

Brief Encounter with the Taos Institute

June 2014

Manners, Courtesies, and Etiquette



By Sally St. George

“What we need in the world is manners . . . I think that if, instead of preaching brotherly love, we preached good manners, we might get a little further. It sounds less righteous and more practical.”

Eleanor Roosevelt, “My Day” (February 17, 1938)

I am holding several thoughts that seem to be traveling through my mind. One minute they seem to have a destination and at other moments they seem to go off in other directions. I feel like I need a “thought GPS.” Here are those thoughts:

- Just recently, Dan and I returned from a most stimulating 10 weeks of traveling and studying in Australia and New Zealand and as I reconnect with my friends and colleagues, I am often asked, “what did you find that was exceptional or different?” What I noticed that was so different was the language, not the different English accents, but the phrasing and colorful language that people used in daily talk. As I reflect on it, the talk was most courteous and mannerly.
- I returned home from these travels to hosting house guests. Harlene’s metaphor of “guest and host” in collaborative practices comes to mind, especially on the home front. Guests and hosting require the utmost in manners.
- Returning home was marked by an excited return to dance lessons. Our dance teacher took us “back to the basics” that we had appeared to have forgotten. Manners are the basics of effective conversation.
- Steadily, I am still catching up on the piles of mail, and current events. While I boast to Dan that I have many “high brow” ideas for this writing, I find I keep gravitating back to manners, courtesies, and etiquette. I think watching one of the CNN debating shows illuminated it best as all of the guests on the news show talked over each other. I had to turn the TV off.
- Relational responsibilities are always on my mind, from family, to students, clients, colleagues, and friends. I love this phrase and while we can talk of these in philosophical and theoretical terms, I find they cohere with manners at the forefront, in the midst, and in memory.

What was memorable about living and studying in another culture was the care that our hosts took in attending to the relationships we were developing. It seemed that there was nothing extravagant, just the basics. And yet the basic manners and courtesies I experienced felt extremely extravagant and rich. I would describe the basic manners and courtesies as sound listening—everyone could finish a sentence, there seemed to be no competition for conversational space. Conversational contributions were acknowledged and linked to the next ideas offered—it felt like appreciation. There was time taken without impinging on commitments and obligations or timelines. Our hosts were generous too—not only in making sure our needs were met, but in not letting us flounder. They clearly and delicately

explained the etiquette observed there that we might not know (e.g., greeting rituals and meeting ceremonies, tipping, offering and accepting gifts).

Each of these moments of generosity, teaching, and relational attending was an invitation for us to be the best guests possible and to also attend to the relationships. We looked at the patterns of participation we were invited into, we listened to understand as fully as possible, we took time to see the merits and sensibilities of practices that in our own culture would make little sense, and we looked for the beauty in the relational that we could bring home and hold here too. I could see that these were invitations to be the best host I could be when I have guests, when I am teaching, and when I am seeing client families. Actually my client families have provided some pretty important information. For a year, I asked every one of my client families (regardless of the dilemmas they were facing and trying to rectify) to comment on the manners that were minded and expressed in their family. The answer was unanimous—manners had fallen by the wayside or were taken-for-granted. Reinstating their manners, they agreed, made problem-solving and moving forward much easier. I think that if it could help de-stress family interaction, it has potential for other interpersonal interactions as well. I would say that Eleanor (as quoted above) and our dance teacher, in their wisdom, remind us to go back to the basics in our relational responsibilities if we want to be, and be offered, the best.

The following question appeared in one of my magazines and I share it with you to ponder: “What polite gesture never fails to impress you?” (*Real Simple*, June 2014, p. 25). And I would add, “What polite gesture that you do never fails to impress others? “