"You Make Me Feel Old"
By Judith Martin

"No, no, I'm Tommy. Mr. Featherstone is my father."
"Whoa there, young lady. Are you sure you're old enough to drink?"
"Your grandson! Why, I thought this was your little brother."

Such pleasantries, now commonplace, are not intended to be taken literally. Tommy is fifty-eight and his father is dead. The lady in the bar reached legal drinking age before the bartender was born. If that pair were siblings, their parents would have had sixty-some years of child-bearing.

These remarks are simply meant as polite conventions, much the way one might tell a hospice patient he looks great or a guest who broke something that it was of no consequence. When directed toward others, they pass for compliments. The expected reply from a middle-aged person who is told "You look like a teenager" is not "You mean my acne is back?" but "Thank you."

Made in reference to oneself, they are reproofs for the faux pas of acknowledging the reality of aging, even in the act of showing it respect. An admonishment from an adult who has been addressed by title and surname, offered a seat in a public conveyance, or otherwise treated as an adult is meant to solicit a show of confusion and a mumbled apology as if, indeed, there had been a case of mistaken generational identity. This put-down to courtesy, inevitably made with the half-jocular accusation "You make me feel old," bewilders any children not already discouraged from exhibiting respect. The real test of their manners becomes the ability to conceal the inevitable thought, "But you are old!" which is probably not the effect the adult wished to produce.

The concept of manners underlying these practices would be equally bewildering, at best, in any traditional society, where advances in age are automatically accompanied by increases in status. At worst, it is interpreted as the intention to push the elderly out of the way of the on-coming generation, usurping that status and depriving age of its natural advantage.

But in a youth culture, where it is thought indecorous to grow up, well-meaning people observe the modern prudery of averting their eyes from any signs of age and routinely declare everyone whom they want to please to be younger than is plausible. Friendly conversation is laced with deliberately inaccurate guesses about other people's ages and generational standing, false reassurances about how young they appear to be, and feigned disbelief that they could remember public events that occurred during their lifetimes.

Because modesty bars characterizing oneself as young and nobody will own up to being old, the entire adult society refers to itself as middle-aged, just as the entire society declares itself middle-class to avoid the arrogance of admitting to being rich and the embarrassment of admitting to being poor. Middle-aged now extends at least through an individual's sixties, which would put life expectancy above one hundred and twenty.

After middle-age, one might reasonably expect old age, but instead, youth seems to come around again. Congratulations for being long-lived are phrased as, for example, "So you're ninety-eight years young!" and always accompanied by the reassurance that the old person is obviously "young at heart." The phrase "older and wiser" is now used only in connection with misfortune.

It follows that no one dies of old age: The custom of pinpointing the final medical problem as the cause of death helps sustain the odd notion that death can be avoided if people would only follow known health precautions or if medical science would bestir itself to find the cure for aging. It is a common complaint of the bereaved that instead of being offered sympathy, they are frequently lectured about how the deceased should have taken better care of himself or, if he had deteriorated with age, told how much better off they are to have him dead.

The callousness of extending insistence on youth to the point of blaming the dead for not living up to it, as it were, may be obviously rude, although obviously not obviously enough. However, those gallant pretenses of seeing everyone alive as being young are not authorized etiquette, either.

It is true that they are made with the intention of pleasing, and that motivation counts a great deal in etiquette, which is why such remarks should be taken good-naturedly. Taking insult where kindness was

intended, as in the case of huffiness at being shown respect, is itself an etiquette violation. Nor is the falseness of the claims an issue. Far from joining the general condemnation of euphemisms and hypocrisy (which oddly co-exists with the general pretense to youth), etiquette makes great use of both when there is a choice to be made between bluntness and consideration for others.

It is, rather, in spite of these virtues that the fiction of everyone's being young does more harm than good. As with the long-prevailing belief that women were delighted to have strangers address them with endearments such as "Honey" or "Beautiful," it unwittingly causes personal offense. This is not only among those who prefer to acknowledge their age and receive the deference they feel due, rather than accept equality with --or inferiority to-- their juniors. It also upsets those who do hope to seem younger than they are, but who rightly interpret the exaggerated and pointed conventions declaring them to be youthful as evidence of their appearing old enough to require such flattery and desperate enough to swallow it.

Furthermore, the system of according higher status with greater age is not only traditional but increasingly necessary. Other historical systems of precedence, based on caste, class or gender, have been rejected as inappropriate for egalitarian society, yet social order is still needed-- we can't all go through the door at once, as the protocol officers' mantra reminds us. The fairest system is precedence based on age because, with luck, everybody eventually gets to go first. Sabotaging this solution by false and often angry denials from the very people who are eligible has established an example of rudeness for the young and resulted in melees when everyone demands respect as an individual but, in the absence of agreement about who deserves it, no one wants to give it to others.

Most serious of all is the failure to accept the basic premise of adult manners, toward the acceptance of which children are supposed to be trained in increasingly sophisticated rules of etiquette. That there are other people in the world and that their feelings should be taken into consideration are counter-intuitive ideas that take many years to learn. No one is born willing to defer gratification or share toys. Nevertheless, everyone resents being victimized by the selfishness of others. Civilization therefore requires everyone to restrain unnecessarily offensive and provocative impulses that would disrupt community harmony, and, when there are important conflicts, to air these with a show of mutual respect in order to resolve them peacefully. It is no accident that the word often used now to describe public discourse is "childish."

There is hardly an aspect of behavior that has not been affected by the agreement that no one is to be considered grown up. Children's manners, keyed to those who have not yet developed the control, compassion, skills and experience to handle the complexities of civilized life, have been adopted as the general standard.

At birth, a child is given a formal name, but because a name appropriate for adulthood seems too solemn for a baby and for every day use, a diminutive nickname is usually also conferred. However, we no longer seem to have anyone who is old enough, or considers an occasion solemn enough, to use his or her full name. Officiants at weddings now routinely use nicknames when addressing the couple and reciting the wedding vows that the couple repeat to each other. Whereas children used to struggle to reclaim their formal names as they grew older, those who have attained the highest dignities now insist on the use of their nicknames, and not only to insinuate accessibility for campaign purposes. President James Earl Carter took his inaugural oath as Jimmy.

In the general population, the custom of granting adults the dignity of surnames and titles has nearly vanished, the rationale being that using first names is friendlier. This is cited even under circumstances when friendship could not remotely be said to exist, such as between strangers meeting for the first time or by telemarketers targeting potential customers. Worse than the cheekiness of this phony intimacy is the implication of inferiority that lingers in the society's memory. Less than a generation ago, the first-name system was commonly used among non-intimates only for children and those unflatteringly perceived as childish, either congenitally, such as women and blacks, or under certain conditions, as a servant in relation to an employer or a patient to a doctor.

Honorifics are used even less, to the point where their existence has been forgotten. Among those who wish to evoke the past, anachronisms abound: In the supposedly etiquette-conscious film of "The Age of Innocence," Madame Olenska's letter to her lover is baldly addressed "Newland Archer" with no polite "Mr." or "Esq." A glossy magazine advertisement for writing paper purports to show a bundle of treasured

old love letters tied in ribbon, in order to illustrate the superiority of handwritten letters to unsalvageable voicemail and unkissable email; what it inadvertently suggests is that the young lady whose name appears on the envelope without the deference of an honorific was courted by an ignoramus or a cad.

When surnames are required for identification, such as in news stories, they are used alone, in the style of prep-school classmates: "Whiffle, whose administration has been plagued by scandal, denies that he and Hudson are anything more than friends." Or, for that matter, "Rockman was crowned Miss America."

The first etiquette lesson an infant learns is to wait to eat at regular mealtimes that are convenient for others. While it is recognized that a newborn baby requires frequent feedings because its stomach is too small to hold much, training in scheduled waiting begins within a few weeks.

However, this no longer seems necessary, as adults have largely abandoned regularly scheduled meals in favor of the feedings-on-demand method, now known as "grazing." Even in affluent families, children grow up unfamiliar with the concept of sitting down at a dining table with other members of the household at regular hours, a ritual formerly observed at all economic levels of the society. A great many adults snack constantly, like the refrigerator-raiding teenagers who used to be told they would spoil their appetites for dinner-- except that they never have breakfast or dinner as such, and schedule lunch only when it involves restaurant appointments. Household members eat by making their separate periodic trips to the kitchen, vending machine or carry-out store to get what they want and consume it alone while doing something else, such as watching television, working, walking, taking public transportation or even exercising-- floating trays now making it convenient to eat in swimming pools. The household dining table may be the only place where one doesn't usually find people eating.

The demise of the regular household meal --memorialized by the increased awe for the restaurant meal-- has had numerous behavioral repercussions. This was the arena for teaching children not only table manners --including refraining from criticizing what they were given to eat, then known as "food-fussing" but now a staple of adult conversation-- but other forms of etiquette they would need as adults. The requirement to show up suitably dressed (whether it meant donning evening clothes or changing a work shirt for a clean one), the restriction on stomach-churning topics of conversation ("We don't discuss that at the dinner table") and the choice of styles of eating ("family style" permitting more latitude than "company manners," for example, and picnicking permitting even more) taught the sophisticated concept of behavior's being context-dependent. The art of conversation was also taught at the dinner table, including the unnatural idea that one should be as interested in hearing other people's ideas and experience as in giving one's own, which is intended to develop the moral quality of empathy as well as the social one of charm.

Without this schooling, meals that are deemed important for business or social reasons are viewed fearfully as etiquette tests; the idea is lost that there are different rules for different venues (for example, that one can properly talk during a movie shown at home but not at a movie theater); and the inability to converse is masked by television, music, argument or competitive confession.

At the same time, there is pride in that ignorance. "I don't know which fork to use" --an odd declaration to survive when the specialized forks of the 19th century have disappeared from use so that a choice rarely exists-- is a common form of modern bragging. So are "We're always informal" and "I got to be me," which make virtues of a child-like failure to handle a variety of circumstances and a childish refusal to abide by social symbolism. (It should be noted that neither stance prevents the same people from putting on lavish weddings and taking offense at those who don't follow their dress code; or from appearing before a jury dressed to symbolize deference to community standards or being unfavorably influenced by those who do not.)

The expectation is that an adult can selectively demand the immunity from social duties that is granted to children who are too young to understand or perform them. If explanations are offered, they are apt to be as disingenuous as "I didn't feel like it," "Oh, I never write letters," "I don't entertain because I hate to clean up," "I don't go to funerals because I find them depressing," or "I didn't ask them to give me anything, so why should they expect to be thanked?"

Ancient and enduring traditions involving generosity have been dramatically weakened in our time by reluctance on all sides to assume the obligations involved. Although very young children begin are permitted to take without giving, the customs of hospitality and present-exchanging, both of which have

near-sacred status in religious teachings, depend on their quickly learning to reciprocate as well as to thank. It is striking that those who now declare these requirements to be out-of-date mean only that they should personally be relieved of responsibilities. Having given no thought to the next logical step of declaring the other half of these customs to be out of date, they expect to continue to be on the receiving end of hospitality and presents.

Virtually everyone who has given a party in recent years, even serious ones connected with ceremonial events, complains that most guests do not reply at all to invitations. There was a time when people could be embarrassed into giving an answer by a prodding telephone call from the host, but now that they can think of themselves as charming for exhibiting the childish qualities of spontaneity and openness, they no longer feel rude. Reminders are as likely to produce further stalling, the explanation being that they don't know what they will feel like doing at the date indicated. Even if answers are given, the terms may not stand, as guests fail to show up after having accepted, or they bring along their own guests. The time and style of the event are often violated, and letters of thanks and reciprocal entertaining are rare. Intimidated hosts are given to pleading that they don't expect anything from their guests --it's the caterer who wants to know how many people are coming-- or simply give up entertaining. Others, perhaps in retaliation or from the same failure to understand the meaning of hospitality, mimic commerce by requesting contributions of food or cash.

There is, however, one social form that has not only survived but taken on paramount importance. This is the children's birthday party, of which the highlight, for the host at any rate, is the ceremonial opening of presents. Adults now throw such birthday parties for themselves and one another, expecting both commiseration for growing older and serious material contributions. This ritual is so popular that it has transformed the formerly minor event known as a shower, once a light-hearted way for intimate friends to mark engagements and first babies with amusing, token presents, into an elaborate occasion requiring serious donations. The form has also been adapted for a great variety of other occasions, such as changing residences, getting a new job, or being divorced.

"Presents" remain the central feature, but they rarely meet the definition of presents as voluntary offerings whose symbolical purpose is to demonstrate, flatteringly, that the giver has paid attention to the needs and tastes of the recipient. Rather, the potential donor is issued a shopping list or told to donate cash. If goods are being accepted, they are likely to be ordered by means of another convention --that of children's being allowed to influence the choice of their presents indirectly by writing or telling Santa Claus what they want-- that has been adapted by adults in regard to themselves. Their mechanism is the store "registry," once confined to keeping information about the china and flatware patterns of brides in case wedding guests happened to ask, and now in the business of helping people notify their relatives and friends about what occasions the adult celebrates and what he expects to receive. As it happens, this change is a perfect fit with the desire of guests to avoid the obligation of thinking up ways to please others.

It is not only friends and relatives among whom birthdays and other personal events are being celebrated. These are the occasion for workplace parties, as are holidays, Fridays and special food days. The practice, long standard in pre-schools to ease the transition from home to school, is part of a convention to suggest that worktime is really playtime.

The etiquette of kindergarten requires that everybody is the focus of a special day (children whose birthdays occur during school holidays being allowed to pick another day to celebrate) and that nobody is allowed to bring a treat unless there is enough for everyone. Failure to observe these rules is a source of friction in the modern work place. There are charges that some people are excluded from the office treats, and that others consume treats but never bring them. Those who organize parties and collect money for presents complain about those who don't help or give, while those who are asked to do so complain about the unfairness of expecting people who are not getting married or having babies to contribute for those who are.

The childish technique of bullying people who won't play the game is directed at the occasional worker who refuses to stop working to participate in these festivities. The theory is that workers, like children in playgrounds or school, should make friends, rather than retain the distance appropriate to mere

colleagues. In the increasingly used open office plan, the discreet desk family photograph has turned into a version of locker-decorating intended to make the office look homey and to display the personality of the worker.

The formerly stern ban on recreation at work has given way to the idea that socializing is desirable and some amusement is necessary to keep the worker's attention from wandering-- the equivalent of elementary school recess. Computer games are considered questionable (although a government threat to remove them from civil employees' computers drew shocked protests), but radios and social email are widely accepted as features of the modern workplace.

Professional dress has been abandoned entirely in some industries, and on Fridays in many. Play clothes, often remarkably similar in cut and color to those worn at playgrounds, were introduced for the sole purpose of making workers comfortable, it always is explained. The adolescent looks of tight jeans or miniskirts with tights apparently meet the definition of comfort, but regulation suits and dresses do not. However, the clothes of leisure also symbolize childhood's freedom from work and coincide with young attitude that getting dressed up is a terrible ordeal (unless done for laughs, as in the prom practice of adding sneakers, jeans or other incongruous elements to evening clothes for ironic effect, a practice that can now be observed at any formal gathering of adults).

Of course, the idea that a youthful face and figure are desirable is not peculiar to a youth culture. What is different is the age at which people aim when they attempt to preserve or to recreate a youthful appearance, and the lengths to which they will go to achieve it. Cosmetic surgery to correct the natural effects of aging (as opposed to congenital defects or accident wounds) was once largely supported by aging rich women; with the addition of men, patients in their twenties, and those who consider it a necessity worth the financial sacrifice, the business has expanded significantly.

The presumption that everyone is using every available method to look as young as possible even makes conversation hazardous for those who are not trying. It is not just that, in this age of sharing, they are battered with advice about how to exercise and dress to look younger-- so, for that matter, are those who are trying. It is that they cause genuine shock. Gray hair is so unusual among women of any age as to excite people to exclaim, "What did you do to your hair?" Fortunately, the polite among them eventually recover enough to offer admiration on a daring look they refer to, no matter what the age of the bearer, as Prematurely Gray. In a world growing increasingly younger, this seems to be the only shade of gray available.

Many of these convolutions of etiquette spring from charming premises. Youth is attractive, while old age has the highly unattractive attribute of moving one closer to death. The romance of childhood, with its freedom from responsibility, guilelessness, simplicity, spontaneity and promise of endless possibility, has a strong hold on the imagination. The American dream of social egalitarianism, professional mobility, and the freedom to fashion and re-fashion one's own identity is also compelling. Yet the effects of translating all this into a standard of behavior based on perpetual youth and malleability are less charming.

It is fortunate that the modern belief in Original Innocence --that children are born good and civilization corrupts them-- is able to survive our experience with the tyrannical demands of infants, whose adorableness one suspects of being Nature's survival insurance. When practiced by adults, those carefree qualities look suspiciously like selfishness, thoughtlessness and aimlessness. Being always uninhibited would only be desirable if, contrary to everything we know about humanity, we harbored only gentle impulses.

To allow children to remain in this state is tragic for them and disastrous for society. The failure in parenting, which nowadays may as easily be the result of kind intentions rather than of neglect, follows naturally from that belief in Original Innocence. If experience is devalued, if not actually condemned as corrupt, the parent who wants to be fair is hard pressed to justify his or her authority. Devoted parents may put as much effort into helping their children as those who never doubted that they were more competent than their children, but much of it consists of bemoaning the poor job of parenting done by those who have filled the vacancy they left-- television, public "role models" such as sports figures and movie stars, and the

children's own peers-- or in being the child's advocate against the demands of other authorities, such as schools and police.

Internet socializing has put the final touch on our ability to fashion and refashion identity by allowing people to claim whatever age, gender, appearance or background they choose. But the generous custom of taking people at face value and granting fresh starts to those who have erred has its downside. It allows people to escape the need to establish good character over a lifetime and deprives others of the ability to judge them --and therefore their own safety in trusting them—through reputation.

In the working world, the pretense of sociable equality can blind people to their own interests and leave them unprepared for the suddenly revealed realities of power. Nor does it serve the interests of either employers or customers when workers are unable to put aside their personal identities temporarily, in order to assume the role of the job and carry its responsibilities. Using the manners of friends who party and play together deprives people of their autonomy over their social lives and sometimes also of their judgment. Goofing off and pursuing romance are examples of behavior that is condoned in the real social circumstances that the work place imitates, but they are grounds for punitive action on the job.

Finally, the neo-Faustian bargain of trading dignity and respect in exchange for youth, beauty, energy and freedom is a fraud: The sacrifices are readily accepted, but the reward is not delivered.