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## MISS MANNERS GOES TO COLLEGE

## MATRICULATION CONVOCATION ADDRESS

PRESIDENT RICHARD WARCH

September 29, 1987

Judith Martin does not fool around. With extraordinary self-assurance and unwavering confidence, she dispenses advice about various manifestations of proper conduct that make social relations tolerable and even pleasureable. In her syndicated newspapers columns and in three best-selling books--Miss Manners' Guide to Excruciatingly Correct Behavior, Miss Manners' Guide to Rearing Perfect Children, and Common Courtesy: In Which Miss Manners Solves the Problem that Baffled Mr. Jefferson--she attempts to steer her readers away from what she styles "the impulse rude" and toward, in her words, "the mannerly way of life."

In this, of course, she is but the latest--albeit among the most humorous and opinionated--in a long line of arbiters of etiquette who have instructed our nation over the centuries. Manners in one form or another have been a preoccupation of people in every society, though perhaps none has promoted them through popular books as much as our fair land. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, most of our forebears' sense of manners derived from the Old World, especially England. While European visitors often concluded that Americans had no manners at all, occasionally attributing this fact to their democratic sensibilities, treatises on correct behavior did

circulate in the colonies and new nation.

One of the more popular works--an American version of an English translation of a French original--was called The School of Good Manners, and George Washington, for one, apparently owned a copy. In the "Rules of Civility" he composed for himself as a teenager, Washington seems to have borrowed from the book, including the following: "Put not another bit into your mouth til the former be Swallowed"; "Cleanse not your teeth with the Table Cloth, Napkin, Fork, or Knife"; and "Kill no Vermin as Fleas, lice ticks &c in the Sight of Others."

In the mid-19th century, there was a concerted search for a proper republican code of behavior, which resulted in attempts to "get rid of imported superfluities of etiquette" and arrive at a "distinctively American school of good manners." Among other things, this effort dealt with the recurring issue of table manners, particularly the vexing problem of which fork to use, although in this case the argument was made that it was all right for Americans to eat food with the knife "provided you do it neatly, and do not put in large mouthfuls, or close your lips tight over the blade."

Debates about utensils aside--and there were vigorous disputes about the relative merits of spoons, knives, and forks, with forks the universally preferred implement--American manners had other manifestations as well. In the late nineteenth century and into the twentieth, concerns about proper behavior between the sexes flourished. Henry James's Daisy Miller may be read in this light, as Daisy's innocent associations with men in Europe not only affronted Old World conventions but became a

stock example of what American girls should not be and do.

Volumes have been published on such subjects and Emily Post and Amy Vanderbilt are the grande dames of the genre in the twentieth century. Their treatises cover the gamut of correct behavior, from how to eat artichokes to whether or not a child needs a middle name, from how to plan or postpone a wedding to how to manage a sit-down dinner without a maid.

Amy Vanderbilt even devoted a chapter of her magnum opus to "The College Years," and much of her advice is, not to put too fine a point on it, exceedingly formal and, in places, wildly dated. She found it rather curious that some co-ed colleges seemed to permit women--she calls them girls--to wear Bermuda shorts and cautioned her readers to take care in choosing to bedeck themselves in such garments. And she devoted several paragraphs to the etiquette of the blind date and to the custom of pinning, which she described as "a romantic trial balloon, easily punctured if not taken seriously enough by both parties and kept a highly private and not-too-restrictive an arrangement."

For all of the curious arcana of such books, however, there is in them a theme of good sense that ought not too easily be dismissed. Again, Miss Vanderbilt, this time on dormitory living: "Students living in a dormitory need to observe carefully the social rules that make living in this kind of group shelter tolerable. . . . Constant borrowing of money, articles of clothing, books, notepaper, ink, snacks, toothpaste, even with permission, is another bone of contention. Noise and disturbance

at night is very inconsiderate. The student who monopolizes any facility to be used by all, such as the bathroom or the telephone, is headed for social disaster."

In former times--i.e., before the late 1960s--colleges helped students maintain proper conduct if not avoid social disaster. Miss Vanderbilt, for example, worried about clothing. So did Lawrence. In the Women's Rules, promulgated in the student handbook of twenty years ago, we find the following: "Bermudas, jamaicas, sweatshirts, jeans, and slacks are not to be worn to class or to convocation." There were even rules in 1966-67 about minimum clothing requirements for sunbathing, including the provision that "shoes and coats are to be worn en route to sunbathing areas."

If the etiquette czars were concerned about the relations between the sexes, the college had rules governing them too. There were no co-ed residence halls, and so regulations about hours and visitation were the norm. Freshmen, Sophomore, and Junior women had set hours when they had to be in the residence halls, typically 11 or 12 on weekdays and 12 or 1 on weekends, and could only receive "gentlemen callers" at set times and places. When so doing, their conduct was to be "above the criticism of parents and visitors." Failure to abide by these rules resulted in the usual penalty of "campus," for which a woman must remain in the residence hall "for the evening after 6:30 p.m. She may attend no social functions, make and receive no local phone calls, and entertain no callers. She may not be in the sorority rooms, the Panhellenic kitchen, or the dorm lounge." She was not, obviously, a happy camper.

Men had rules, too, though they were far less restrictive, particularly in terms of dress codes and hours. But visiting with women was tightly controlled, with women allowed on the first floor of men's residence halls only, except for the open dorm hours of 2 to 5 o'clock on Sunday afternoons. The purpose of these regulations was embodied in the Biblical quotation which followed them: "Touch not; taste not; handle not"--Colossians 11:21.

Beyond these regulations governing conduct, the college also prohibited possession or use of alcoholic beverages on campus or any college building--there was, obviously, no Viking Room--and forbade Freshmen, Sophomores, and Juniors from having or operating a motor vehicle while attending Lawrence--so that there was, obviously, no parking problem.

These and like rules and codes of behavior imposed by the college involved Lawrence in an in loco parentis role, that is, of acting in place of the students' parents. There was freedom for the individual, to be sure, but the college was far more intrusive in students' lives than is the case today. Back then, not only did parents tell their children what time to be in, but the college did too. Not any more. The 1987-88 student handbook is about twice the size of its predecessor of two decades ago, but that bulk is not the result of more rules. In fact, regulations have been superceded by policies and procedures. In 1967, the handbook dealt with intoxicants in two paragraphs in less than a page; the 1987 version does so in two separate entries with numerous sections and subsections covering six and a

half pages. More to the point, in 1967, the handbook dealt with behavior explicitly in terms of rules; in 1987, it does so rather covertly in terms of implied expectations, perhaps best seen in the residence hall bill of rights.

And here we circle back to Miss Manners. What the residence hall bill of rights calls for, in brief, are manners, etiquette, courtesy, civility, or--to put it another way and in her terms--protection from "the impulse rude." Indeed, Miss Manners's "rules of thumb" for feeling correct in all situations might well serve here: they are, 1) Don't; and 2) Be sure not to forget to. Whatever. The point is that as in loco parentis has dropped away, as, in other words, the college has given up some of the responsibilities for enforcing Amy Vanderbilt's precepts, the demands for self-generated fidelity to "the mannerly way of life" increase.

Columnist and former Lawrence convo speaker George Will is a great fan of Miss Manners. For Will, her books are, alternatively, to be compared with Plato's Republic--in that both recognize that the most important political question is the proper raising of children--and with The Federalist Papers--in that they are the most formidable political books written by Americans. Whether one buys the hyperbole or not, Will argues that manners are the sine qua non of our common life on the grounds that in their absence--that is, in the case of people saying and doing exactly as they think and feel--society would disintegrate. Candor run amok--especially when tainted by self-centeredness--is a sure prescription for civil war.

We are hardly dealing with the disintegration of campus life

or with civil war in the residence halls and academic buildings. But as we begin a new academic year--one that we begin in such high spirits and high hopes--I would urge your fidelity to the common courtesies of communal life. Romain Gary--who is apt to engage in a little hyperbole himself--put it this way: "In our disturbed and uncertain age, not knowing where we are going, how and if we shall get there, the least we can do is to treat one another with a certain amount of respect." I hope that at Lawrence we shall do just that.

But I have in mind here something greater than playing one's stereo at a volume sufficient to entertain the entire hall, or of asserting one's rights to have guests in one's room regardless of the sensibilities of one's roommate, or of defacing campus buildings as if one's own sense of taste is the only operative one.

We are a community of learning, one that believes that learning involves all we do here, even as it derives from the academic mission of the college. Further, we are--distinctively and spiritedly, I think--a democratic community of learning, one whose members should accord respect to one another out of a common bond of fellowship in the educational life of the institution.

Something of what I hope would obtain for us at Lawrence is captured and conveyed in William Wordsworth's poem, "The Prelude."



For, born in a poor district, and which yet  
Retaineth more of ancient homeliness,  
Than any other nook of English ground,  
It was my fortune scarcely to have seen,  
Through the whole tenor of my school-day time,  
The face of one, who, whether boy or man,  
Was vested with attention or respect  
Through claims of wealth or blood; nor was it least  
Of many benefits, in later years  
Derived from academic institutes  
And rules, that they held something up to view  
Of a Republic, where all stood thus far  
Upon equal ground; that we were brothers all  
In honour, as in one community,  
Scholars and gentlemen; where, furthermore,  
Distinction open lay to all that came,  
And wealth and titles were in less esteem  
Than talents, worth, and prosperous industry.

Please let us move beyond the male-only nature of Wordsworth's world and find in these lines instead a glimpse of what a college ought to be: "a republic," where all stand on equal ground, brothers and sisters in honor, as in one community, where external and immaterial attributes--wealth, blood, title, and, yes, sex, race, sexual preference, academic specialty, faith, place of origin, and all other such claims and characteristics--are not what count, but talent, individual worth, and hard work are the qualities we value--and distinction and respect lay open to all who join us.

As we know from examples on this campus and from even more disturbing and dramatic events on others, such ideals have not always governed collegiate behavior. Our academic institutes are not always such republics of honor and community. Racial incidents and racist attitudes at the University of Michigan and the University of Massachusetts and anti-gay sentiments at the University of Chicago made headlines last year, but the episodes are simply the most notorious, not the only ones to be found in American higher education. In another vein, The Association of American Colleges' Project on the Status and Education of Women reports similar, though not always so overt, patterns of discrimination and abuse. The project's several reports on "The Classroom Climate: A Chilly One for Women" point out the subtle, small behaviors, as well as the more pronounced inequities that impede the educational experiences and successes of women students and which, the authors opine, probably dampen the educational process for all.

We do not have to cast far afield to recognize the existence and the deleterious effects of such attitudes and actions. At Lawrence, one hears of the harmful effects of social cliques on campus life, creating artificial divisions between and among students, prompting friends to choose among friends, wherein rush, for example, becomes--at least temporarily--something of a social Rubicon. One hears too of the easy categorizations of members of the community by other members: Greeks and independents, Connies and Sci-Hall types, jocks and grinds, straights and gays, cheeseheads and preppies, activists

and apathists.

This is not, alas, a game confined to undergraduates. One hears too of dismissive labelings of disciplines, of cavalier callousness toward the legitimacy of fields of study, methodology, and subject matter, of proud distancing of self or department from elements of the college that are by some strange standard deemed to be below the salt.

These categorizations are not benign: too often, they infuse our interactions, perhaps unwittingly, with subtle and even unintended elements of discrimination and harrassment. Rarely articulated as principled positions to be discussed and debated, because our better selves know they are not worthy of such treatment, these views persist at an almost unconscious level. And they are all the more pernicious for that.

Leave aside the essential silliness inherent in all of these discriminations and distancings. What ought to concern us is that these various manifestations of the impulse rude are not only thoughtless, but are also shorthand mechanisms and devices by which we describe, isolate, and thus demean one another. In their Phi Beta Kappa presentation last year, Professors Cohen and Glick suggested that prejudice may be--from both an historical and psychological perspective--a fact of our social existence. One explanation, proffered by psychologist Henri Tajfel, is that such behavior is an expression of the basic human trait of egocentrism, both individually and collectively. Two centuries before Dr. Tajfel, Samuel Johnson made the same claim: "He who overvalues himself will undervalue others," he said, "and he who

undervalues others will oppress them."

I do not here want to overdramatize the case or to imply that we are dealing with overt oppression. We are hardly at that stage. But I do want to offer the argument that that these behaviors ought to be ones that a college like Lawrence--a republic, where we stand on equal ground, brothers and sisters in honor, as in one community--should resist with all of its wisdom and might.

There is, of course, a fine line here, one that I hope to walk, and not to obliterate by trampling on it. Lawrence should be a place where we engage ideas seriously, where we argue among ourselves spiritedly about matters of substance and significance, and where manners ought not be construed as a shield from honest confrontations or an excuse for evading such engagements. As long as we permit ourselves to revel in the stereotypical, to wallow in the easy labelings of one another, we will never engage one another as individuals of worth with something to contribute to our common cause. We will take ideas seriously only when we take each other seriously, and we will take each other seriously only when we shun easy typologies and accord legitimacy and honor to each individual.

What I have described as external and irrelevant attributes, of course, are not that at all. Sex, race, sexual preference, academic specialty, faith, place of origin and so on are not incidental to who we are and to what we have to contribute to the college. And membership in a sorority or on the Committee on Social Concerns, devotion to music or to chemistry, participation in athletics or on Lantern also matter--and we do well to

remember that for many people these pairings are not either-ors but both-and's. So I am not suggesting that we ignore the many identities that we have and the many choices that each of us will make. I am not urging that we homogenize each other or that we treat one another only as disembodied intellects.

Rather, I hope that we will let manners liberate us from the shallow shorthand that afflicts our interactions and to enable deep and thoughtful engagement with each other. It is not just a matter of being courteous and civil--though courtesy and civility are to be desired. It is not simply a matter of making the college home less stressful and more pleasant--though the college home might well have such attributes. It is not, finally, even a matter of that collegial cordiality that ought to mark a community of scholars--though every scholar knows the value of that collegiality. That engagement is, more than all of these, a duty we owe ourselves as devotees of a liberal education which seeks to connect our living and learning and to make us more sensitive and thoughtful persons and citizens.

The point is not, then, simply that manners by Miss Manners have a place at the college (though they do). And the point about manners surely transcends compulsive concerns about using the correct fork (though when in doubt, start from the far left and work in). The issue of manners--of civility, respect, correct conduct--goes to the heart of our enterprise, which is to say to enabling the college to be true to its own best principles and purposes.

The impulse rude masks and frustrates those principles; it

diminishes and destroys our better selves, individually and in community. We have important tasks and opportunities before us and we should be intolerant of those thoughtless behaviors that keep us from them. We should be bold enough to hope that Lawrence may indeed be that republic of which Wordsworth wrote, a place where talents, worth, and prosperous industry are held in esteem, where the paths to distinction are open to all, and where teaching and learning and our shared commitments to liberal education are the activities and attitudes that bind us together, in honor, as in one community. That hope may be, as President Wriston said about the liberal college in another context, utopian, but if it is the ideal, it is the pattern from which we should build. I urge us to do so.