



Out of the mouths of the unthinking

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I find it fascinating how messages come to us in direct proportion to how badly we need to receive them. In the past couple of weeks a common theme has surfaced in my world to illustrate this point. That theme is the double-edged sword of freedom of expression and forgiveness and how it directly relates to etiquette and the respect we have for others.

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By now we all know Susan Boyle as the newest star to emerge from the hit TV show Britain Has Talent. She wowed the judges with a beautiful rendition of I Dreamed a Dream from the musical Les Miserables. When Susan, the unassuming woman from East Lothia, came on the stage, the judges noticeably and hastily formed an opinion of her upcoming performance, rolling their eyes and grimacing. Frankly, if I were one of those judges I would have likely done the same thing. As a matter of fact, I believe most of the audience members shared the judges' reaction to her entrance. Then she sang. In an instant, everyone's minds changed. It was a moment few of us will forget.

My hat goes off to the judges for their gracious remarks and self-effacing commentary.

Etiquette teaches us to be polite. It further teaches us to be accepting of others by levelling the playing field in many ways. And it provides some good ground rules by which to live. If we realize that we all have good qualities inside us, we begin from the same starting point. After all, it is that which we express from within that reveals who we truly are and what talents we possess.

Too often we see someone and think how sloppy their clothing, how fat, how unkempt, et cetera. Without hesitating we judge the other person, never thinking they may have been through hard times, are suffering daily pain or experiencing a personal challenge. Could we use our minds to imagine another's circumstance rather than simply create an analysis from what we perceive? Is it possible to think beyond just what we see and realize that everyone is unique? Can we expand our horizons by learning to be more accepting of our differences? But what if we do or say something unintentionally or without thinking and as a result belittle, offend or demean someone else? Are we harming with our choice of words?

Not long ago I was teaching a workshop on business etiquette to some recent college graduates. During the three-hour presentation unwittingly I used the word 'retarded' twice. Although I was not using the word in the context of illustrating a weakness in another person's mental or physical capacity, but rather as a humorous aside, the comment was received by four people as shocking (not humorous) and not becoming of an etiquette seminar. Thankfully, this was pointed out to me a few days later. A humbling apology was written and gratefully accepted; and a valuable lesson was learned. But the damage was done. I wondered how much of the rest of the workshop went unabsorbed by those four because of my unintended careless remarks. This bothered me enough to spend some time researching politically incorrect usage in today's language. In speaking with a colleague, she explained that etiquette is the civil way we are to behave in society. It teaches primarily that we should respect one another and to be courteous to everyone around us.

Proper behaviour is not simply good manners, but entails an awareness of others through our speech - how we verbally interact with one another. Controlling our thoughts before speaking helps to prevent harming someone else with a word or words that, once spoken, are impossible to rescind. Trying to annul a hurtful comment or word used out of context is impossible. A person not wanting to offend must take the time to think before speaking. When delivering a lecture, giving a speech or teaching a class, I need to consider my language and its context before delivering the material. In our society, words and their meanings change frequently. What was commonly accepted as good usage years ago may very well be offensive or completely redefined by today's standards. Words referring to ethnicity, religion and sexual orientation punctuate this statement clearly.

What we can learn from this is to carefully consider what is pouring forth from our mouths; to deliberately choose our words; and to remember that language is our means of communication. Certainly incorrect usage is not something we want to teach our children; nor usually is it our intent to offend anyone.

Forgiveness is the key. Without it, the pain from the bitterness which escaped can never be healed. Etiquette reminds us to look before we leap, and to forgive others who forget. Who knows? We may be guilty ourselves one day. It can happen to any one of us when we least expect it.



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It bothers me that Mr. Remer keeps writing this column but seldom gets any response or comments on this site. I enjoy his columns very much for the good sense and excellent advice that he displays. I read the column online because I am away during the winter. I guess most people just read them in the newspaper and enjoy them but are unaware of this site which invites comments ... at least that is what I hope.

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