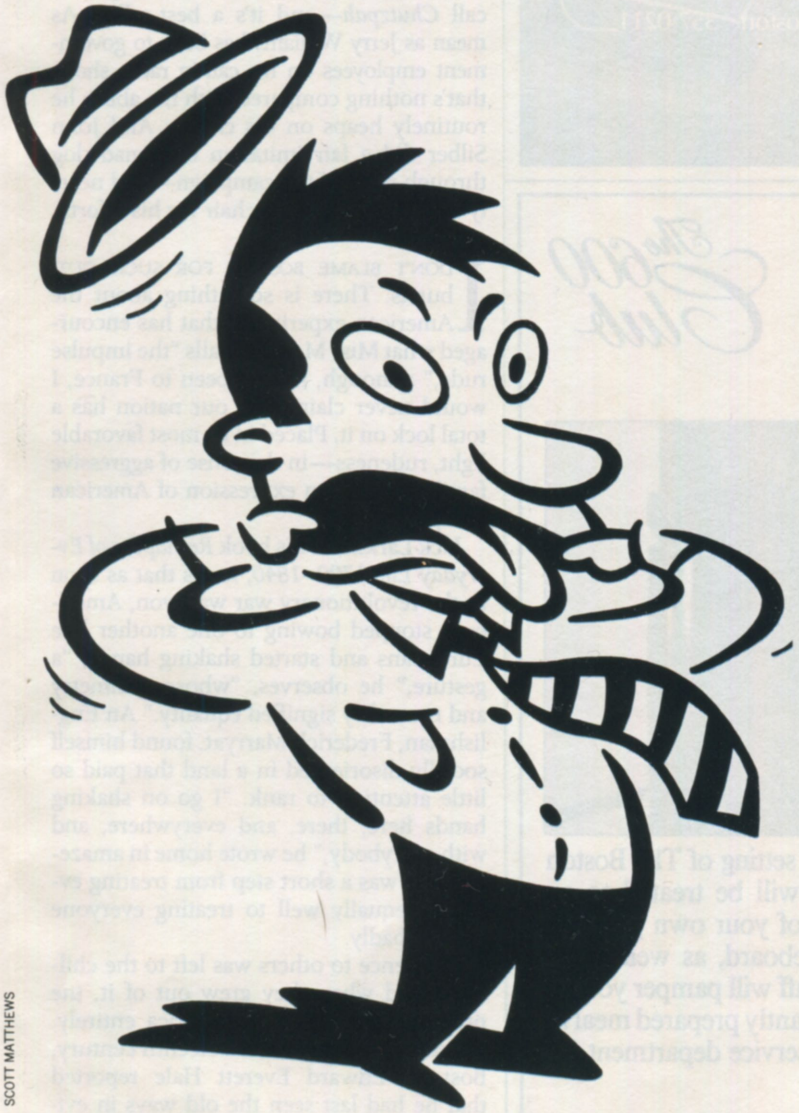
Missing Manners

All too often, living in Boston means never having to say you're sorry.

BY JOHN SEDGWICK



SCOTT MATTHEWS

MY BLOOD PRESSURE WAS UP WHEN I WENT TO THE doctor. He told me to watch my diet and exercise more, but I knew there was nothing wrong with my cardiovascular system.

My problem was his manners. He had been 55 minutes late, and he hadn't apologized. Not only that, but the receptionist had been so busy chatting with her boyfriend on the telephone when I arrived that she could barely be bothered to sign me in. The waiting room was stocked with only one dog-eared copy of *Bride's*. The nurse who had ushered me into the examination room had all the tenderness of a prison matron. And, after all that, the doctor himself had breezed into the room—whistling, no less—and started to tell me all about his delightful weekend. He's lucky I didn't strangle him.

Maybe I'm being oversensitive. After all, the receptionist probably did need to straighten out some things with her boyfriend; I could have brought my own reading material; the nurse was in a hurry; and the doctor was actually trying to be friendly by letting me in on his weekend bliss. And maybe I should have said something myself to clear the air.

Or maybe they were rude.

It's an intemperate age, and I don't mean to single out the medical profession for rebuke. It seems that every profession now makes a point of outraging the public it ostensibly serves—and it's no better in Boston, for all our fair city's reputation for civility. Cabbies get lost driving

from Brookline to Cambridge and then blame *you* for not knowing the route. Boston banks have let their interpersonal skills deteriorate to the point where the ATMs far outdo the humans in responsiveness and civility. No wonder Bank of New England and First Mutual Bank for Savings went under.

Regular Joes can be pretty nasty, too. Not long ago I was parked for gas when a car pulled abruptly out of an adjoining parking space and slammed into me. Seeing the side of my car suddenly crumpled, I told the other driver that he'd made a rather stupid mistake. "Don't call me stupid!" he screamed, and drew back an arm to slug me. I ended up apologizing to him.

In certain quarters, as on rap albums and in comedy clubs, rudeness has a certain "that's tellin' 'em" appeal. Locally, Harvard's Alan Dershowitz has made a career of being a loudmouth and a party crasher. He even bragged about it for a whole book that he had the chutzpah to call *Chutzpah*—and it's a best-seller! As mean as Jerry Williams has been to government employees on his call-in radio show, that's nothing compared with the abuse he routinely heaps on his callers. And John Silber did a fair imitation of a mad dog through most of the campaign—and nearly won the governor's chair for his efforts.

I DON'T BLAME BOSTON FOR SUCH OUTbursts. There is something about the American experiment that has encouraged what Miss Manners calls "the impulse rude," although, having been to France, I would never claim that our nation has a total lock on it. Placed in its most favorable light, rudeness—in the sense of aggressive familiarity—is an expression of American independence.

Jack Larkin, in his book *Reshaping of Everyday Life 1790–1840,* notes that as soon as the revolutionary war was won, Americans stopped bowing to one another like Europeans and started shaking hands, "a gesture," he observes, "whose symmetry and mutuality signified equality." An Englishman, Frederick Marryat, found himself socially disoriented in a land that paid so little attention to rank. "I go on shaking hands here, there, and everywhere, and with everybody," he wrote home in amazement. It was a short step from treating everyone equally well to treating everyone equally badly.

Deference to others was left to the children, and when they grew out of it, the practice vanished from America entirely. Toward the end of the nineteenth century, Boston's Edward Everett Hale reported that he had last seen the old ways in evi-

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dence in 1842. Nowadays, the only time I hear the titles Mr. and Mrs. is when my wife and I are called up (usually in the middle of dinner) by telemarketers or when my daughter mentions her second-grade teacher, Mrs. Hardaway.

In the face of such decadence, campaigns to civilize us have cropped up roughly every 50 years, generally during an outbreak of prosperity that has made the social graces newly affordable.

A century ago, Mary Elizabeth Wilson Sherwood's *Manners and Social Usage in America* led the list of nearly 60 titles that appeared during the Gilded Age to tutor the nation in deportment. Emily Post rose up in the Roaring Twenties to provide, through the personages of Mrs. Climber, Mrs. Wellborn, the Upstarts, the Richan Vulgars, and the like, a handy allegory for correct behavior, right down to the proper pronunciation of words such as *gentleman* (not gempmum) and *girl* (not goil).

And we have had Miss Manners to guide us through the Reagan years and beyond, although her arch tone and her admonitions to the "Gentle Reader" show a diffidence toward her task that would have confounded her predecessors. It's as though she doesn't quite know where to begin.

Besides *Miss Manners' Guide to Excruciatingly Correct Behavior,* a number of books have lately attempted to correct our present social deficiencies, but most of them specialize in extricating readers from sticky situations of a particularly modern flavor. Eve Drobot's *Class Acts,* for instance, gives advice on whether to return, after the divorce, a wedding ring that had been your ex's grandmother's (yes) and when to introduce your new boyfriend to your children (early). Magazine articles have sprung up to address other predicaments of the day, such as whether to tip the sushi chef (no), how to inquire about a lover's sexual past (gently), and what to say to a friend who has just been accused of insider trading ("Sorry").

OBVIOUSLY, THESE ARE COMPLICATED times, but they are not so complicated that you need a graduate degree from charm school to figure out the answers to most of these questions. The more arcane details of etiquette are beside the point, anyway. In most cases, it doesn't matter which fork you use. The real issue is far harder to address in an advice column. It involves interior manners, a kind of personal grace of which etiquette is merely the outward show.

Jonathan Swift, himself never the most decorous of men, declared that "whoever makes the fewest people uncomfortable has the best manners." English royalty (with the obvious exception of such recent installments as Randy Prince Andy) has always been good at this. In a famous instance from the nineteenth century, the shah of Persia once unexpectedly drank all the water from his finger bowl at a London banquet. Queen Victoria promptly responded by downing hers as well.

At bottom, good manners are moral in nature because they stem from a consideration for others. They involve a touch, a feeling, an instinct that, collectively, amounts to goodness and nowadays practically qualifies one for sainthood. Certainly, the absence of such sensitivity looks a lot like evil, both on the small scale of the cutting remark or the off-white lie, and on the large scale of intra-Yugoslavian squabbling or Saddam-style fury.

But moral perfection is not required. The basics are still so simple and easy that only a few children ever seem to bother with them anymore: saying Please, Thank you, Excuse me, and I'm sorry. Yet what a difference such little phrases can make.

"I'm sorry." That's the true test of politesse in the modern age, and it's the one most widely failed. Does anyone say "I'm sorry" anymore? A waiter spills soup on you. Does he say "I'm sorry"? No. He says, "That damn rug. I told the manager I'd trip on it someday." The dry cleaner stains your shirt with cleaning fluid. Does he say "I'm sorry"? He says, "Hey, don't worry about it. It'll come off." (Even if it won't.)

Obviously, "I'm sorry" goes only so far in making you feel better, but it does shift responsibility for the mishap from the victim to the perpetrator, where it belongs, and there is some satisfaction in that. Courts of law understand its value and will often strike years from a murderer's sentence if he demonstrates "remorse" (and, conversely, tack on another decade if he does not). And I appreciate an apology, too, although saying "I'm sorry" doesn't mean that you have to *be* sorry, helpful as that might be in creating the desired effect.

P. J. O'Rourke once observed that in Los Angeles, the only people who acted with any civility were the bellhops. But they didn't count, because they were "acting." I'm not so fussy. Every once in a while it's okay to *pretend* to be nice, just to keep life moving along.

The thing is, graciousness works, whatever its motivation—particularly nowadays, when it is so unexpected. A friend of mine has been stopped for speeding several times in the Greater Boston area, and although the police officers may approach his car with the most severe intentions, their hearts inevitably melt. My friend's secret? "I say, 'I'm sorry, officer. I'm sorry, I'm sorry,'" he explains. "It works like a charm." He hasn't gotten a ticket yet. □