

lessons in *civility*

*10 simple ways to honor
our country, our community,
our fellow humans*

By Gretchen Eichenberg

Civility is the act of showing regard for others; a polite act or expression.

In many ways, American society has grown more civil than in decades and centuries past.

Women are no longer publicly stoned for their indiscretions – at least, not literally. Children are not forced to work in sweatshops. African-Americans and people of color are not banished to the back of the bus. All are major steps forward in terms of civility, not to mention human decency.

In other, seemingly smaller ways, society may have regressed in its civility. Common courtesies that make neighborhoods and communities enjoyable places to live, have gone by the wayside. Holding the door. Removing a hat. Pulling over while a fire truck passes. Some of those actions or lack thereof, actually, aren't such little things.

Hectic times cause people to take short cuts and overlook daily practices that aren't completely necessary. People are overlooked and some of the simplest ways to show respect for fellow citizens have been reduced to mere inconveniences.

Consider 10 simple practices that, if observed once again, might bring about a day of greater civility and, therefore, harmony.



1. USE PROPER FLAG ETIQUETTE.

Most people remember from their elementary school days that the U.S. flag should never touch the ground, lest it be burned. But, did you know that you should never fly a flag at night, without illuminating it with a spotlight? Or, that a flag should never be used in advertising? Or, that a flag should be raised briskly and lowered slowly?

According to the U.S. Department of State, the Flag Code is a set of rules that formalizes and unifies the traditional ways in which we give respect to the flag. It contains specific instructions on how the U. S. flag *is* and *is not* to be used.

Flag Violations:

- The flag should never be dipped to any person or thing. It is flown upside down only as a distress signal.
- The flag should not be used as a drapery, or for covering a speakers desk, draping a platform, or for any decoration in general. Bunting of blue, white and red stripes is available for these purposes. The blue stripe of the bunting should be on the top.
- The flag should never be used for any advertising purpose. It should not be embroidered, printed or otherwise impressed on such articles as cushions, handkerchiefs, napkins, boxes, or anything intended to be discarded after temporary use. Advertising signs should not be attached to the staff or halyard.

- The flag should not be used as part of a costume or athletic uniform, except that a flag patch may be used on the uniform of military personnel, fireman, policeman and members of patriotic organizations.
- The flag should never have placed on it, or attached to it, any mark, insignia, letter, word, number, figure, or drawing of any kind.
- The flag should never be used as a receptacle for receiving, holding, carrying, or delivering anything.
- When the flag is lowered, no part of it should touch the ground or any other object; it should be received by waiting hands and arms. To store the flag it should be folded neatly and ceremoniously.

Flag To-Dos:

- The flag should be cleaned and mended when necessary. But, when a flag is so worn it is no longer fit to serve as a symbol of our country, it should be destroyed by burning in a dignified manner.
- The flag should be raised briskly and lowered slowly and ceremoniously. Ordinarily it should be displayed only between sunrise and sunset. It should be illuminated if displayed at night.
- The flag of the United States of America is saluted as it is hoisted and lowered. The salute is held until the flag is unsnapped from the halyard or through the last note of music, whichever is the longest.

2. PULL OVER WHEN YOU HEAR OR SEE A FIRE TRUCK, AMBULANCE OR POLICE CAR COMING.

This is not just a matter of courtesy; it's a matter of safety and it's a law, said Chief John D. Johnston of the Waco Fire Department.

Section 545.156 of the Texas Criminal and Traffic Laws states:

On the immediate approach of an authorized emergency vehicle using audible and visual signals ... an operator [of a vehicle] shall:

1. yield the right-of-way; 2. immediately drive to a position parallel to and as close to the right-hand edge or curb of the roadway clear of any intersection; and 3. stop and remain standing until the authorized emergency vehicle has passed.

"What people need to remember is that, when we're making an emergency run, it could be to their home or to help one of their family members or friends," Johnson said. "A fire doubles every minute it burns. And a person needing oxygen is less likely to survive every minute that goes by without that oxygen. The amount of time we spend in traffic is critical."

Cell phone calls and text messages have taken many people's attention off the road and what's going on around them. It's a real safety hazard, he said.

"Also, newer cars are designed to block out noise," Johnson said. "So, it's especially important for people to be alert and aware of their surroundings."

3. PAUSE FOR A FUNERAL PROCESSION.

If you happen upon a group of cars, all with their lights on, being led and followed by a police car or motorcycle — it's most likely a string of mourners, heading to the cemetery to say a final goodbye. Such a scene should give everyone pause.

"We should take a moment to think of the person who just died and their family," said Hatch Bailey of Wilkerson-Hatch-Bailey. "We can also maybe think about our own lives, and whether or not we are on the right path."

Funeral directors work closely with the police to plan the best route to the cemetery, so as not to interfere with traffic or inconvenience people, Bailey said.

"We're just talking about a few seconds to show respect for human life," Bailey said. "We all have time to do that."

An average funeral procession is about 20 cars long, he added. So, you'll only be detailed for a few minutes at most — just enough time to stop and reflect.

4. DO OUR PART — AND MAYBE A LITTLE MORE.

Dispose of trash properly — and pick up trash that someone failed to throw away. Return your shopping cart to the cart return area — and return the stray carts that someone else didn't bother to put away. Try never to think: "It's not my job."

6. HOLD THE DOOR.

Perhaps one of the simplest ways to show respect for our fellow citizens, holding the door, seems almost a lost art. No one likes having a door — actual or metaphorical — closed in his or her face. Simply get in the habit of turning around to see if anyone is coming behind you, before you let a door close. And, more importantly, teach this practice to your children.

5. REMOVE HATS.

Even in Texas, where hats are part of the image, it is never appropriate for men to wear a hat or cap of any kind indoors, according to the Emily Post Institute. Therefore, hats (yes, baseball caps, too) must be removed when entering a home (which includes while eating at the table), when entering a place of religion or a restaurant. When entering a store or other "public area," the hat may remain on. Hats are always removed for the Pledge of Allegiance.

Women may wear hats as part of their ensemble. If they are large-brimmed, they should be removed in a theatre or other place where it may block the vision of the person in front of them, Emily Post says.



7. RESPECT OUR ELDERS.

Much honor is due the generations who came before us — and paved the way for the innovation and freedom we enjoy today.

“So much of what we enjoy today was built by the generations who came before us,” said Inez Russell, executive director of Friends for Life, a local organization dedicated to caring for the elderly and connecting the generations. “We would be wise to listen and learn from them because they have knowledge and experience that gives a perspective to history that is rarely found in books.”

A great way to show respect for senior citizens is to look for ways to help them in their daily life.

“Seniors rarely ask for help, which means that if we don’t take the time to ask them if we can help, most will suffer quietly,” Russell said. “A surprising number of seniors are completely alone, so when you take the initiative, you find an opportunity to make a huge difference in their lives.”

Escort them across an intersection. Offer them a seat on a bus or in a crowded waiting room. Take an interest in their stories. Thank a military veteran for his or her service.

8. EXTEND A PROPER THANK YOU.

Never underestimate the importance of a “thank you,” whether in person or in the form of a note. Acknowledgement of a gift or deed is important, so the giver knows you received and appreciated the gesture.

According to the Emily Post Institute, all gifts should be acknowledged with a note, unless the goodies were opened in front of the giver — then, you have a chance to thank them in person. One important exception: many of an older generation expect a hand-written note. Providing them one is an appropriate gesture of respect and consideration.

Thank you notes should be written as soon as possible, so you don’t forget, according to the Emily Post Institute. But, don’t hesitate if you think you’re too late. A late thank you is better than no thank you at all.



9. CARE FOR OUR NEIGHBORS.

With the invention of air conditioning came the decline of evenings spent on the front porch, visiting with neighbors and passers-by. How many people today regularly get together with — or even know — their neighbors?

“I have wonderful neighbors,” said Cynthia Swift, who lives in the Old Oaks edition of Waco. “We help each other in times of need and look after each other’s homes when someone goes on vacation. It’s a real comfort to know you can call on a neighbor for just about anything. And, I certainly am here if my neighbors need me.”

Here are some tips for being a good neighbor:

- Welcome new neighbors with a note or chat.
- Maintain your home and yard so that it is attractive.
- Be aware of loud noises that could disturb neighbors — barking dogs, music, power tools.
- Return borrowed items in a timely manner.
- Replace any item that was broken by you, your child or pet
- Offer to get mail, water plants and care for pets while your neighbor is on vacation.
- Invite neighbors over for a cup of coffee; even host a neighborhood party once a year.

10. CONSIDER OTHERS.

It’s natural for a small child to think of himself as the center of the universe. It’s unnatural — and inconsiderate — for an adult to do so, especially in a public place.

“As a shop owner, my goal is to give customers my undivided attention so I can meet their expectations,” said Johnnie Tovar, owner of Tovar Tailors on Austin Avenue. “When someone comes in talking on their cell phone, I can’t give them — or the other customers who may be waiting in line — the best service possible.”

Tovar even posted a sign on his door, asking customers to refrain from using cell phones in his place of business. People talk too loud on them and they detract from his ability to take accurate measurements, he said. They also disrupt an otherwise pleasant atmosphere.

Loud talking, cutting off another car, getting in the “express check-out” lane with 24 items and holding onto a library book long after you’ve finished it — all show lack of consideration for others. Whether in a store, at work or on the road, consider whether or not your presence is making the experience pleasant for others.