's another factor worth exploring. Since World War II, we've allowed law, legislation, and regulation to govern so many aspects of our lives that were once left to evolving forces of society. The blunt instrument of law has come to rule our private associations, our diets and habits, our office behavior, our associations in public and private, our daily engagements with everyone.

We no longer speak about what is impolite or socially unacceptable but about what is actionable and illegal, fueling a litigation explosion and a culture of fake outrage. The court of manners has been replaced by the court of law. This has fostered suspicion, distrust, and mutual recrimination, not to mention anger and resentment. This use of law might have had the effect of crowding out mechanisms of organic social evolution.

The good news: what bad philosophy has destroyed can be recreated one life at a time. Doing so requires no law or legislation. There is no need for lobbying or protesting. It only requires an earnest desire to improve your life and that of others around you through a rediscovery of older modes of behavior, as well a dedication to helping the corner of the world that is influenced by your choices become a better place to live.

At first, your new way will seem affected. But then habits form. Others will catch on and copy. Eventually, as Burke says, decency becomes "a constant, steady, uniform, insensible operation" and the "air we breathe."

It can happen. My trip to Seoul convinced me of that.

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