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Manners Make Us Look Past Ourselves and to Others

By Kim Nassoiy
UCF Forum columnist
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What has happened to manners?

One day on my way to work, I waited at a green light while another car crossed the intersection after the light had obviously turned red for that driver. And I thought to myself: Why are you so special that the rest of us have to wait?

I'm sure everyone has experienced this.

We've been cut off in traffic, bumped at the end of the grocery aisle, or even had a derogatory remark sent our way, all because people often don't have manners anymore. Common courtesy seems to be out the window and people are oblivious to anyone other than themselves.

I tried to put a date on when our society changed, but that date obviously is vague.

We used to hold doors open for each other, smile at strangers and wave at our neighbors. In my parents' time, friends and neighbors borrowed tools or baking ingredients from each other and had block parties to catch up and socialize. Today, if I smile at a stranger I am often met with a disconcerting look, as if I have some sinister motive. And that just makes me sad.

So how do we get society to regain manners? How do we begin to care about strangers as much as we care about ourselves?

When I did a quick internet search, I found a lot of articles addressing the loss of manners in our society. Some said that the breakdown of family was the cause. Others pointed to technology and our need for instant gratification. Still others discussed reality TV and what has now become acceptable as cultural norms.

Maybe we don't need manners and we should just get what we can for ourselves, and who cares about everyone else? I'm sure we wouldn't agree that's the answer.

What is the point of manners anyway? As cultural and social historian, Carolyn McDowall, so eloquently put it: Manners are meant to "illuminate and respect the

human experience.” When our care and concern or just basic civility extends no farther than the tip of our nose, society completely breaks down. Who cares for those that can’t care for themselves?

Manners make us look past ourselves and to others. They make us think about our words and actions and how they will effect or be perceived by others. And to me, a little self-reflection is never a bad thing.

The key is starting at the beginning, with the social interactions of our youngest members of society. We grown-ups have to be the example. Children see and hear everything and they are great imitators. Many of the good or bad habits children have, they’ve learned from the adults around them.

So, we need to set the standard. We need to care about doing the right thing, the courteous thing, even if the next person isn’t. We can influence the next generation to have manners, only if we have them ourselves.

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