



Newsletter – May 2009

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Manners

I grew up in a family and a neighborhood in which we spoke only Hokkien. All my other siblings went to schools which used Chinese language as the medium of instruction. It took me all of 17 years, when I was in my Pre-U days (now called Junior college) of English medium education, before someone taught me to say "Yes. Please." and "No. Thank you". After that, I used these often, and very quickly, I became known as a gentleman.

As a child, I was taught to be respectful to elders and to "call them", i.e. to wish them whenever I meet them, sort of to acknowledge their presence. We learned to address them in the exact polite form which recognized and acknowledged that they were of an elder generation, and which the definite relationship between us. This was typical of most Chinese families of that time. We did not have this indiscriminate "dumbing down" of simply calling everyone "uncle" and "aunty", that is typical of today's Singapore.

Two years ago, I moved into a new apartment and my immediate neighbor is a family with three teenage children. The first few times I met them in the lifts and the lobby I wished them and asked their names, which they grudgingly gave. Subsequently when they meet me they avoided my eyes and never acknowledged nor "called" me. Not even a smile or a friendly "hi". The youngest, a girl of about 12, even snubbed me once when I ask how she was. The various times when I met them in the presence of their parents, I have never heard their parents instructing them to wish me or my wife. A few months after we moved in, we went to Penang and on our return knocked on their door, and when one of the sons came to the door we gave them a box of cookies we brought back from Penang. We never had any acknowledgement from their parents that they had received it. That was of course the first and regrettably, the last.



Our relationship with them to this day is at best, frosty. The parents are reasonably polite, Their domestic help, an Indonesian girl, is courteous and chatty when her employers are not present. However, their three teenage children remained (as we say in Chinese) untaught, - no upbringing. My wife and I have good relationships with the many other neighbors using the same lift lobby. We still keep in touch with some of our old neighbors in our previous housing block.

Most parents in Singapore do teach their children to be polite, especially to older people. In the schools some of the older teachers still expect and demand some respect and proper manners from their pupils. However, most of the younger teachers, nowadays especially those in the secondary schools, don't. They believe that they should "be the friend" of the children they teach. They seek to be a popular teacher, forgetting their true role as teacher/master (now understood only in the kung-fu context) and mentor.

Children must be taught manners early. Parents are their first educators.

First, teach them to say "hello" and "goodbye" to the people they come into contact with. They must learn to acknowledge the presence of others, and that others matter.

Then they should progress to learn "li" – custom, propriety. They must learn what is acceptable behavior, in the society they live in.

I was a senior Manager in a Danish company. They often sponsored young Danish university students to come to the Company ostensibly on training/orientation. Once I walked past a room a little after 5.00pm and found one of these kids sitting at a manager's table with his feet up on the table soles of his shoes facing the glass front. I asked him to put his feet down telling him it is rude to do that in Singapore. He tried to ignore me. I was only a local and he, a Dane in a Danish company. I had to raise my voice before he would comply. Later, I heard that he complained to the head of the Company and was roundly chastised. That is what we (the older generation) consider as being "untaught", being without knowledge of "li", blatantly and totally ignoring the sensibilities of others. We, of the older generation, consider this as being "untaught" a failing of the parents.

After learning "li", young people have to be guided to rise to the next level – that of etiquette. Etiquette is conventional requirements as to social behavior. In Chinese the word is "ceremony". Etiquette does not exist when you are alone. It is something that we consciously do, acceptable behaviour out of respect of the other person/ people around us.

Some people have given the excuse that in the crowded urban environment, we have to shut out all others, that this is a survival mechanism. This is not true.

I was in Japan recently. When I got on the airport bus to take me into the City I noticed that there was a notice asking passengers not to use their cell phones on the bus as "it may disturb the other passengers". The same rule applies in all their trains. People use their cell phones quietly. They message, play games soundlessly on their phones, but never to talk loudly into it. They respect the calm and peace that the other fellow passenger is entitled to. This is courtesy shown to others, or simply - manners.

In every instance it is an acknowledgement of, a respect for, and voluntarily shown to others. On this bedrock of respect for others stems all courtesy, politeness, manners, correct behavior, being considerate, etiquette, customs, social graces, ceremony, social harmony, peace, etc.

All the major religions in the world teach "subordination of self" as a main tenet.

Christianity too teaches us to respect others, in fact more than that, - to love others. Selfishness, self gratification, self centeredness, are among the worst character traits to have.

In Singapore, after 40 years of courtesy campaigns we are still lamenting about those people who got into the MRT train, rushed to sit down in the seats, (including those reserved for the elderly) and then pretended to be very engrossed in playing games on their mobile phones, listening to iPods, or to sleep, refusing to give up the seats to people who need the seats more. Why? Because we never teach people to respect others.

Many years ago In 1980s the CFMS commented on the inadequacies of the then state/school sex-education program. We noted that what was glaringly missing then was any mention, any attempt, to teach school children respect for one another - that the boys must learn to respect their friends, especially those who are girls, and vice versa.

Recently, the subject of sex education in our schools has again re-surfaced and being re-examined. Regrettably, this - teaching of young people to have respect for one another, is still glaringly missing from the programs.

Parents, as "the first and primary educators" you must not "abdicate".

You have to teach your children to respect others.

article by..... mark

**CFMS Formation Session – 24 May 2009 (Sunday) 1.30 – 5.30pm at Novena Church
Theme – "SOLIDARITY. Please bring your children along. For more details or to confirm your attendance, contact Donald Sng (9366 8337) or Andrew Leong (6789 3710).**