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Civility and the Cell Phone: What Would George Washington Say?

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The public use of the cell phone is ubiquitous in today's technologically advanced global economy. On a recent trip, I settled down into my narrow seat in a commercial airliner. While buckling my seatbelt, I became aware of a cell phone conversation of a man in the seat behind me, and of another by a woman in the seat immediately in front of me, and of another by a man across the aisle. I quickly was exposed to a combination of business conversation, social chatter, and travel arrangements that prevented my own reading or conversation. After landing and leaving the airport in a rental car, I encountered a woman with cell phone in place at her right ear, swerving her sports utility vehicle out of a parking lot into my auto's path. When I slammed on the brakes, the woman glared at me with a wrathful demeanor, presumably for interrupting her conversation. I and others behind me now often have to wait in line at retail counters, standing behind another customer who has difficulty ordering in a manner the clerk can understand, but still continues a conversation over a cell phone. Callers to talk radio shows sometimes use a cell phone while driving in traffic, resulting in static-filled messages. Am I the only one distressed over the cumulative effect of such little but oft-repeated phenomena? Or are they merely to be endured patiently in this brave new world?

Cell phone users may argue that safety is not really endangered by public cell phone use, even by drivers. I fear that accident statistics will prove them wrong. However, another consequence is perhaps merely a manifestation of our autonomous, self-centered society. Manners seem to be obsolete when it comes to

using a cell phone.

More generally, considering the sensibilities of others is no longer given the importance it once was. Just a few years ago, when smoking was at least as unhealthy as it is today but less politically incorrect, a person wishing to smoke in the presence of others, especially when in another's home or workspace, would ask permission prior to lighting up. The gentleman or lady would either refrain from smoking or seek out a spot outside of the presence of others whom he or she might possibly offend. Men did not wear hats indoors, either. In the nineteen seventies, when Bear Bryant, who had led his team to more victories than any other coach in American history, took his football team to the first Sugar Bowl Game in the New Orleans Superdome, he uncharacteristically did not wear his houndstooth hat, a personal trademark. He explained to reporters that his mother had taught him never to wear a hat indoors, a precept he followed even in a domed stadium. In America today, men often wear hats indoors, even at the table in restaurants. Cultural practices do change, but not always for the better.

Another courteous exemplar from the past is George Washington, the first President of the United States. As a young man he copied out by hand 110 rules for civil behavior in a little notebook. These Rules of Civility (edited and with commentary by Richard Brookhiser. 1997. NY: The Free Press), borrowed from a text used by generations of Jesuit tutors, provide a commonsense framework for the gentleman who hoped to rise in society. Washington closely followed these mostly simple rules of etiquette throughout his lifetime, influencing positively all those around him with his morality and reputation for courtesy, the foundations for his military, political, and social leadership. Definitely not a postmodern character, he did not grasp for power. The last thing he did with it was to resign it-considered honorable at the time even by his opponents. George III said his retirement from the presidency, following his resignation as Commander in Chief fourteen years earlier, "placed him in a light the most distinguished of any man living," and that he was "the greatest character of the age." Sincere concern for etiquette goes hand-in-hand with moral character development.

Of course, George Washington never encountered a cell phone, although he could have used this technological marvel well in communicating with his troops and the politicians and others with whom he regularly corresponded. Indeed, he would have

used one, being a thoroughly progressive man, ever seeking ways to develop new crops and new industries for the welfare of the nation and for his own estate. However, according to his principles of conduct, enumerated in the Laws of Civility, he would have used the cell phone politely, following certain rules that suggest ways for twenty-first century people to improve their cell phone etiquette.

A Sample of Washington's Rules of Civility:

Rule #1: Every action done in company ought to be done with some sign of respect to those that are present.

Rule #18: Read no letters, books, or papers in company, but when there is a necessity for the doing of it you must ask leave.

Rule #77: Treat with men at fit times about business & whisper not in the company of others.

As applied to cell phone use, Washington's Rules are translated as follows:

1. Every action, including communicating via cell phone, done in company ought to be done with some sign of respect to those that are present. This is consistent with those of another moral authority, Jesus Christ, who taught men and women to love their God and their neighbors.
2. When there is a necessity to answer or call using a cell phone, excuse oneself from others and leave to use the cell phone in a private area outside the hearing, and preferably the sight, of those that are present.
3. When attending a ceremony or service where a beep or ring would be heard by others in attendance, turn off the beeper or phone until leaving. Never allow a beeper or cell phone to interrupt a worship service.
4. When operating automobiles or other equipment, park safely until the communication can be completed.

In the twenty-first century, we should recall the rather quaint eighteenth century precepts of George Washington. Our characters would be more like Washington's if we would learn to use our cell phones according to the rules he would have followed. If we did so, would not our global civilization fare a

little better?

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