

Making Our Way



A McMAHON / CHEYNE PODCAST

#77 • Season 3 • Episode 16

12/31/2025

E is for Etiquette

Our Hosts

Janet Cheyne McMahon is a lover of family, dogs, nature, travel, books, and music. Born south of the Mason-Dixon line, she left after 9 months for parts north, landing eventually in Michigan, which will always be “where I’m from.”

Love of learning led Jan to a Bachelor of Arts (History, Political Science) at the University of Michigan-Dearborn (Go Blue), and a Master of Arts (Library and Information Science) at the University of South Florida. Amid all that, studied for a time with Rob at Colorado State University, a pivotal time in their lives.

Worked at the U of M-Dearborn Library, and then The Salvation Army Florida Divisional Headquarters, with the greatest reward being in serving as the Divisional Librarian. A librarian is who Jan is “in my soul.”

Jan and Rob have made our home in Florida since 1983, and live now in retirement with their dog, Skye, who makes it all the best adventure. They travel as much as possible, spending time in nature and in diverse places on this amazing planet. It has all been, and continues to be a fascinating journey, with hope of making a difference, in small ways, by being brave enough to speak and act on behalf of others.

Rob McMahon is a native Michigander, born in Saginaw and raised in the suburbs of Detroit. Rob attended Michigan State University, graduating in 1978 with a Bachelor of Science degree. He did graduate studies at the University of Michigan and the University of South Florida. Rob is retired, having spent 36 years in public education teaching both high school chemistry and biology and middle school science. He worked as a total quality management trainer for the Pinellas County School District and served four years as the president of the Pinellas Classroom Teachers Association. Rob cofounded a non-profit total quality management training center, The Learning Co-op, for Teacher Unions interested in applying the W. Edwards Deming continuous improvement principles to their day-to-day operations. He worked with teacher unions in Colorado, Maryland, New Mexico, North Dakota, Texas and Michigan. He also worked in a similar capacity with Jim Shipley & Associates. In retirement Rob has written a series of science related children’s books, and enjoys traveling with his wife, Jan, and their Black Labrador Retriever, Skye.

Deanna Cheyne, born in St. John’s, Newfoundland, earned a Bachelor’s Degree in Vocal Performance from the University of Toronto (1996), studying with such luminaries as Elmer Eisler, Doreen Rao, Greta Kraus, Lois Marshall, and Rosemarie Landry.

Dee taught music at Mississauga Christian Academy, served as music director for Meadowvale Bible Baptist Church (Mississauga, Ontario), served as Assistant Divisional Music Director for The Salvation Army in Florida, is a former member of Tampa’s Master Chorale, and, for the past 18 years, has been a public school teacher.

Dee has visit 36 of the 50 U.S. states, and 12 countries. Her favorite destinations include France, Prague, New Orleans, National Parks, & Hawaii.

Dee & Jim live in Florida with Brigus (Golden Retriever) and Pip (Teacup Yorkie).

James Cheyne, born in Galesburg, Illinois, earned a Bachelor of Music degree (Theory and Composition) from Michigan State University (1978); and a Master of Music degree (Theory and Composition) from the University of Illinois Urbana/Champaign (1981), studying with David Liptak, Salvatore Martirano, and Ben Johnston.

Jim has served as music director for The Salvation Army in Central Illinois & Eastern Iowa, Orlando Area Command, and the Florida Division, served as a pastor with The Salvation Army, and was a public school teacher for 17 years.

In travel so far, Jim has visited 50 states and 27 countries. His favorite travel destinations include National Parks, New Orleans, Newfoundland, Argentina, Prague, & France.

Jim continues to write music and support Dee’s musical endeavors, and cooks whenever absolutely necessary. Jim & Dee live in Florida with their dogs Brigus & Pip.



L-R: Brigus, Jim, Deanna, Skye, Jan, Rob.
Inset: Pip

E is for Etiquette

#77 - Season 3; Episode 16

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Host: Jim.

Etiquette is on offer, with George Washington's Rules of Civility, a quiz on etiquette internationally, the use of etiquette to restrict some and to elevate others, Goethe and Beethoven, a few offhand suggestions for etiquette rules, answers to our quiz, and Washington's summative aphorism.

[Music]

JIM:

"Every action done in company ought to be with some sign of respect to those that are present."

"When in company, put not your hands to any part of the body not usually discovered."

"In the presence of others, sing not to yourself with a humming voice, nor drum your fingers or feet."

"Sleep not when others speak, sit not when others stand, speak not when you should hold your peace, walk not when others stop."

These are just a few of the aphorisms collected in a book called "Washington's Rules of Civility and Decent Behavior in Company and Conversation." He lists 110 aphorisms in all, copied down as a penmanship exercise when George Washington was a boy. Rules of etiquette help us navigate a variety of social situations—when dining, when greeting strangers, when traveling overseas. We're told that "good manners are never out of style," but things change, and what counts today as good manners is not always obvious from yesterday's point of view.

For instance, we once had clear, widely accepted rules for what constitutes appropriate dress in public. Do you remember that? But have you been to a Walmart recently?

Or suppose you're traveling overseas. Let's say you're planning a trip to the Winter Olympics in Milan in February. Seasoned travelers will tell you you're not really prepared for a trip until you learn the customs and manners of the places you will visit. Take Italy. Do you know the tipping policy for restaurants in Italy? For hotels? For taxis? Do you know how to order coffee without ending up with espresso? And is it okay to walk around town drinking a cup of coffee? Is it okay to ask your server for a sprinkle of parmesan cheese on your pizza? And speaking of "okay" is it okay to give the "okay" gesture in Milan? What about giving thumbs up?

And that's just northern Italy. As you know, Americans, of course, have a stellar global reputation for being polite, well-mannered, soft-spoken, exceedingly courteous, and ever vigilant not to cause the slightest offense. It's just who we are. International travel can be a

minefield of faux paws ready to explode in your face if you haven't prepared properly. So here's a little quiz to illustrate.

In Morocco, what is the proper manner for reaching for food from shared dishes at a dinner table?

In Kenya, is whistling at night encouraged or forbidden?

In France is it okay to ask for substitutions at a restaurant?

In China, does finishing your plate tell your host you're pleased with a meal?

In Indonesia, with which finger should you never point?

In Japan, should you refill your own glass or wait for someone else to do it?

In which countries is slurping soup a compliment? And in which countries is it rude?

In which countries do you pass items with two hands? And in which countries do you pass items with the right hand only?

In Thailand, at dinner you are provided with a fork, a spoon, and chopsticks. But how and when do you use each?

What is an appropriate amount to tip your server at a restaurant in Denmark or in Japan?

And in which countries is English more understandable if it is shouted slowly?

And as daunting as international customs are, we have regional rules of etiquette in the U.S. as well. Try this. Put someone from New York, someone from Chicago, from Detroit, and Los Angeles in a room. Have them discuss the etiquette of making and eating pizza. Lock the door. And check back in a day and see what's left.

There are two sides to the etiquette coin. One side divides us, the other unites us. On the divisive side, let's first note that the word "etiquette" comes from the word "ticket," that is, permission to take part in something.

Etiquette determines who is part of the in-group and who is excluded. Membership in high society is reserved for privileged classes who have the proper ticket, who know the rules of etiquette, which seem arcane and arbitrary to outsiders. Thus, etiquette forms a protective barrier against infiltration by undesirables who can only dream of upward mobility. Without the ticket, you don't get into our club.

Remember the movie Titanic, where Jack, a third-class passenger, gets invited to a first-class dinner? He doesn't know how to manage all the manners and protocols of high society, which regards him as amusing or repulsive. It's only Molly Brown who is decent and kind enough to whisper to Jack which utensils he should use with which dishes.

On the flip side, etiquette can be a way to level artificial status and to bring us together through simple gestures designed to show everyone the simple regard and respect everyone is due.

I'll begin with an incident that happened to me in late 1980.

I was a graduate student at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, and I was heading

into the art building for some reason. There was someone walking behind me, so when I got to the door, I opened it and stepped aside to let them in. I think Mom taught me that. But that's when the woman following me went out of her way to go to another door, fling it open, and rush in that way instead. I don't know exactly what a huff is, but she was in one.

I was stunned and thought, "How rude! Why'd she do that? I was just opening the door for someone. Isn't that the polite thing to do? What, did you think I was being patronizing? Was I being rude? I didn't hold the door open just because it was a woman. I would have done it for anyone. Is that what she thought? Did I show that? Did she assume that? What should I have done? Should I have gone through the door first and held it open behind me? Should I have acted as if she wasn't there at all and let her take care of it herself?"

Mind you, all this went through my mind in about two seconds. So what had I done? What just happened?

First, I'll note the person who pushed past me was Barbara DeGenevieve, the artist. If you don't know her, look her up. I hadn't met her yet. She had just started teaching at Illinois. Someone told me she was a feminist, but that term was imprecise for her. I learned she was seeking a way of breaking through stereotypes of female social passivity. Look at her art. You might see that. And that made sense of our encounter at the door. An encounter I misunderstood at the time, but now accept and agree with.

Etiquette should not be used as cover for unjust social hierarchy.

The story is told of Goethe and Beethoven walking in conversation when they came upon the imperial party, whereupon Goethe removed his hat and bowed obsequiously, while Beethoven merely tipped his hat and stayed upright. The story goes on that Goethe, well versed in aristocratic protocols, was aghast at Beethoven's failure to show due respect. While Beethoven replied, "We should not bow to them, they should bow to us," or something to that effect.

Etiquette is a language, and as with any language, all parties bear some responsibility in reaching out and trying to understand each other.

Now I have my own rules of etiquette. I've never written these down as a penmanship exercise, and let me add quickly that I call these rules, but these are not commandments, they are merely suggestions, because proper etiquette requires that I do not require proper etiquette from others. Actually I like that. I will write that one down. "Proper etiquette requires that I do not require proper etiquette from others."

So my first rule of etiquette is this. Assume the best of others until they prove otherwise. Don't assume ill intent. Don't take the heat of the moment as someone else's normal temperature.

Also, the moving sidewalk at the airport is not a ride. Keep walking, or at least stand to the right with your bags out of the way so others can pass.

Always take the lower step on an escalator, that is, behind when going up or below when descending. That way, should your companion lose balance, you can break their fall. As a side note, extreme weight differentials might override this.

Always wait until everyone is served before eating. I've seen some finish their meal before

grace has even been offered.

Speaking of which, always say grace before a meal, to thank whomever or whatever has provided it—a divine power, nature, or the flora and fauna about to be consumed. If some do not practice sane grace, don't employ shame. Offer grace silently.

Respond to a "thank you" with either "you're welcome" or "my pleasure," never with "no problem." Don't imply you've been inconvenienced in some way.

Dress above the occasion. You can remove a tie and jacket if you've overdone it.

If you got it out—oh mom used to say this—if you got it out, you should put it away. Now, Dee believes I think clothes are an exception to this, but she's the one who keeps putting things in drawers. I put clothes away, back on the floor where I found them.

Return your shopping carts. If you've just pushed a shopping cart hundreds of feet through a store, you can push it another 20 feet to the cart return.

Not everyone knows how to cook well, but everyone should learn how to prepare breakfast for their partner.

When I ask Siri or Alexa a question and they answer, for some reason I still say, "Thank you," which they ignore. AI lacks manners.

I am always the last person standing in public transportation, but as my age is becoming more and more obvious, some younger man might rise and offer me his seat. To this my etiquette provides two replies. I could say, "Sit down, you lousy punk, I ain't that old," or I could say, "How very gracious of you. I prefer to stand, but it warms my heart to know proper manners are secure in the hands of this thoughtful new generation." See? Two options. Either way, I don't sit until everyone else is seated first.

Washington's book includes one etiquette rule that I believe applies to everyone in all places at all times. And I'll get to that in a moment. But first, here are the answers to that little quiz on international travel.

In Morocco, take food from shared dishes using the thumb and two fingers only. One finger is rude and three fingers are gluttonous.

In Kenya, whistling at night is forbidden because it invites evil spirits.

In France, never ask for substitutions at a restaurant. Order only those items whose ingredients you will eat.

In China, an empty plate means you want more. Leaving a bit behind compliments your host for serving more than enough food.

In Indonesia, never point with your pointer finger. It's rude. Point with your thumb instead.

In Japan, never refill your own glass. Allow someone else to do it for you.

In China, slurping soup can be considered a compliment, but don't do it at my house.

Pass items with two hands in Korea and Vietnam. In India, pass with the right hand only. The left hand is used for hygiene.

In Thailand, never put the fork in your mouth. The fork is used to cut food and push it into the spoon. Chopsticks are used for noodles only.

In Denmark, as in Japan, servers are professionals, and tips are already figured into your bill. In North America, of course, treating servers as professionals is a foreign idea, so servers depend on tips to make even a modest living.

Finally, yes, English is more understandable when shouted slowly, and no one appreciates this quite like the French.

Etiquette should function as a sincere attempt to treat others with respect. It is a sensitive awareness of the feelings of others. Proper etiquette shows respect to all, regardless of social status, through kindness, punctuality, presence, self-awareness. It pays attention. It is humble, it's considerate. When dining, etiquette suggests we level the voice to those at the table, set social media devices away, and respect those providing service. Etiquette communicates interest in others for their sake, not for one's own.

Proper etiquette is a natural extension of proper ethics. which prepares us for Washington's final aphorism, which isn't so much a rule of etiquette as it is good advice for good living. Quoting, "Labor to keep alive in your breast that little spark of celestial fire called conscience."

[Music begins]

Thank you for your company today. With that, we wish you a Happy New Year. Be it resolved: respect offered is respect earned.

The whole crew plus some special guests will join me next week as we continue Making Our Way.

Until next time.

[Music ends]