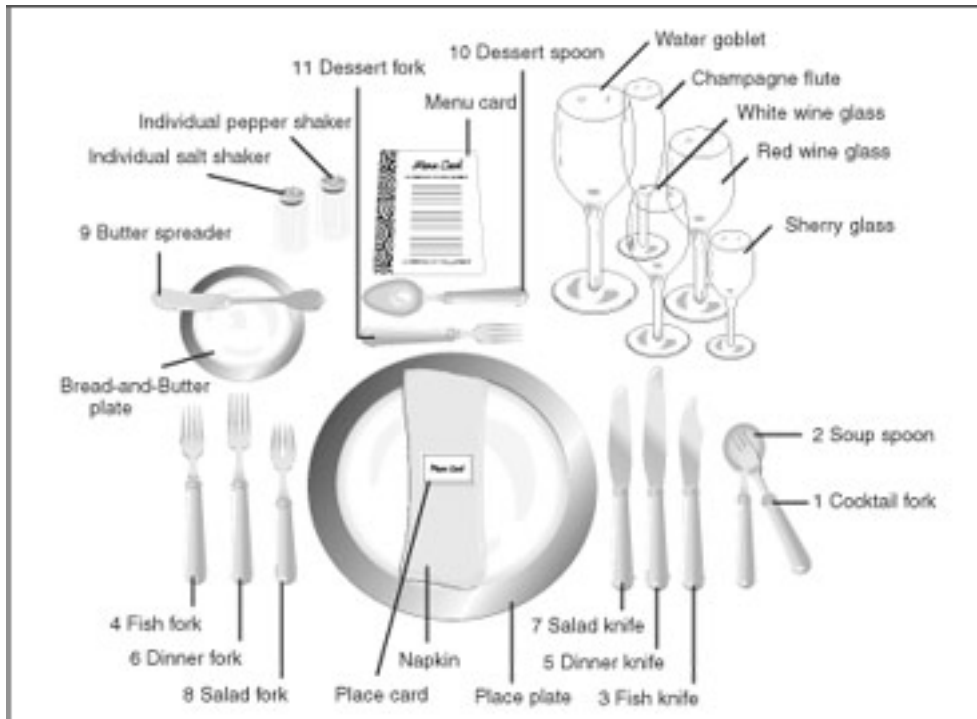


The Purpose of Manners and Etiquette

By Kathryn Casey, Owner and Coach at The Good Life – Life Coaching



Perhaps cultural practices require some evolution, like children, to reach maturity. In the middle ages, etiquette was a way to prevent violence among warriors. In the Victorian period, it distinguished between classes. Thus the ornate rules among the diners at Downton Abbey. Now, according to Diane Gottsman, manners have become about treating people with respect.

Just as we evolved from cave paintings to Rembrandt's, so manners are a way to elevate our everyday, rather animal behaviors, to something human. It infuses rationality and regard in our actions.

You can still find the rulebooks out there. Post decedents are alive and well. Q&A yields many a conundrum for the average host or guest. For those pragmatic persons here are some concepts behind the many details.

The two purposes of etiquette are to 1) elevate our more animal behaviors (eating and the like) and 2) express thoughtfulness towards others. Etiquette, more strictly defined, adds additional flare to our actions, making them richer and more ritual. They act as informal laws that help govern society, whether preventing violence or showing your class (in this case, your good taste and consideration).

The examples are endless.

At the table the rules function as a means of smooth communication so you don't end up with your neighbors fork. Choosing to wait until all are served or not using your arm as a fulcrum demonstrates the virtue of patience. Not reaching across an individual, verbally excusing yourself from the table rather than disappearing under the tablecloth, arriving not too late (and never early), and RSVP'ing right away show you are aware of the effect your actions have on others.

Learning the keys to introducing others (sharing something they have in common) reveals your social savvy in building relationships, and that you're considerate enough to know it's awkward to meet new people. Thank you notes and hostess gifts show your gratitude, that you don't just consume but stay aware of the person on the end and the effort he or she has put into the event or action.

Giving your seat up or opening a door are no longer relegated to strict gender lines. It's a generous behavior that will likely be received gratefully by any, especially those with some physical impediment (pregnancy, those with young children, the elderly).

We live in an eco-system reality. Our lives affect us personally, those around us, and our environment. Mindfully taking care of our surroundings (by following the host's request or following common knowledge) can help us to remain grateful for the goods we have, and pass on that consideration to others.

And smart phones? Consider a visit to the internet a way of leaving the room momentarily. If I enter a brilliant discussion, speculating on some mystery of the universe, checking my smart phone in the midst of it would be the equivalent of me leaving the room to go to the library to find the information. It's distracting and leaves my conversation partner alone.

Using social media well means I'll consider the effect my actions have on others. If I post publically about an amazing and exclusive night out, it could become the same as bragging, in person, to those who weren't invited.

Something as simple as saying, "please" softens the request from command to "if you please" putting the power into the hands of the one who chooses to comply or not. It makes it a gift. We say "thank you" to the gift that has been received recognizing the other made the choice in our favor.

If you have children, it's important to take the time to teach these lessons to them as well. It may seem harsh or extreme in the eyes of relaxed visitors, but you know the impact of repeated incidents that you let slide by. It isn't about judging others but knowing that if we continue to act in good ways with awareness of the reason for our actions, our hearts follow our actions and we can become better people overall.