

The Soft Skill of Politeness

Mystery and Manners

Don't you mind people grinnin' in your face?
— Son House

Etiquette... is always a matter of refined self-interest.
— Albert Murray

*Rather than act like the lord of the manor,
I would rather behave like a guest.*
— Lao Tzu

Gratitude is the most exquisite form of courtesy.
— Jacques Maritain

I seldom have the urge or fortitude to be a disciplinarian. Nor do I have the impudence to be rude, or the gall or brass to demand order.
—Duke Ellington

There is a widespread lack of considerateness when it comes to selling, which is most commonly an arena for shoving, barging, elbowing, cornering, barking, haranguing, self-promoting, and insistent questioning. It is played as a competitive, not a cooperative, sport. Yet our training never acknowledges that these acts and attitudes might be unmannerly.

The word “etiquette” means “little ethics”. I use manners (from *manus*, hand), politeness (from *politus*, polish), etiquette, deference, courtesy, grace, consideration, and discretion interchangeably here. Please understand that I am not talking about manners as policing behavior, curbing tongues, wagging fingers, tsks and tuts, fossilized form, empty compliments, courtly ritual, cosmetic surfaces or class-marking grammar or dialect. I have no interest in ‘putting on’ a facade, nor of clipping the wings of an individual’s majesty in order to fit her into a board or drawing room. I am talking about deep consideration, kindness, Aretha’s spelling bee. Dignity requires no ceremony.

(If you can't say anything nice don't say anything at all sets up a field day for pedophiles. I prefer Alice Roosevelt Longworth's: If you don't have anything nice to say about anyone, sit next to me.)

When I talk about manners, I am talking about what Flannery O'Connor wrote about in *Mystery and Manners*. She felt that the "mystery of our position on earth" is the heart of our experience, and that manners, which she called the "texture of existence," should reveal it. To be mannerly means to be present with this mystery.

The mystery changes you; you do not change it. The question that matters is: What is your relationship to it?

The powerful actions of animals may be recognized as a form of natural law governing ethics. They have been shown to demonstrate respect for others. Their ethics are remarkably common: They reward respect and generosity and punish greed.

Humility has the power to cool the gods.

While doing a piece of business, I strive with maximum courtesy, dignity, gentleness, and humility for a meeting of minds and hearts. Civility is a form of connectedness. We might even see civility as a form of enforcing specificity on ourselves. If you, my client, receive extreme consideration and courtesy, might you not anticipate our meetings with pleasure?

We do not expect to be treated with radical politeness or love by a salesperson. I often think: If this client were my mother, how would I behave with him? That is the kind of care I wish to pay. It has nothing to do with sentimentality.

But a misuse of manners is often a misuse of power. Personal, social, political power. Civility

was put in service to fascism. Mona Eltahawy: “Decorum, manners, and the like are used to uphold authority—patriarchy, whiteness, other forms of privilege. We are urged to acquiesce as a form of maintaining that authority.”

Politeness can also be employed to exploit another person’s sense of propriety, as when one puts on a mask of civility to cloak odious behavior, relying on the other to be too polite to call one on it, or too fearful to offend a powerful other. We often give away our power, allowing another to knock us out of our presence and connection. Silence can be both exploitative and exploited.

Baldwin said that only when he learned he was allowed to hate white people could he begin loving them.

Toni Morrison said that manners could be “used as tools of oppression,” but she added, “Yet, as the daughter of a man born under Jim Crow who saw manners as an expression of self-respect, I also look at propriety and etiquette as a way to show the respect for others you hope that they’ll return”.

Manners are not simply surface phenomena; they foster an attitude of respect, appreciation, and courtesy between people. Émile Durkheim asserts that by definition, sacred beings are separate beings, and manners is about how we navigate the space between us. Bad manners are bad ethics, as Emily Post insisted in 1922. Greed and politeness are incommensurate. If you are any good, as you grow older you become more modest. Formality is polite as carelessness is rude. When someone is careless toward me, I suspect they are careless toward themselves, making them less trustworthy. Substitute cruelty for carelessness.

True tact (from *tangier* to touch) stems not from fear, but from care. The opposite of slapdash might be having a commitment to a role and a deep sense of privacy, not intrusive friendliness.

Truth is neither polite nor impolite. The manner of conveying the truth, however, is.

In most cultures, there are rituals in greeting and parting that are considered polite behavior. In my business, how can I mark these passages with maximum courtesy? In part by making real, not glancing, eye contact, by showing appreciation and warmth, thanking the other for their time. By breathing to the other person, neither short of them nor beyond them.

As selling can metastasize everywhere, as it seems to today, it can also shrink, pull back, restrict itself to as small a realm as possible. This is my aim. The old-fashioned jolt, whiplash, and rage I experience when I stumble over marketing in the middle of a riveting read, when a pop-up window ambushes me.

When I examine ‘best practices,’ I find they are often simply good manners. *Be on time. Be prepared. Ask, don’t assume. Do what you say you will do. Say ‘please’ and ‘thank you.’ Don’t interrupt when someone else is speaking...*

I am always looking for a distinguishing edge, a competitive advantage, a loose stitch to unravel the fabric of conventional sales dynamics. Why not make politeness a key part of my ‘brand’? In place of traditional marketing and branding, I prefer to lead with mystery and manners. Why not design all sales rhetoric — scripts, talking points, power phrases — to be embedded within principles of politeness? Catch flies with honey. I start collecting stock phrases for polite interaction. *Thank you for drawing attention to this...*

Etiquette fills the gap for us when we are at a loss, in our most vulnerable moments, with the ‘rules of the game’ being like the steps of a ritual.

As I have no idea what people are thinking. I must ask, invite them to tell me what matters to them before I unspool my story. A straightforward approach combined with fairness and integrity. This reads as courtesy.

I am in the business of making money. To my artistic sensibility, this is not a high calling. Perhaps a respectful courtesy can lighten my labor, lift some of the burden from the complexity of modern life. Can etiquette be alchemical? So, I play a little game: How polite can I be in the service of a sale? Can I employ exquisite courtesy to offset or counter the crudity of selling, approaching each encounter as an occasion to intensify politeness and all that it means to affirm the dignity of the individual, making politeness a refuge, a sanctuary within selling? Perhaps I can dignify our engagement by tapping into a generous current between two powerful individuals, two little dignitaries.

Equality of worth is an essential aspect of being present in the mystery. I stand neither above nor below you. Our inner lives have equal value.

Full presence is fundamental to courtesy and respect, but divided, distracted focus is all too common.

Dignity and equality need not exclude farce, need not pretend we are other than bumbling, laughable fools together. Wit is the permitted suspension of decorum and the retaliation of the underdog, for, as Thornton Wilder wrote, “humor is the acknowledgment of one’s kinship with frailty.”

I want the religion of kindness and modesty and courtesy and tact and delicacy and generosity to permeate my hard-nosed business model.

Authenticity is not just about expressing our own thoughts and feelings; it is about conveying our respect for others, because we are linked together. The peace which makes

human interaction possible is founded on respect for variety and the rights of others.

I like to confuse gendered reception of me (for most of my career I have been a younger woman calling on an older man), mixing ‘female’ politeness with ‘male’ straightforward energy, aiming to destabilize stereotypes. To my pleasant surprise, within a few sentences into my pitch, I am judged by the content of the words coming out of my mouth rather than my gender. A businessman takes his money seriously.

My intention is to decapitate ill will and mistrust with kindness, regard, full accord, and recognition. All of this requires self-restraint and formality but not coldness or evasion. If my sales script treats you as a person of worth, then it is natural for you to meet me there and reciprocate. The odds shift.

If individuals are sacred, inviolable, equal, then politeness is a form of de-commodification. No one ever relishes being treated as a commodity. How do you show someone they are not a commodity to you?

People accommodate each other. We are flexible and we bend, which may be demonstrated in our very comportment.

I don’t really expect anyone to agree with me. My abilities to persuade are limited. The idea of controlling someone is horrible to me. I am not attracted to that type of power.

We experience the dynamics of politeness in hospitality upon greeting, as well as on parting. How do you feel at the end of a conversation? — Do you feel violated, dirtied, polluted, that you have just survived a brawl, or do you feel a glow of ‘well met’?

A good curse: *Fuck you!* has the courtesy of clarity.

Timing is a consideration. It is polite of me to neither lag, waste my client's time, nor to rush him into a decision. It is insulting to both parties to push someone for a decision before they are ready. It is my job to make clients ready without jarring force. There is a heartbeat, a human pulse underlying our attention, permeating our presence, a tensile quality as well as a sense of ease. It takes time to develop confidence, respect, goodwill; these things only unfold in time.

Nick Cave likens shyness to an orchestra tuning up — my favorite part of a concert experience — fragmentary and over all too soon. Crown shyness in trees is a phenomenon where the upper branches or canopies of trees avoid touching or overlapping with each other, creating visible gaps or channels between the treetops.

The very few clients who made my skin crawl did so by violating my worth, treating me as if I were a scrap of garbage to be used by them; to be in their presence was to feel polluted.

Two clients stand out for their quality of manners. They each greet me exquisitely when I arrive, look me directly in the face, not glancing but with light curiosity, their faces lighting up to see me, their formality-softening ease, not to be mistaken for informality, in turn putting me at ease. They personally offer me something to drink, remembering what I drank the last time, as would a host to an honored guest, unstintingly gathering me in, creating what today we call a safe space. (Safe spaces are not oases we stumble upon. Someone must make and maintain them.) Their welcoming feels genuine and expansive, with brand new energy, not pro forma, giving me a feeling of being seen and esteemed. They extend this atmosphere of deep cordiality into their listening throughout the meeting. I feel necessary to them; their welcome gives me weight and unites us. They do me the courtesy of demanding all my intelligence and wits. In the mundane, something happens. (Perhaps it is not surprising that they also evince generosity of spirit, robust wit, are not just out for themselves, offering employees decent benefits and dignified working conditions.)

They are secure in their power, yet do not misuse it.

According to Penelope Brown and Stephen C. Levinson in their book *Politeness*, wherein they discuss principles for constructing polite speech, there are good arguments for insisting that off-record strategies are generally more polite than on-record ones. These include irony, understatement, hedges, indirect speech acts, apologies for intrusions, off-record hints such as metaphors, and avoiding unequivocal impositions.

When complimented, traditional Japanese culture would consider it polite to demur, *oh no, I am not very skillful...* while Western culture might instead tacitly accept the compliment, *thank you, that's very kind...* In other words, Japan's maxim of modesty takes precedent over the Western maxim of agreement. To your ear: Which is more polite?

When a client asks you if you would like something to drink upon arriving at their office for the initial meeting, is it more polite to decline or to accept their hospitality? I excessively ponder these koans of maximum courtesy.

All my scripts, talking points, power phrases—rhetoric—are designed with principles of politeness top of mind, strategic orientation to my partner's face. I prefer offering over requesting. I like to give prior indications that a request may be coming up, a pre-request, and to acknowledge acceptance of requests.

In conversation we cannot help betraying assumptions of power and (social) distance. A salesperson is often the lower-ranked participant in a dialogue. I aim to respect our respective positions while at the same time avoiding obsequiousness, asserting my own power as an equal individual having something valuable to proffer. I write my scripts seeking to establish a rough equality.

A sales call is so often a jarring intrusion and interruption, a version of a pop-up window

on a website. To make a sales call is to interrupt someone, and I acknowledge this in my opening remarks: *It is most kind of you to spare me the time. Thank you.... Thank you for taking the time from your busy schedule to meet with me.* Earlier, on the telephone: *Thank you for taking my call. Joe B. was kind enough to endorse a brief letter of introduction... Do you have a moment?* Hercule Poirot: *May I have a moment of your so valuable time?*

My practice eschews jargon; details the timeframe and cost of our process in the initial meeting, opts for transparency and disclosure of bias and conflict of interest; uses meeting agendas; avoids obfuscation, bewildering language and mixed signals; and marks when I am speaking metaphorically. I confess confusion — the clarity of an honest muddle — and use tact and nuance in order to soften a blatant no.

Asking a question can be perceived as a thrust into one's privacy, an intrusion. I attempt to temper this by asking permission to ask a question: *May I ask you... May I ask you why you purchased this particular product?* I may preface a request with a pre-request: *At the end of our engagement, if I've earned the right to ask you for help — and you are the sole judge of that — then I would ask for your help in introducing me to other business owners like yourself, in a manner that you would be comfortable with... May I show you an idea that some of my clients, whose situations are like yours, have found beneficial?* Here again I am asking permission to proceed, but also preying on the fear of missing out, a fear that seems to hypertrophy the more wealth someone has.

Late in our engagement, I often explicitly ask permission to sell, assuming that other times the verbs that best describe my actions would be listening, clarifying, testing, educating, offering, suggesting...

Imperatives are never the most respectful way to speak.

It isn't polite to be Ms. Know-It-All. I make sure my clients know I am not in the business of telling anybody how to live.

Prospects who persist in haggling over the fee after I have stated, *I would charge you our minimum fee...* are telling me they would make bad clients; they are either not listening or not respecting boundaries.

Notice (note) when you are given something. Acknowledge it simply and in the flow of the conversation. *Thank you for your patience in answering so many questions. Based on what you've shared with me; I see five or six areas where my work might benefit you.* [beat] *First...*

Expecting little, I am surprised when business owners seldom interrupt me. For the most part, they give me fair hearing until I give them reason to disengage. Interrupting is like stepping on your dance partner's feet. Lack of interruptions suggests status equality.

My dear colleagues: *Why are you asking him to listen to you so much? Where are your manners...*

I make myself cross the client's thresholds scrupulously at the appointed time, not from militant control but from the polite paradox of a discipline.

I spend minimal time on my credentials early in my pitch, offering just enough to establish credibility as needed, holding back a recitation of my 'script of impressiveness' until there may be a strategic call for it in the closing conversation. Any 'I'm a big shot' risks backfiring, as a raising of oneself may imply a lowering of the other. In a similar vein, marketing often feels like bad manners. When we thrust ourselves forward into the spotlight, we knock someone else out of it.

It sounds goofy, but I sometimes softly hum *Me Me Me* under my breath, as a self-tuning fork, to hear whether it sounds discordant (I feel this in my stomach) or harmonious. When the latter, I know I am in a kind of trouble.

Making space is polite. A large part of courtesy is giving space for the other to fully respond. Not too slack, as you are a professional, but not impinging either, being prescriptive rarely. Sometimes we want to discover things for ourselves, not have them thrust at us.

There are two places in the sales cycle where being out of business (OOB) is a live question, where the viability and survival of my entire business is at risk. These two places are the initial telephone call asking for a pitch opportunity, and the end of the engagement asking for referrals. In these two lynchpin places, I press persistency to its limit. Can I find that spot just shy of obnoxious and ply from there? Push it as far as I dare, play at the very edge of politeness? Decent people don't like to say No. To refuse something asked. And so, I put them on the spot as little as possible, but when I do, I press hard.

While I do not outright apologize for intrusion, I soften the impact with hedging and indirectness. *Please tell me if you would be comfortable... if this seems a bridge too far...*

My pitches are most powerful and effective when I deliver them with an underlying attitude of: *If I am good enough, you will let me help you.* There is a difference between acting in service of and acting in pursuit of, and this difference is felt by the other. One beckons him to come forward, the other causes him to flee. Think of a dance — you neither lead forcefully nor lag nor trample your partner's toes, but proceed by rhythmic hints, drawing forward, leaning back, spiraling around. A species of yielding is turn-taking, not monopolizing conversation. You are winning if you refuse to force any connection. Not being connected is a form of connection, and to deny that space is to be isolated in that moment. This means yielding when the straight-ahead energy is blocked, rather than forcing on through.

People say: You should have a little elevator speech (a short pitch) prepared about who you are and what you do. I could never do that, as I seek to shrink the realm of selling, not expand it opportunistically. To me, it would be impolite to thrust a sale in the middle of a human encounter outside the formal realm of a sales call. Perhaps I am too shy, and it is a

failing.

In *The Grace of Crows*, Bill Davidson writes that crows shame humanity by their exquisite attention to manners and effusive displays of gratitude: “Nothing, we discovered, is gracious like a Corvid. Nothing displays such old world, mannerly attention to others, such an elaborate, politesse, such greetings, and such parting . . . most effulgently ritualistic, of coming in and going out, in acceptance and rejection, in speech and gesture, in meeting and making acquaintance, in the presentation of gifts. . . in the bowings and callings, circling and head bending, the solemn placing of ritual.”

One of my favorite guides in pondering politeness has been Keith H. Basso, in his study of Western Apache linguistic play in *Portraits of “The Whiteman”* and *Wisdom Sits in Places*. He catalogs a long list of observations of what Apaches understood to be acceptable and unacceptable behavior: “Whiteman act as if they were chiefs. Even if it’s something little — like they want you to close the door — even for something like that, some Whiteman talk like they bossing you around. It’s like shooting rabbits with a .30-.30”. I summarize only a few here, using Basso’s original terminology, while noting that it is not in current use. Apaches consider it polite to:

Learn to wait. Develop capacity for self-restraint and discretion.

Quietly ask permission.

Ask a question no more than once.

Carefully consider replies to questions.

Wait a bit before asking questions.

Avoid probing.

Construct directives in ways so circumlocutional and oblique that they carry the force of observations rather than orders.

Temper your assumptions that you know what is best for other people.

Respect the intelligence of those you presume to advise.

Address each other in low, softly modulated tones and at a measured and deliberate pace.

Treat misfortune carefully and formally.

Avoid using someone's name. Use it as if you were borrowing a valued possession.

Say thank you sparingly, so that the gesture has significance.

Discourse sparingly about the patently obvious.

Understand inadequacies inherent in your own forms of reasoning.

Surprisingly, Jungian therapist Helen M. Luke links the imagination at its most free and playful with the words 'merchant' and 'commercial':

[T]he oldest known root of the word "mercy" is probably the Etruscan *merc*, from which such words as commerce and merchant are derived. It is therefore connected with basic images of exchange—value given and received between people. Like so many other meanings hidden in our language, the word commerce, debased to commercialism, has lost much of its dignity, since it often signifies greed for money through dishonest efforts to destroy competitors. But the root meaning of exchange persisted and developed in another context, its meaning deepening through the French *merci* to grateful response and kindness of heart, and finally to the compassion and forgiveness, including all our share of darkness, whereby we are able to open ourselves to the Mercy. This is the ultimate "exchange" that, when we come to a final letting go, may reveal to us the whole. It is a lovely thing to connect the constantly used *merci*, meaning thank you in France, with the Mercy that frees all faults.