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Editorials & Opinion: Tuesday, November 04, 2003

Guest columnist

Please join my revolution; thank you very much

By Philip W. Eaton
Special to The Times

I want to launch a revolution. The question that drives my cause is this: Can good manners really change the world? I suppose the converse to this question is as much a driver as anything: Isn't it true that bad manners are badly damaging our world?

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The 19th-century American Romanticist Henry Thoreau liked to say that any revolution starts at home, before you open your door in the morning. And so I recognize, the revolution I propose begins with me. I have to practice good manners before I have much to say about these matters.

That being said, I believe the stakes are pretty high. Peter Drucker, the great guru of management over the past 50 years, says that no organization can thrive when bad manners are tolerated or encouraged. In a thoughtful book called "Civility," Yale professor and prolific public intellectual Stephen Carter sees in the cancerous spread of incivility a threat to the very survival of democracy.

Recently, I found myself alarmed at how easily I crossed the line into the territory of bad manners. As I breathlessly approached an airport ticket counter in a major Midwestern city, on my way back to Seattle, I was a bit dismayed to find the airline attendant on the phone. I waited. And then I waited some more. It finally became clear to me that she was enjoying a personal call, and I began to steam up a bit. This woman was being very rude.

When she finally finished her call, she demanded that I tear the tags off my bag. Well, by this time I was in no mood to perform a task I saw as appropriately hers. I took the tags off my bag and put them on the counter, nudging them just slightly, so they fell on the floor, where she had to pick them up. Her rudeness and my counter-rudeness erupted into verbal battle and maneuvering. I couldn't believe what I was doing.

As I got on the plane, I felt ashamed. I came away thinking that our little battle, this woman and I, repeated in millions of exchanges across the world every minute of the day, was a metaphor for so much of what is tearing our world apart. And I could have made a real difference, simply by changing my response.

The theologian Miroslav Volf, in his marvelous book "Exclusion and



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Embrace," makes the point that "in all wars whether large or small, whether carried out on the battlefields, city streets, living rooms, or faculty lounges, we come across the same basic exclusionary polarity: 'us against them,' 'their gain-our loss,' 'either us or them.' "

Now Volf talks about some awfully big issues in his book — bloody wars, the clash of civilizations, ethnic cleansing, deadly violence in the streets, racial hatred — but he locates this same "horrid polarity" in our everyday encounters with each other. The answer, he contends, to separation and dividedness, this exclusion of others, is to learn the radical and costly posture of embrace. And I suggest that one step in the direction of such an embrace is to practice good manners.

I saw a young woman recently wearing a T-shirt that boldly proclaimed her posture in the world: "Deny Everything," the big, red letters announced. I thought, now there's a stance that will never allow embrace.

When someone makes a statement, deny its truthfulness, even attack the person's motives and character. Question the authority of everyone. Don't ever assume that someone else is worthy of your respect or deserves your gratitude. This young woman's T-shirt might stand as the motto for our media today, for the kind of public and political discourse we must endure daily.

What if we created a new T-shirt that said something about affirmation and trust? What if we started by affirming the dignity of others we encounter, even if that affirmation is costly to our own pride or control, even if we might be proven a fool down the road? What if we start with trust, then check the facts, and finally challenge credibility and truthfulness — in that order, instead of the reverse.

I grew up learning to say the "magic words." Before my mom would release her hold on that peanut butter and jelly sandwich, I had to say "please" and then follow quickly with "thank you." The assumptions behind these simple words are huge: things like respect, dignity, recognition of authority, gratitude and trust.

Could it be that the magic words, these small gestures of good manners, might just start a revolution?

Philip W. Eaton is president of Seattle Pacific University.

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