

# **SYMPOSIUM: SHOULD EDUCATION CIVILIZE?**

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*Mark Bauerlein, Robert Pattison, Douglas Sears,  
and Carson Holloway, introduced by Carol Iannone*

The papers that comprise this symposium are adapted from remarks delivered on 23 May 2004 in New York City at the NAS's eleventh national conference. The overall theme of the conference was "What Our Universities and Our Schools Owe Each Other."

## **A Vignette with Comments on Manners**

*Carol Iannone*

I want to relate a little incident that certainly made vivid for me that something is lacking in our civilizing mechanisms today. A friend and I were having a snack on a weekday afternoon at a fast food restaurant in which a number of people were eating. Near us, very near us, was a group of school-girls, maybe seventh or eighth grade, quite intelligent looking, but talking in loud, piercing, high-pitched voices and in a lingo impossible to decipher, that is, modern young people's English. My companion said to them, "Girls, please, lower your voices, you're shrieking." The shrieking girls shrieked back: "We're not shrieking!" Yes, I thought, rather complacently I fear, it's very hard to teach young people today. They are probably not used to hearing any kind of check on their behavior any more. Barbarism one, civilization zero, I calculated.

But my friend wasn't giving up, and it helps to be a man in situations like these, I guess. "Yes, you are shrieking," he said, "and the rest of us would like to eat in peace, so please talk in normal human tones." There was much bristling and consternation, and ruffled feathers and reddened faces and eyeballs distended in ire, but the voices did get lower, considerably lower. Well, I thought, even though we're told that we adults are the ones who must learn from children nowadays in our post-Rousseauian age, maybe we can still teach them a thing or two. I recalculated. Civilization one, barbarism zero.

So as the girls were leaving to get into the cab, which is apparently their mode of transportation home from school—I guess we're not dealing with poverty issues here—I waved to them through the plate glass window, as if to say, no hard feelings, girls, we know you're young, you're learning, and it's all ended agreeably enough, hasn't it. I saw an arm emerge from the car window.

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I thought how nice, I am getting a return wave of good will. Suddenly, however, the hand turned, the fingers clenched, and the middle finger sprung up! I won't illustrate, but yes, she was giving me the finger! Barbarism one, civilization zero!

But then another hand emerged from the cab, one of the other girls; she grabbed the fingered hand, the hand with the extended finger, and pulled it back into the cab! So perhaps one of them at least had been touched by our reproaches. OK, I said, it's a tie!

But seriously, I don't think there's any doubt that we want our schools to help civilize, to uphold discipline, and to teach the rules of life in a civilized society. Manners are greater than law, said Edmund Burke. The teacher shortage we heard about yesterday would disappear in short order in my opinion if schools were strict and serious about upholding discipline and defending educators in their civilizing tasks.

If you grew up in a big extended immigrant New York family as I did, and when I did, you were bound to hear stories about the golden age of the New York City public school system, when "schoolteachers" were figures of respect, the days when an applicant was told that she could not be a New York City public school teacher until she rid herself of her New York accent. You had great aunts who hadn't finished high school perhaps, because many young people, especially girls, didn't finish high school in those days, but who could still correct your grammar and your speech and the tone of your voice and tell you to sit up straight because they had been so taught. You heard of the starched white blouses required for weekly assembly, at which there were recitations and group singing.

Recently I think we passed a kind of negative milestone in disintegration when a young performer who was leading the crowd in singing "The Star-Spangled Banner" before a ball game suddenly forgot the words. The reason given by the media was the lack of money for music programs in our schools. But you don't need James Levine to teach "The Star-Spangled Banner." You need a kind of commitment to and belief in the best and highest values of our society, as well as a conviction that it is the task of our schools to help pass these on.