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The Social Graces That Say "You Will"

Become a gentleman by unlearning your bad habits and cultivating new skills.

By Larry Smith

A gentleman doesn't shove sheep intestines into his mouth willy-nilly. Especially not in Scotland, in a castle, where I'm dressed in my best black suit, adorned with a blue cravat, and seated at a formal dining table with a fire blazing in the background. The host is serving HAGGIES, and taking a mouthful is not easy. Not because I'm grossed out, which I am (the many parts of a sheep that constitute this dish are boiled in the animal's stomach before it lands on my plate). It's because I am trying to become a gentleman and don't want to mess up before the first bite.

Twenty-four miles northwest of Aberdeen, in the farming and fishing village of Oyne, eight men are in training to eat the local dish in a manner that would befit the Queen of England. I am one, having submitted myself to an intensive 3-day finishing school for gentlemen. Picture an upper-class boot camp, with the role of Louis Gossett Jr. played by a fleet of fancy British women, and you're getting warm.

A lot has to occur before a true gentleman can dig into his dinner. For starters, he must wait for the host to sit down and start eating--this is your cue. But not so fast: First, a gentleman must offer water to the people to his immediate left and right. Next, he should inquire whether anyone in his vicinity needs bread, salt, pepper, or other relevant condiments. Then and only then can he hold his fork tine-side down, employ his knife to gracefully slide some of the dish onto the end of the fork, and bring the cutlery to his mouth, rather than his mouth to the cutlery, as I have a habit of doing.

"Oh, my," says Diana Mather, the founder of the program, called the Finishing Academy--Teaching Life's Essentials. "We're going to have to work on you and that fork."

I didn't travel thousands of miles to argue with British aristocracy. But what I realize at this moment--and she surely senses--is that we're going to have to work on a lot more than forks.

I was not raised by wolves; just loud, ungraceful, though loving, Jews. I do not talk with my mouth full. I give up my seat on the bus to the elderly, the pregnant, and the good-looking. I stopped spitting in public years ago. I rarely walk empty-handed into a home to which I have been invited. I am, by and large, good to my mother.

No, I am not an animal. But I grip a fork like a caveman, and I have serious deficiencies in other departments. There's no debating the fact that I cannot dance. And while I love my weekly hoops game, I am also not at heart a "sportsman." I'm a good guy, certainly good enough to find a girl to marry me, but I am not a gentleman in the most expansive sense of that word.

Finishing Academy managing directors Diana Mather and Penny Edge realized there were many men like me. They had a hunch that we would come from all across the world and pay a pretty penny to unlearn bad habits and cultivate new skills. When I told my friends that I was going to a "gentlemen's school," most pictured me among a bunch of Bad Manners Bears, all of us struggling to walk with a book on our heads and speak clearly with pebbles in our mouths. And that's part of it. But a man obsessed solely with cultivating these parts of the puzzle conjures up a quasi-guy who's hopelessly un-masculine. When you add the sporty skills into the mix (shooting, golf), along with a pinch of modern-life know-how and practicality, a higher-minded notion of what it means to be a gentleman emerges: to become a man in full, equipped to handle any situation that arises.

In that spirit, we release our bodies, minds, bad habits, and \$1,500 into these women's hands. They have 3 days to make men of us.

Step 1: Master The Art Of The First Impression

The seven other "delegates" (as we are called) joining me hail from five countries and span nearly six decades of unrefined living. The youngest guy is Dietrich, a 24-year-old Aussie living in London, who has the wide eyes and unflappable energy of a Jack Russell terrier. The oldest are Ravindra, 57, from Bombay; and Michael, a computer geek living in the north of England whose wife gave him the course as a 50th-birthday present. To the untrained eye, we don't look like a disaster area needing to be roped off. The sorority of sophisticated ladies at the Finishing Academy, however, is not the untrained eye.

"If you don't look and act appropriately, you have to work that much harder to get what you want in life," says Mather, bubbling with energy like a fizzy bottle of champagne as she instructs us on the importance of image. She is talking about our outward appearance, but the lesson applies to most everything else we learn this weekend: Being a gentleman can help you in every part of life, from self-esteem to relationships to professional success. "We're teaching you to get rich and get lucky" is the not-so-subtle subtext.

Edge invites me into a hula hoop to demonstrate body language, which she says makes up 93 percent of first impressions. Stand 2 to 3 feet from the person you're talking to, she says. When you shake hands, lightly touch the person's arm with your other hand for 3 seconds and you have an 80 percent chance of making a good connection; touch it for more than 5 seconds and you come across as patronizing. When talking, look into the other person's eyes. And, she adds, don't talk to a woman's breasts.

Good to know.

Step 2: Apply The Rules Of Style

Our days at the academy are peppered with maxims like "you don't get a second chance to make a first impression" and "the best suit is useless if you don't stand and walk in it correctly"--all variations on the same self-improvement-is-a-gift-to-yourself-and-the-world theme. Michaela Jedinal, a pretty fashion consultant suspected of being from Sweden, leads us in an impassioned dissection of what types of clothes are best for each body type.

Short guys: Wear one color to keep your body in one lengthening piece. Tall guys: Break up the body with distinct colors. Fat guys: No stripes. Darker-skinned guys: Wear dark clothes. All guys: Buy bespoke, or custom-made, suits whenever possible. We're told that among the eight of us, six are wearing their pants too long, which is not only sloppy but also makes shorter men appear shorter still.

During my one-on-one session with Michaela, I grill her about wedding attire; she listens, and then, after 30 minutes of masterful instruction about how I need to go easy on the black, why off-whites will bring out my pretty blue eyes (aw, shucks), and the reason double-breasted suits are not my move, my muse finally says, "But I'd really just ask your fiancée."

Step 3: Savor The Gustatory Arts

I may be living in a castle, eating rich and delicious Scottish delicacies, and surrounded by acre after acre of pristine land, but this is no gentleman's holiday. The days and nights are packed. Each and every event is an occasion for more instruction.

There's the simple act of serving wine, which many men yearn to master. It seems a little scary, but it's not so hard. Never fill a glass of wine more than halfway, our wine-appreciation instructor explains. (You need to allow the vino room to breathe.) Don't hold a white-wine glass by the bowl. (Your hand warms the wine; this applies to your water glass, too.) And no clinking during a toast! To clink is to risk chipping the fine glassware you're drinking from. And we can't have that.

Meals at the Finishing Academy fill us up with knowledge ("When seated between two women at a dinner party, talk to one woman during the first course and then the other woman during the next course"; "Place your silverware at 5:20 on your plate to indicate that you are finished with the dish"). We pepper our conversation with formal niceties ("You, sir, are too kind") that start off as a goof but become addictive. Turns out, it's as easy to be pleasant and polite as it is to be rushed and rude. Dietrich gets into a habit of beginning every conversation with "My good man," and I surprise myself by not wanting to smack him.

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