

# On Behalf of Common Courtesy

( When it comes to everyday civility, legislation is no substitute for social shame. )

IT IS EIGHT O'CLOCK on a Monday morning, and I'm enjoying a second cup of coffee while seated at my desk in the suite where I work. It's a small company where the employees are accustomed to an easy-going spin-up to start off their week. I am just getting into concentrating on my accumulated e-mail messages, when my studied mood is soon *shattered* by a steady stream of hard-core obscenities emanating from a battling colleague on the opposite side of the office. Everyone, who is within earshot, tries to distract their attention to something else to be able to continue working - two people leave the building having found an opportune excuse to go have an extra smoke outdoors...

Too often, no one asks boors like that to restrain themselves. I feel as if I've been MUGGED, and it's partly because I've done too little to resist.

This situation, like so much of the obnoxious behavior eroding the quality of our lives, cried out for a dose of old-time social pressure. My father would have been out of his seat to lecture that fellow in the time it takes to say, "You should have your mouth washed out with soap... Grow up!"

After that person returned to a calmer mood I complained to my supervisor, who shrugged and said, "What could I do? No laws were broken."

That dispiriting line embodies the passive attitude we've adopted toward self-centered assaults on our right to enjoy both public and work places. Many of us rationalize our reluctance to get involved on the grounds that it is too risky to speak up on behalf of common courtesy in a nation of potentially violent strangers and victims.

But most often, fear cannot justify the indifference of bystanders.

A case in point: while shopping at an indoor mall recently, I saw some boys-none older than 12, skate aggressively into a crowded area, forcing an elderly man to his knees as he struggled to get out of the way. I yelled for a security guard only to hear "Lighten up!" from several shoppers... *Lighten up?*

Those kids needed to be shown that their behavior was unacceptable. The adults in the crowd could have surrounded the skaters and reminded them that they were endangering others. Then the boys should have been turned over to mall security and to their parents.

In the absence of such social pressure, what did those kids learn? *That even if you knock someone down, you'll probably get away with it unless there happens to be a cop on the scene.*

Laws can only offer a minimum standard of behavior. And they should be the last, not the first, line of defense in safeguarding public tranquillity. When it comes to everyday civility, legislation is no substitute for social shame.

What my fellow workers and I should have done while overhearing that pompous office trash, was *embarrass* the trash-talking individual. Politely but firmly, we could have said something like "Please lower your voice." or "I wouldn't want your spouse to overhear you."

The solution is within our grasp. All it will take is for more of those of us who are the well behaved to step forward, support one another, and show the boors among us that they don't own our public spaces.

-ooOoo-

*"Politeness is the art of choosing among your thoughts, for apology - is politeness too late."*