



Manners and Civilization

They are the same people, he declared, who continue “washing back at you the same crap over and over and over again.” Yet they have become so successful at dissembling, we have reached a point where it is now unacceptable in “mixed” or “bi-partisan company to use the godd***ed word ‘climate.’” On three consecutive occasions during his speech, Gore referred to his opponents’ alternative accounts of climate change as “bull***!”



Gore isn’t the first high-profile politician to curse in public. Back in 2004, when he was campaigning for the presidency, [John Kerry provided an interview with *Rolling Stone* magazine in which he said he never thought President Bush would “f— up” the Iraq War as badly as he did.](#) And the other night, while on Bill Maher’s *Real Time*, President Obama’s former economic advisor, [Christine Romer, described the United States as “pretty darned fu—ed”](#) when speaking to the credit downgrade that it received courtesy of [Standard & Poor’s](#).

Public cursing has become common in our time. It isn’t only politicians who partake of it; celebrities of various sorts do as well. Judging from the relative lack of commentary on this phenomenon, few people are particularly bothered by it. But it is at our peril as a culture, as a civilization, that we trivialize the ease and frequency with which “public figures” resort to profanity.

It would also be a mistake to either dismiss this concern of mine as hysteria or to mistake it for prudery. It is the function of neither.

Cursing itself is not the issue here; [it is public cursing, the cursing of “public figures”](#) especially, to which I allude. Furthermore, it isn’t even *this* by itself that promises calamity for our world, but the host of other culturally corrosive trends by which it is accompanied.

The casualness with which untold numbers of people sport tattoos that they have burned into their flesh, piercings that have been drilled into every conceivable body part, and exceedingly revealing attire — whether males wearing pants that hang down to their knees or females with shirts that are open to their stomachs — is an ominous sign of the cultural rot from which we suffer.

But there are other, more subtle, indicators of the immodesty into which we have lapsed.

The explosion of “reality” television, and its Internet counterpart — such “social media” as facebook — at once disclose and exacerbate this malaise. Although I have never taken an interest in it, it is true that



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not all “reality” television is devoid of redeemable qualities. Shows like [American Idol](#) and [So You Think You Can Dance](#) encourage excellence. And the Internet is invaluable for a variety of reasons. Be this as it may, though, there can be no denying that there is much in these venues that is complete trash.

Shows like [The Real Housewives of New Jersey](#), [The Bachelor](#), [The Bachelorette](#), and many others supply an opportunity for cognitively challenged and morally impoverished nobodies to achieve their proverbial 15 minutes of fame while carving away ever further at some of our most time honored and sacred of institutions (like marriage and the family). As for the Internet, it is *not* necessarily the effortlessness with which *anyone* can submit their views that is the problem. It is, instead, the *anonymity* that the Internet affords us that scatters our inhibitions to the winds and renders the Internet a bastion of incivility and even cruelty.

All of these phenomena, from public cursing to tattoos to “reality” television and more, reveal a substantial deterioration of *manners*. The glaring lack of self-discipline and humility that we witness in our politics are just as easily seen in our culture, both in its “lower” and “higher” aspects. Perhaps from a misguided — actually, destructive — idea of liberty, we have abandoned what our ancestors knew all too well, that, as Burke said, “liberty without wisdom, and without virtue ... is the greatest of all possible evils,” for liberty unhindered by “tradition and restraint” is “folly, vice, and madness.”

It is appropriate to enlist [Burke](#) in the service of this discussion, for “the conservatism” of which he was among the most eloquent and impassioned advocates was one he helped develop in response to an assault against traditional manners that in both its intensity and scope is not unlike that occurring in our own day.

In one of his many replies to the French Revolution, Burke noted the relationship between vice or a loss of manners in politics and the same throughout the culture. The political radicalism against which he railed was and could only be attended by a “*correspondent system of manners*” that no “thinking man” could seriously doubt reflected a “determined hostility to the human race.” This is beyond tragic, for not only are manners essential to civilization; they constitute the cornerstone upon which civilization depends.

Burke writes: “Manners are of more importance than laws. Upon them, in a great measure, the laws depend.” Unlike the political rationalists of his generation and ours, Burke was keenly aware of the limits of laws to inform human conduct. It was “manners,” he knew, that make us who we are. “The law touches us but here and there, now and then. Manners,” on the other hand, “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.” Manners “give their whole form and colour to our lives.” While they are not to be confused with “morals” proper, manners, if they are sound, “aid morals” and even “supply them.” If, however, manners are bad, then they promise to “totally destroy” morality.

It is high time that we once again revisit the importance of “manners” to our way of life.



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