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February 15, 1986 (letter 10)

Dear Colleague:

Wow! Gee! Gee whiz! O Boy! Taped to my office mantelpiece is a New Yorker cartoon which shows a man just out of bed and still in his pajamas looking at the window pane that is streaked with rain. He says: "Wow! What a day for a workaholic!" At a dinner party, our conversation turned to the theme of American optimism. One guest noted that no other language is so richly endowed with starry-eyed exclamations. The English "Capital!" and "Splendid!" are clearly not the same thing as "Wow!". What they lack is innocence---the boundless optimism of the New Adam. American teenagers try to look cool. I hope that's just a facade, behind which--and about to break through--is the thrust and glow of hope.

Last week in Minneapolis, two friends and I had lunch at the Willows in a Hyatt-Regency Hotel. It is one of the best restaurants in the Twin Cities. (A note to Travis: I was there to advertise UW scholarship). The first thing that struck me was the silver platter that contained three pads of butter carved into the shape of flowers. The pads were in three different colors: the regular pale yellow, pink, and milk chocolate. The pink and chocolate pads had in them pinches of garlic and spice. The show piece was the smorgasbord which stretched along the entire length of one side of the dining-room. I couldn't cope with the smorgasbord. That spread of enormously complex design baffled me as much as the matrix for microcomputers that seven-year old Joshua tried to explain to me the other day. Neither my IQ nor my stomach was up to that kind of challenge. So I ordered a chicken salad, innocently believing that it is a dish of modest pedigree and proportions. Of course, what I received was a vast flower bed of crisp lettuce, asparagus, sliced avocado, red cabbage, and on top, a bouquet of tenderly-browned chicken. While my co-gourmets were at the smorgasbord counter, the waitress came to the table and refolded the salmon-colored napkins into blushing blossoms. What food, what service!

Well, dear reader, I do not ever want to eat there again. I like comfort but am repelled by luxury. Lionel Trilling in Beyond Culture reminds us that the old meaning of luxury is erotic and nothing but erotic. "For Chaucer and Shakespeare luxury meant lust and its indulgence. Women present themselves to Keats's imagination as luxuries: 'All that soft luxury/ that nestled in his arms.' A poem is described as 'a posy/ Of luxuries, bright, milky, soft and rosy.'" In an early poem, Keats speaks of "the pillowy silkiness that rests/ Full in the speculation of the stars." Here is a rapid movement from the soft luxury of pillowy silkiness to the cold hard beauty of the stars. Which do you prefer? Is it possible to have both? By the way, can we make the case that in patriarchal societies, only the men are in a position to enjoy luxuries; women lounging in "pillowy silkiness" are not enjoying the luxury but are themselves a part of the luxury--a part of that silky voluptuousness.

Best wishes,

Y. Z.