

The Loss of Civility

By Jill Evans Kryston, Etiquette Consultant

Q: My family watched the MTV Video Music Awards and witnessed Kanye West's rude behavior as he grabbed the microphone away from Taylor Swift while she was accepting her award. I think the behavior of some of our so-called role models is appalling and wonder if you think we've lost civility, and what might be the reason for the decline in good public behavior?

A: From celebrities, to politicians, to sports figures, we've recently seen a rash of rude behavior among high-profile individuals. These incidents leave many wondering if decorum is a thing of the past.

It's my impression that the current trend toward public outbursts may be rooted in the culture of reality shows and YouTube, where some of the worst behaved solicit the most attention, and social networking, such as blogging, texting and twittering, which entitles people to do whatever they want and say whatever they want no matter whom it hurts. People tend to lash out for no apparent reason when they're no longer focused on their social skills. Everybody has a bad moment now and then, but blatant public rudeness seems to be on the rise.

The decline in civility didn't happen overnight. It appears good manners have shifted in the last century from "caring for others" to "pleasing ourselves." With pleasing ourselves comes a loss of respect for others. There are many theories about how we got to this point. Some feel the social changes of the 1960s and 1970s have ushered in new norms which changed old behavioral codes. Parents were so busy adjusting to their new roles that teaching manners got pushed aside. Many at that time became distrustful of social "rules" because they thought they would bring back the old gender "roles." Also, we did away with the rules that didn't treat people as equals and in the process some of the good went out with the bad. Still, there are those who think parenting skills are to blame. Experts say we make children think they're invincible through what psychologists call "cheap self-esteem," and give them a sense of entitlement that has helped to create a narcissistic and egocentric population.

I don't think civility is a thing of the past. Certainly, there are many gracious people who practice common courtesies every day – they consider the other person before themselves. However, if civility is to make a strong come-back, I believe it will be accomplished by fellow citizens who are willing to denounce rudeness and once again make good manners a priority. A little more please, thank you, and excuse me along with holding doors would be a good start, and there's no better place to begin than in the home. It costs nothing to be civil and polite.

P.M. Forni, author of "Choosing Civility," professor, and cofounder of the Johns Hopkins Civility Project, has this to say about the subject, "Being civil means being constantly aware of others and weaving restraint, respect, and consideration into the very fabric of this awareness." Let's all begin the New Year with the resolution to "bring back civility, one person at a time!"

Do you have an etiquette question you want Jill to answer in her monthly column? E-Mail your question(s) to: information@DefiningManners.com or mail to: P.O. Box 1703, Shavertown, PA 18708.

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