

The following piece appeared in 1994 in *The Orange County Register*.

How We Have Evolved into a Culture of Rudeness

martin J. smith

The scene: a popular souvenir shop. The topic: the decline of civility. "I keep wanting to do a 'remember when' book," says customer Cecilia de Baca, 41. "Remember when someone sneezed and everyone would say, 'God bless you'? Remember when people would see an older person and offer them their seat?"

She is speaking to the manager, behind whom hangs a sign: "Shoplifters will be beaten to death." A key-ring display on the counter shrieks slogans full of hostility and attitude, including "Chill me, thrill me, fulfill me, then leave me the hell alone." The T-shirt rack behind her bristles with messages—"It's not a beer belly. It's a fuel tank for a sex machine"—that suggest crudeness these days can be a profitable commodity.

"There really are a lot of nice people that come in," says Jeff Balaam, 34, manager of the Seal Beach, Calif., souvenir shop, "but there also are a lot of jerks. I like the ones that come in, go straight to the back and use the restroom, then just walk out. They don't even pretend to look around. And they don't say thank you."

Highbrow prudes? Hardly. They are, after all, in a beachside souvenir shop.

But lamentations about the decline of common courtesy and civility transcend economic, social and racial lines like the ratings of a particularly juicy "Geraldo" show.

"It has nothing to do with money or social class," insists Letitia Baldrige, an authority on manners who has written 13 books on the subject. "It has everything to do with character and the way Mama and Papa brought you up, and that doesn't cost money. Some of the lowest economic classes have the best brought-up children, and some of the highest economic classes have the least civility."

So how did we go from a ma'am-ing and sir-ing society where politeness really counted to a society where even a corporate giant such as Del Taco feels safe distributing children's prizes imprinted with the slogan "Shut up and eat your beans"?

What social pathology explains the reluctance of so many people to pull over for passing funeral processions, to make small talk with fellow bus passengers, to exchange the pleasantries that for generations helped lubricate social discourse?

What impulse moved an antique-store owner to tape a photocopied cartoon in the store's front window showing two vault-type safes, apparently copulating, above the caption "Safe sex"?

Does the world really need to see unauthorized and explicit honeymoon video outtakes of Tonya Harding and Jeff Gillooly, as presented in the new *Penthouse* magazine, or the full video available, reportedly, on pay-per-view TV this fall?

Experts agree on the symptoms but aren't sure how to explain the decline of civility and the rise of crudeness. They cite everything from the anti-Establishment movement of the 1960s to the unraveling of close-knit neighborhoods to the rise of feminism. "One reason is the legitimization of protest movements in North America and the West in general," said Alexander Moore, a professor of anthropology at the University of Southern California.

"That legitimized bad behavior, especially among youth, and has influenced the

problem. Protests have gone from the gentle nonviolence of Martin Luther King to the antics of ACT-UP and Queer Nation and others that use rudeness as a way of gaining attention."

Psychology Professor Jerald Jellison blames the phenomenon on "a 40-year shift away from a social life guided by social customs and personal character."

"We used to have informal rule systems which governed life," says Jellison, author of "I'm Sorry I Didn't Mean To & Other Lies We Love to Tell."

Now, Jellison says, that informal mandate for public behavior has been replaced by more formal rules and government-based laws. The question "Is it proper?" has been replaced by the question "Is it legal?"

"If it's not illegal, then a lot of people will go ahead and do it," he says. "They don't worry about upsetting people. It may be offensive, but they think. There's no law against it. And even if there is a law, then I probably won't get caught. And even if I get caught, I'll get a good attorney and get out of it.' That's a large change in our society, and there are problems associated with it."

Moore, the USC anthropologist, says the issue of civility seemed especially relevant during the recent World Cup, during which competing players frequently helped up one another from the ground and winners often consoled losers. The behavior was very different than the in-your-face style of more traditional U.S. sports.

Baldrige says recent events "reminded people of a different era when people behaved nicely to one another"—the death of Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis, the pomp and ceremony surrounding the death of former President Richard Nixon, the patriotic fervor of the D-Day celebrations. "In the space of a few months," she says wistfully, "there were a lot of tragic but very dignified events that harkened back to a time of graciousness and kindness and caring."

Essay Topic: What does Smith say has happened to American culture? To what extent do you find his discussion and evidence persuasive? Write an essay responding to these two questions. To develop your own position, be sure to discuss specific examples; those examples can be drawn from anything you've read, as well as from your observation or experience.