

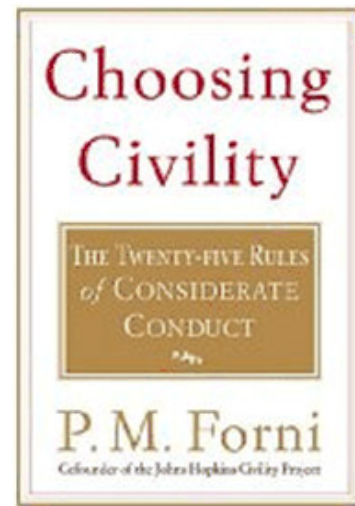
CHOOSING CIVILITY

The 25 rules of considerate conduct

by P.M. Forni

Ode to 'angels of our better nature'

This one was recommended persistently by my mom until I eventually caved; she swore mastering the rules of civil behavior would stand me in good stead with Coffee Coaster Website readership. I would realize that instead of being a mean and angry SOB and screaming at everyone, if I made nice, people would come around to my way of thinking. Well, Choosing Civility is not (forgiving the mixed metaphor) your Emily Post's sort of Oldsmobile. Rather, it is, but it's the muscular 442 or the sleek and fast Cutlass Supreme, not the big-ol'-heap-o'-iron Delta 88.



Forni points out the ethical component of civility, making distinctions with respect to etiquette, politeness, tolerance, kindness, and so on. He starts by explaining that civility's "...defining characteristic is its tie to city and society. The word derives from the Latin civitas, which means 'city,' especially in the sense of civic community." Then: "Although we can describe the civil as courteous, polite, and well mannered, etymology reminds us that the civil [people] are also supposed to be good citizens and good neighbors."

Lately, I'm always seeing the SNaP angle...

Good citizens, practicing the nonaggression principle? Well, it's certainly implied isn't it? From my presentation (on the Sacred Nonaggression Principle), a significant-other contributed the following key thought:

- All core American values—life, liberty, equality, justice, truth, pursuit of happiness, popular sovereignty, separation of powers, rule of law, sanctity of family, and so on—assume the simple nonaggression principle. Name a value that doesn't!

And civility is certainly right up there as a key value. And this is a wonderfully useful book. The rules, which are laid out by chapter with often refreshingly bright and robust illustrations taken from Forni's own cultivated experience, speak for themselves:

Pay attention
Acknowledge others
Think the best
Listen
Be inclusive
Speak kindly
Don't speak ill
Accept and give praise
Respect even a subtle "no"
Respect others' opinions
Mind your body
Be agreeable

Keep it down (and rediscover silence)
Respect other people's time
Respect other people's space
Apologize earnestly
Assert yourself
Avoid personal questions
Care for your guests
Be a considerate guest
Think twice before asking for favors
Refrain from idle complaints
Accept and give constructive criticism
Respect the environment and be gentle
Don't shift responsibility and blame

Salt-and-pepper lessons ...

Just a readthru of the list serves as a reminder of good and prudent behavior, but in the presentation of each Dr. Forni typically provides an idea that makes the rule come to life. For instance, on rule #1, Forni makes a habit of having his students imagine they're in a cafeteria with him and he asks one of them to pass him the salt.

"What do you do:"

The students start by merely stating they will pass to Forni the salt shaker. But Forni continues to prompt, "What else?" After seconds of silence, invariably one of the students responds, "I'll pass you the pepper, as well." To which Forni says yes, we recall the etiquette books tell us that the salt and pepper always travel together... but often neglect the "why:"

"Student B is ready now: 'I will give you the pepper as well because you may need it later?'

"That's indeed part of the rationale. And that's where ethics intersects etiquette. 'You,' I tell student B, 'will be thinking of a need of mine that may or may not become apparent. By doing what you are doing, you are not just observing an arbitrary rule. Your act has an ethical component, since it requires attention and consideration...."

"At this point someone points out that keeping the saltshaker and the pepper mill together makes it easier to locate them. The next person who needs them will not have to chase them around the table. 'By following the rule then,' I conclude, 'we show consideration [and attention, of course] for people we don't even know.'" — page 40

And Forni ends the chapter: "The students are intrigued by this unveiling of implications. They talk about the salt and the pepper with their friends and their dates. And they begin to understand that a humble book of etiquette can be used as a primer in moral philosophy. This meditation on good manners and their ethical underpinnings both expands and gives focus to the students' awareness of the needs of others...."

So gentle readers, just as the devil is in the details so may lie the 'better angels of our nature.' Choosing Civility, just as any edifying work of the practical philosopher, "tells us

what most of us already know inside—something really important and essential to our lives—but didn't quite get around to coming up with the words for."[1]

Making us "want to be a better man" ...

So do we all remember the famous dialog between Jack Nicholson and Helen Hunt in *As Good as It Gets*? It's the scene where Melvin (Nicholson) tries to convince Carol (Hunt) that he loves her and they should be together. Now Melvin has a lot of personality issues that manifest themselves in a host of (often extraordinarily comic) behavior that would be considered by most people to lack manners, lack civility.

Indeed, if fans of the movie were to go through the 25 measures of civil behavior listed above, Melvin crashes and burns on virtually all of them. But he ultimately comes up smelling like a rose. Why? Well, one could make an argument that—because of the supreme motivation provided by his love for another human being—he moves steadily toward civility in his actions... slowly and awkwardly, to be sure, but in the end effectively. And what does his conscious effort toward civility accomplish? Leaving aside whether he gets the girl, he takes a big bite out of his deeper psychological problems.

Change the behavior, change the man?

Not to dwell on psychological theories of behaviorism, cognitive therapy, or any others: even if it cannot be demonstrated that personality orders can be resolved through good manners, good manners certainly don't hurt anything. Moreover, simply by giving it the good-old college try, you make life for people in your surroundings better—often considerably.

Finally, consciousness and civility ...

Candidly, reading such a sneaky and seductive little book as *Choosing Civility* (sneaky and seductive because, as the boss used to say, 'he puts into words stuff you already know' and thus sort of tricks you into coming to grips with deeper ideas) reminds me of where I'm not exactly being the best I can be. Just from Chapter 1: Pay Attention, on more than a handful of occasions I don't really pay attention to people, to what they're telling me, to their body language, to their tone of voice. Even if I can respond logically to their words, I can be oblivious to the subtext and context.

Then going down the list by reading through the book, sure, I can be a whole lot better. Not to pick on myself exclusively here, I'll bet the great majority of people can move forward in these civility categories, too.

So how do we get down to it?

When you boil down the fundamental quality required of us by the practice of civility, it's consciousness, isn't it? Awareness, consciousness, however you want to name the concept. Which I find totally fascinating, especially because of my reading of Eckhart Tolle and the commitment he encourages to totally embracing in our lives "the Now" of all that exists. Personally, I've been moving more and more toward letting go of a longstanding cloud of "reactive mind" that obscures my direct, immediate awareness of things and people. (I'm honestly trying, but, like good golf, I'm not one of the types who gets things right, immediately. Please bear with me.)

I've also identified—I believe in a benign, easy-to-digest format through my field manual on the Sacred Nonaggression Principle (SNaP)—how consciousness and consistent observance of the nonaggression principle complement each other in 'making us want to

have a better society.' Healthful political goals are well-served by civility. And as the wholly believable Melvin shows us in *As Good as It Gets*, as we make positive changes in our concrete, day-to-day ways of dealing with people, those patterns work their way down into our personal essence.

It's like milk and cookies: Good manners breed consciousness; consciousness breeds good manners. You'll be edified if not invigorated by this disarmingly unpretentious little book from Dr. Forni. Though I must say, it could use a Chapter 26:

Always Listen to Your Mother.

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[1] The reason for the quotes is that these words come from my first real boss, Jim Cline. At the time, where I'm doing a project for him 23 years ago in East Hampton, Long Island, I was explaining either Objectivism or libertarianism, and this was his sage comeback. [Jim is a self-made man and graduate of Hardscrabble University, working his way from lowly roots in the hills of North Carolina to ownership of a respected, flourishing engineering firm in Florida.]

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Etiquette | *Manners* | *P.M. Forni* | *Considerate Conduct* | *Moral Philosophy*

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