Manners matter — don’t they?

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WASHINGTON — Let’s be good cosmopolitans and offer sociological explanations rather than moral judgments about students, The Washington Post reports, having sex during the day in high schools. Sociology discerns connections, and there may be one between the fact that teenagers are relaxing from academic rigors by enjoying sex in the school auditorium, and the fact that Americans in public soon will be able to watch pornography and prime-time TV programs such as “Desperate Housewives” — and, for the high-minded, C-SPAN — on their cell phones and video iPods.

The connection is this: Many people have no notion of propriety when in the presence of other people because they are not actually in the presence of other people, even when they are in public.

With everyone chatting on cell phones when not floating in iPod-land, “this is an age of social autism, in which people just can’t see the value of imagining their impact on others.” We are entertaining ourselves into inanition. (There are web sites for people with Internet addiction. Think about that.) And multiplying technologies of portable entertainments will enable “liminal self-absorption,” which will make people solipsistic, inconsiderate and anti-social. Hence, manners are becoming unmannerly in this “age of lazy moral relativism combined with aggressive social insolence.”

So says Lynne Truss in her latest trumpet-blast of a book, Talk to the Hand: The Utter Bloody Rudeness of the World Today, or Six Good Reasons to Stay Home and Bolt the Door.” Her previous wail of despair was Eats, Shoots & Leaves: The Zero Tolerance Approach to Punctuation,” which established her as — depending on your sensibility — a comma and apostrophe fascist (the liberal sensibility) or a plucky constable combating anarchy (the conservative sensibility).

Good punctuation, she says, is analogous to good manners because it treats readers with respect. “All the important rules,” she writes, “surely boil down to one: Remember you are with other people; show some consideration.” Manners, which have been called “quotidian ethics,” arise from real or — this, too, is important in lubricating social frictions — feigned empathy.

“People,” Truss says, “are happier when they have some idea of where they stand and what the rules are.” But today’s entitlement mentality, which is both a cause and a consequence of the welfare state, manifests itself in the attitude that it is all right to do whatever one has a right to do. Which is why acrimony has enveloped a coffee shop on Chicago’s affluent North Side, where the proprietor posted a notice that children must “behave and use their indoor voices.” The proprietor, battling what he calls an ‘epidemic’ of anti-social behavior, told The New York Times that parents protesting his notice “have a very strong sense of entitlement.”

A thoroughly modern parent, believing that children must be protected from feelings injurious to self-esteem, says, “Johnny, the fact that you did something bad does not mean that you are bad for doing it.” We have, Truss thinks, “created people who will not stand to be corrected in any way.” Furthermore, it is a brave, or fool-hardy, man who shows traditional manners toward women. In today’s world of “hair-trigger sensitivity,” to open a door for a woman is to play what Truss calls Gallantry Russian Roulette: You risk a high-decibel lecture on gender politics.

One writer on manners has argued that a nation’s greatness is measured not only by obedience of laws but also by “obedience to the unenforceable.” But enforcement of manners can be necessary. The well-named David Stern, commissioner of the NBA, recently decreed a dress code for players. It is politeness to the league’s customers who, weary of seeing players dressed, in “edgy” hip-hop, “street” or “gangsta” styles, want to be able to distinguish the Bucks and Knicks from the Bloods and Crips. Stern also understands that players who wear “in your face” clothes of a kind, and in a manner, that evokes Sing Sing more than Brooks Brothers might be more inclined to fight on the floor and to allow fights to migrate to the stands, as happened last year.

Because manners are means of extending respect, especially to strangers, this question arises: Do manners and virtue go together? Truss thinks so, in spite of the possibility of “blood-stained dictators who had exquisite table manners and never used their mobile phones in a crowded train compartment to order mass executions.”

Actually, manners are the practice of a virtue. The virtue is called civility, a word related — as a foundation is related to a house — to the word civilization.