

## Donkey butts

*Saturday, July 4, 2009*

I'm thinking of all the times I've confronted what I consider to be rude behavior and how little good it's probably done. The over-loud cell phone conversations I've interrupted, the smokers I've asked not to smoke in non-smoking areas, the parents I've asked to calm their crying infants in movie theaters and restaurants. While I do more often than not accomplish short-term local change, I doubt seriously that I've made the world a better place for anybody but me, and then only for a few minutes or hours. Still, as automatically as I'd straighten a picture frame hanging crooked on the wall, I'll rise from my chair to cross a room where I'll hear myself begin, "Excuse me, but ..." and the knot tightens in anticipation of the rebuttal or the blank stare.



*Let's declare our independence from rudeness.*

One of the worst responses I've gotten to my impulsive straightening took place a few weekends ago. I was waiting for my order to arrive at a moderately priced restaurant when a woman was seated with her toddler in the adjacent booth. Almost immediately, the toddler stood up on his seat where he began to stare at me, sippy cup dangling from his fingers and threatening to spill onto my companion. I stepped to the mother's side of the booth to quietly tell her that her son was distracting us from our conversation and to ask that she have her son sit down. She looked at me disbelievingly, but said, "Uh ... yeah, I guess so." I returned to my seat, waited 90 seconds and, since the toddler and sippy cup failed to disappear from view, moved us to another table. Problem solved.

Or so I thought.

Some time later, the woman came to my table, very upset, to tell me that her son was autistic, that I'd ruined her lunch and that she was leaving. She returned to her table and I followed her, intending to use an insincere but convincing apology as the lead-in to reminding her that she wasn't doing her son any favor by allowing him to make a nuisance of himself and then rebuking anyone who dared to complain. But she cut me off. "It's too late," she said, and stalked out of the restaurant.

Admittedly, I'm a childless grump. I have zero tolerance for the same childhood antics that many consider (or pretend to consider) cute, particularly where dining and performance spaces are concerned. But a friend of mine who has decades of experience as a public school teacher and administrator feels as I do. He believes that disability diagnoses like autism (ADD, ADHD, etc.) are in many cases allowing – dare I say it? – lazy parents to shift responsibility for their children's behavior away from themselves and toward whatever other surface seems the stickiest. The lady in the restaurant certainly played that card with me, invoking a now all-to-common form of diplomatic immunity.

Another friend of mine, a parent of grown children, suggests that bad nutrition and unchecked media access are adding fuel to the fire and I'm inclined to agree. I noticed at an Ingles grocery store recently that the center third of the watermelon bin was filled with hundreds of plastic tubes of sugar water ... freezer pops. The implications of so much high-fructose corn syrup so strategically displayed were obvious and, true to form, I almost asked for the manager. But I was with someone that day and didn't want to ruin her shopping experience by staging a probably futile throw-down in the produce

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aisle. Instead, I grumbled around the store – at the child’s eye-level Sugar Smacks, at the proliferation of brightly packaged sodas, at the power of the tobacco lobby, of Monsanto and big pharma – and kicked myself for abetting evil with my silence.

But I digress.

For all my righteous posing, I’m not so interested in the causes of inconsiderate behavior as I am in our increasing unwillingness to confront that behavior, especially when it’s based somehow in the perpetrator’s age, gender, race, creed, country of national origin or purported disability.

My opinion regarding the autistic child is this: He doesn’t get to eat in restaurants until he’s old enough to control himself. Nor does he get to go to plays or concerts. When he attends church, he must sit in the cry room. And his mother must be prepared to remove him immediately from any place where his behavior becomes an annoyance. And she should apologize to people like me who’d do the same for her if the tables were turned.

Generally speaking, I reject anyone’s right to be inconsiderate of me inside my airspace and then flash their special needs credentials in lieu of explanation or apology. Rude is rude.

**Length:** 9:09

**Music:** *We’re the Monkeys* by The Monkeys, excerpts from Southpark (season 11, episode 8): “Le Petit Tourettes”

**Writer, voice:** Tim Brosnan