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NEH/ George Washington and his Legacy

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Rules of Civility and Decent Behavior in Company and Conversation

1. Every action done in company ought to be with some sign of respect to those that are present
4. In the presence of others, sing not to yourself with a humming noise, nor drum with your fingers or feet.
5. If you cough, sneeze, sigh, or yawn, do it not loud but privately; and speak not in your yawning, but put your handkerchief or hand before your face and turn aside.
11. Shift not yourself in the sight of others, nor gnaw your nails.
14. Turn not your back to others, especially in speaking; jog not the table or desk on which another reads or writes; lean not upon anyone

21. Reproach none for the infirmities of Nature, nor delight to put them that have in mind thereof.
44. When a man does all he can thought it succeeds not well, blame not him that did it.
50. Be not hasty to believe flying reports to the disparagement of any. 56. Associate yourself with men of good quality if you esteem your own reputation, for it is better to be alone than in bad company.
65. Speak not injurious words, neither in jest nor earnest. Scoff at none although they give occasion.
82. Undertake not what you cannot perform, but be careful to keep your promise.
89. Speak not evil of the absent, for it is unjust.
110. Labor to keep alive in your breast that little spark of celestial fire called conscience.

73. Think before you speak; pronounce not imperfectly nor bring out your words too hastily, but orderly and distinctly.
74. When another speaks, be attentive yourself and disturb not the audience; if any hesitate in his words, help him not, nor prompt him without desired. Interrupt him not, nor answer him till his speech be ended.

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

Some time between 1744 and 1748, when he was twelve to sixteen years old, George Washington carefully, in his best handwriting, copied out these, and ninety-four other Rules of Civility into his school book. Already a century old, these rules described how gentlemen should behave, and what qualities of character they should possess.

While we may laugh at the admonitions to 'kill no vermin' or 'spit not in the fire' in the complete Rules, a great many of the Rules are as relevant, and as useful, today as they were during Washington's adolescence. As my students enter adolescence during their time with me, the sixteen rules I've chosen are those I believe my students will benefit from most.

I have grouped these sixteen into four categories - behavior, character, listening and speaking skills, and appearance. These categories are as applicable to today's elementary student as they were to Washington. In fact, with the exception of appearance, they form the basis of today's rules in thousands of elementary classrooms in America.

Most teachers want their students to show respect to everyone, and every thing, around them. The first group of rules pertain to this; the first one declares it, and the next four demonstrate what that respect would look like. In my experience, most students don't come to school intuitively knowing how to behave, or exactly what respect is.

The next grouping, eight rules between 21 and 110, all address character. Character education has been hotly debated in the past few years, at least at the elementary level in California. Concerns have been raised over exactly what character values would be taught, who got to choose them, how they would be taught, even over who would teach them. Several programs were finally deemed 'permissible', but they generally focused on middle school or higher. To me, this is much too late to begin teaching character. The rules I've chosen all address basic character, qualities that all people, at any age, should possess and display. Don't gossip, and don't credit gossip you hear. Don't speak badly of others, don't make hurtful comments or jokes about anyone. Keep the promises you make. Don't blame someone for failing, if they did their best. And, perhaps most importantly, keep that spark of conscience alive in yourself.

The next grouping, a small one of only two rules, deals with skills for speaking and listening. These are skills that I see declining in the schools today. California does have state standards in this area, but as they are never tested, little serious attention is given to them. Further, these standards don't address basic skills, instead focusing on critical thinking strategies, analyzing the structure of an oral presentation, evaluating the components and their delivery.

The Rules I've chosen here focus on those basic skills - how to speak, and how to listen, level one. Think before you speak. Speak clearly, at an appropriate pace. Be coherent. Pay attention to a speaker. Don't interrupt, correct, or help the speech of others. This is more about communication, rather than how to be a critical listener or speaker, and skills I don't see in my incoming students.

I selected only one Rule concerning appearance for two reasons. First, class rules don't legitimately address student appearance (although my district does have a dress code). Secondly, this one rule neatly sums up what I try to impress upon my students, without belaboring it. Dress neatly in clothing appropriate for school. Especially in fifth grade, with the onset of puberty, appearance can begin to assume gigantic proportions, to the detriment of academics.

All the Rules I've chosen to focus on, and present to my students, are as applicable today as they were in Washington's time, as they were in Erasmus's time. Some rules of behavior and character transcend time and find utility and desirability in every era. I hope to show my students this timeless aspect of certain rules.

I intend to introduce these rules very early in the year, and propose to take at least four days to cover them. I want to begin by showing the students transparency copies of the original Washington handwritten copy of the Rules. We will talk about both the handwriting he displayed, and as I read some of the Rules to them, some of the ones I have not chosen to focus on, my students and I can share the humor of not killing fleas or lice at the table, or not spitting on others as we speak. We can also look at some that are more suitable to an aristocracy than to a democracy, and discuss the reasons for some behaviors towards those of higher class than oneself.

Moving on, I will replace the Washington copy of the rules with a transparency of my selection of sixteen. They will be grouped as I have done here, by spacing, without labels. I want my students to discover or decide what labels are appropriate.

On this first day, we will look at the two smallest groupings - appearance and skills for listening and speaking. On the second day, we will deal with the behavior group, and character on the third day. Because of the archaic language of the Rules, I will read aloud each Rule, and if necessary, define unfamiliar words.

In small groups, students will discuss the meaning of the rule(s), and if more than one rule, why they are grouped together or what they have in common. They will also discuss how that rule would look, today.

Back in a whole class setting, we will discuss why that rule applies to us, and formulate a more modern, kid friendly version of it. Each rule will be rewritten in this manner.

On the fourth day, we will construct a formal Rules of Civility document for our classroom, containing the rules we feel are essential for governing how we interact with one another in a school setting. Depending on the maturity and the skill level of the students (this is a beginning of the year activity), we may decide to make the document very fancy, with parchment torn and burnt around the edges, calligraphic lettering, etc., or we may simply post a word processed list of the Rules. Echoing the young George Washington, all students will be asked to copy these Rules into their notebooks in their neatest writing (or printing). The larger, formal document will be posted in the room for reference purposes throughout the year.

When we begin to study George Washington and other important figures in the Colonial and Revolutionary times, we will look for examples in their lives that reflect these rules. We will also look at contemporary figures, applying the Rules to observed behavior. I hope in this way to keep the Rules alive in the minds of my students, and to give them the beginnings of a method to use in judging the behavior of others. Later, in a different lesson, I intend to use the Rules as we investigate the concept of reputation.

Because so little time and emphasis is given to history in the elementary schools, I have to look for ways to include topics from it in other curricular areas. Using George Washington in the first days of school, to introduce and codify classroom rules, lets me start right away in grounding my students in early American history. And I can't think of a better historical figure to begin our exploration of that history with than George Washington, the indispensable man.