



COLONIAL AMERICA

George Washington's Spiritual Journey

BY JANICE T. CONNELL

"No man ever lived, more deservedly beloved and Respected," wrote Abigail Adams, the wife of Washington's vice president. "Possess[ed] of power, possess[ed] of an extensive influence, he never used it but for the benefit of his Country. . . . If we look through the whole tenor of his Life, History will not produce to us a Parallel."

GEORGE WASHINGTON enthusiastically embraced life's lessons. In 1745, when he was 13 years old, young Washington transcribed "The Rules of Civility and Decent Behavior in Company and Conversation" in colonial shorthand in his school workout. These "Rules" were taught to Washington during his first year of study with Rev. James Marye, a French Jesuit turned Anglican priest and rector of St. George's Church in Fredericksburg, Va. Rev. Marye also taught Washington mathematics, Latin, and deportment. Schoolboy George was required to learn the Rules of Civility by heart. They were the code of civil, social, and cultural behavior for respectable gentlemen of his times. Washington accomplished his lessons perfectly.

The history of those Rules of Civility dates from the 1590s. French Jesuit priests distilled the spiritual exercises of their Spanish founder, Ignatius of Loyola, and incorporated them with rules of deportment for European nobility known as "110 Rules for Young Gentlemen." Washington's handwritten copy of these "Rules" in his personal notebook now is in the Library of Congress.

"The Rules of Civility" that governed Wash-

ington's code of behavior convey Ignatian discipline designed to form the authentic spiritual man. They allow adherents exquisite awareness that man is God's servant, on Earth to honor his fellow man as he would like to be honored in everyday life, living not for self, but for the good of all. "The Rules of Civility" were so gentlemanly that they even included regulations concerning suitable table manners and proper conversation.

That Washington appropriated "The Rules of Civility" into his personality and social-political behavior is evident throughout his remaining life. Consider what Abigail Adams, wife of George Washington's vice president, John Adams, said of the first president of the U.S., "No man ever lived, more deservedly beloved and Respected. The praise and I may say adulation which followed his administration for several years, never made him forget that he was a Man, subject to the weakness and frailty attached to human nature. He never grew giddy, but ever maintained a modest diffidence of his own talents, and if that was an error, it was of the amiable and engaging kind. . . . Possesst of power, possesst of an extensive influence, he never used it but for the benefit of his Country. . . ."

When assailed by faction, when reviled by Party, he suffered with dignity, and retired from his exalted station with a Character which malice would not wound, nor envy tarnish. If we look through the whole tenor of his Life, History will not produce to us a Parallel."

Such praise finds origin in Washington's properly formed conscience and refined spiritual nature. "The Rules of Civility" were tools he used to achieve excellence in personal conduct. They shine brightly as cardinal principles of Washington's leadership. An excerpted version of "The Rules of Civility" in somewhat modernized English usage follows:

Let all actions performed in public show some sign of respectful sentiment to the entire company.

When in the presence of others, refrain from touching any part of the body that is not usually within view. The hands and feet are ordinarily visible. In order to form the habit in this point of etiquette, practice it when you are with intimate friends.

Show nothing to your companion that may grieve him, since that might provoke a misunderstanding.

Do not seek amusement by singing to yourself, unless you are beyond the hearing of others; do not tap out the beat of a drum with your hands or feet.

Whenever you cough or sneeze, if you can control these natural efforts, do not sound off

"Reproach none for their infirmities. Avoid it equally when they are natural ones, and do not take pleasure in uttering words that cause anyone shame, whoever it may be."

so highly or loudly. Do not heave sighs so noisily that others hear. When you yawn, refrain from any sound. Try to avoid yawning altogether when you are in company or engaged in conversation for it is a clear sign of certain weariness with those about you. If you cannot stop from yawning, avoid gaping widely and refrain from speaking while doing. Also, press at your mouth adroitly or turn a little away from the company.

It is an affront and an impertinence to doze while everyone is engaged in conversation, to be seated while the rest stand, or to walk on while others pause, or to speak when you should be silent or listen.

It is not becoming to leave your room while bed is in disorder, or to dress or undress in the presence of others, or to leave your bedroom half-dressed, half-groomed, or to remain standing in your chamber or at your desk in immodest attire. And although you may have servants to make your bed; nevertheless, take care when you go out of your chamber not to leave your bed uncovered.

It is bad manners in sports, recreation, and at the fireside, to make a new-comer wait very long for a place. Guard against becoming overheated in temperament; don't let excite-

ments carry you away. [Equates excitement with loud speech.]

Do not spit in the fire [place], nor stoop low before it. Neither put your hands into the flames to warm them, nor set your feet on the fire, especially if there be meat [cooking] before it. In polite society, do not turn your back to the fire and do not approach it closer than others—for these are the privileges of persons of rank. When there is a need for stirring the fire, putting wood on it or pulling or lifting it, this is the job of the person who has the general superintendence of those things.

When seated, place your feet firmly on the ground, with the legs at an equal distance, and neither a leg nor a foot should be crossed one upon the other.

When in public, it is [an] insufferable breach of etiquette to stretch out one's body by extending the arms, or to assume different postures. It is absolutely forbidden to pare your nails in public; and also, do not gnaw your nails.

Do not shake the head, nor fidget the legs, nor rolls the eyes, nor frown, nor twist the mouth. Take care not to let saliva escape with your words, and do not let spittle fly into the faces of those with whom you converse. To prevent such an accident, do not approach your conversant too near; but engage in conversation at a reasonable distance.

If anything on the ground, such as phlegm or spittle, offends the sight, then put your foot

on it. If it is on the garment of someone with whom you are conversing, do not show it to him or anyone else, but do your best to remove it unobserved. If someone obliges you in this way, make your acknowledgments to him.

Turn not your back to others, especially in speaking. Jog not the table or desk on which another reads or writes. Do not lean against anyone or pull at anyone's clothes while you entertain them in conversation.

Do not stop in conversation to adjust garters or pull up stockings to appear to [be] more gallant. Do not allow your nails to be dirty or too long. Take great care for the cleanliness of your hands, but do not overdo it.

It is a very low act to puff up the cheeks, to stick out the tongue, to pull on one's beard, to rub one's hands, to chew or bite on the lips, or to hold the mouth too widely open or too tightly closed.

Do not flatter or wheedle anyone with fine words, for he who aspires to gain another's favor by his honeyed words shows that the speaker does not regard him in high esteem, and that the speaker deems him far from sensible or clever, in taking him for a man who may be tricked in this manner. Do not play practical jokes on those who would take as an offense.

It is an act directly opposed to good manners to read a book, letters, or similar things during ordinary conversation if it is not a pressing matter, or resolved very quickly; and even in that case, it is proper to ask permission unless [you] are, possibly, the highest rank of the company. It is even worse to handle other people's work, their books or things of that nature, to get too near to these objects, to look at them closely without the owner's permission, and also to praise or find fault with them before your opinion has been asked; or to approach too close and inconvenience anyone when he is reading his letters or other papers.

A fantastic face

The face should not look fantastic, changeable, absent, rapt in attention, covered with sadness, various or volatile; and it should not show any signs of an unquiet mind. On the contrary, it should be open and tranquil, but not too expansive with joy in serious affairs, nor too self-contained by an affected gravity in the ordinary and familiar conversation of human life.

The gestures of the body must be suited to the discourse you are upon.

Reproach none for their infirmities. Avoid it equally when they are natural ones, and do not take pleasure in uttering words that cause anyone shame, whoever it may be.

Show not yourself glad at the misfortune of another, though he were your enemy. It argues a mischievous mind, that you had a desire to have done it yourself, and if you had the power or opportunity to, you would have.

When you see a crime punished, you may be inwardly pleased; but always show pity to the suffering offender.

Do not laugh too loud or too much at any public spectacle lest you cause yourself to be laughed at.

Superfluous compliments and all affectation of ceremony are to be avoided; yet where due, they are not neglected.

In pulling off your hat to persons of distinction, make a reverence, bowing more or less according to the custom of the better bred and quality of persons. Amongst equals, expect not always that they should begin with you first; but to pull off the hat when there is no need is affectation. In the manner of salutation, keep to the most usual custom.

It is ill manners to bid one more eminent than yourself to put on his hat, as well as not to do so when it is due. Likewise, he that makes too much haste to put on his hat does not well, yet he ought to put it on at the first, or at most the second time of being asked. All of these remarks on polite conduct must also be extended to the order to be observed in taking places and in sitting down. Ceremonies without bounds are troublesome.

If anyone comes to speak to you while you are sitting, stand up although he be your inferior. And when you present seats, let it be to everyone according to his rank.

When you meet with one of greater quality

than yourself, stop and retire, especially if it be at a door or any straight place, to give way for him to pass.

In walking, the highest place in most countries seems to be on the right hand. Therefore, place yourself on the left of him whom you desire to honor. If three walk together, the middle place is the most honorable. The wall is usually given to the most worthy if the two walk together.

If anyone far surpasses others, either in age, estate, or merit, yet in any particular instance would give place to one less than himself (in his own house or elsewhere) the lesser one ought not to accept it. Also, the superior, for fear of making himself uncivil, ought not to press it above once or twice.

To one who is your equal, or not much inferior, you give the chief place in your lodging. And he to whom it is offered, ought, at the first to refuse, but at the second offer to accept, though not without acknowledging his own unworthiness.

They that are in dignity or in office have, in all places, precedency. But while they are young, they ought to respect those that are their equals in birth or other qualities, even though they have no public charge.

It is the height of politeness always to speak better of those with whom we converse than of ourselves. Particularly when they are persons of a superior rank to ourselves, with whom we ought never to dispute in any fashion.

Let your discourse with men of business be short and comprehensive. One should spare them and make himself understood rather by looks than by words.

Craftsmen and persons of low degree ought not to use many ceremonies to disturb their superiors or others of high rank, but respect and honor them. Those of high rank ought to treat their lessers with affability and courtesy, without arrogance.

In speaking to men of quality, do not lean, nor look them full in the face, nor approach too near them. At the least, keep a full step in distance.

In visiting the sick, do not act the physician if you are not trained in science.

In writing or speaking, give to every person his due title, according to his degree and the custom of the place.

Strive not with your superiors in argument, but always submit your judgment to others with modesty.

Undertake not to teach your equal in the art that he himself professes. It flavours of arrogance.

Let your ceremonies in courtesy be proper to the dignity of the place of the person with whom you converse. It is absurd to act the same with a clown and a Prince.

Do not express joy before one who is sick or in pain, for that contrary passion will aggravate his misery.

When a man does all he can, though it succeeds not well, blame not he that did it since he is more worthy of praise than blame.

To advise to reprehend anyone, consider whether it ought to be public or in private, presently or at some other time, in what terms to do it and in reproving, show no signs of cholera, but do it with all sweetness and mildness.

Take all admonitions thankfully, in what time or place whatsoever given, but afterwards, not being culpable, take a time or place convenient to let him know it that gave them.

You must be jesting

Mock not, nor jest at anything of importance. Make no jests that are sharp and biting, and if you deliver anything witty and pleasant, abstain from laughing thereat yourself.

Wherein you reprove another, be unblameful yourself. Example is more prevalent than precept.

Use no reproachful language against anyone. Neither curse nor revile.

Do not be hasty to believe flying reports to the disparagement of anyone.

Wear not your clothes foul, ripped, or dusty, but see to it that they be brushed once every day at least. Take heed that you approach not to any uncleanness.

In your apparel, be modest and endeavor to accommodate nature rather than procure admiration. Keep to the fashion of your equals, such as are civil and orderly, with respect to times and places.

Run not in the streets. Neither go too slowly nor with mouth open. Go not shaking your arms, stamping or shuffling, nor pull up your stockings in the street. Walk not upon your toes, nor in a dancing or skipping manner, nor yet with measured steps. Strike not heels together, nor stoop when there is no occasion.

Play not the peacock, looking everywhere

about you to see if you be well decked, if your shoes fit well, if your stockings sit neatly, and your clothes appear handsomely.

Eat not in the streets, nor in your house out of normal meal times; at least abstain from it in the presence of others.

Associate yourself with men of good quality if you esteem your own reputation. For 'tis better to be alone than in bad company.

In walking about the house alone with a person whose rank demands some deference, at the first step be sure to give him your right hand. Stop not walking until he does. Do not be the first to turn. If you do turn, let it be with your face towards him. If he be a man of great quality, walk not with him cheek by jowl but somewhat behind him, but yet in such a manner that he may easily speak to you.

Let your conversation be without malice or envy, for 'tis a sign of tractable and commendable nature. And in all causes of passion admit reason to govern.

Never express anything unbecoming, nor act against moral Rules, especially in front of your inferiors.

Be not immodest in urging your friends to discover their secrets.

Utter not base or frivolous things amongst grave and learned men; nor very difficult questions or subjects, nor things hard to be believed, among the ignorant. Stuff not your discourse with proverbs when you are amongst your betters or your equals.

Speak not of sad things in a time of mirth, or at the table. Speak not of melancholy things such as death and wounds, and if others mention them, change the discourse if you can. Tell not your dreams but to your intimate friends.

A man ought not to value himself of his achievements or rare qualities, his riches, his titles, his virtue or his kindred. But he need not speak meanly of himself either.

Jesting must be avoided when it is inappropriate. Laugh not aloud, nor at all without occasion. Deride no man's misfortune, although there may seem to be some cause.

Speak not injurious words, neither in jest nor earnest. Scoff at no one, although they give occasion.

Be not rude, but friendly and courteous. Be the first to salute, to hear, to answer; and be not pensive when it is time to converse.

Detract not from others; neither be excessive in commending them.

Go not thither where you know not whether you shall be welcome or not. Give not advice without being asked and, when desired, do it briefly.

If two contend together, take not the part of either unless some greater reason obliges you to do so. And be not obstinate in your opinion. In things to which you are indifferent, be a part of the majority. ★

Janice T. Connell is an attorney and author of several books. This article is an adapted excerpt from The Spiritual Journey of George Washington.

