

September 1, 1989 (Vol. 5, no. 1)

Dear Colleague:

The Emperor Maximilian (1459-1519) was too busy to attend his own wedding in France, so he sent an ambassador to the ceremony. The Emperor was also too busy to consummate the marriage, so again it befell on the ambassador to substitute for his boss, which he managed to do with a great deal of tact. After the public ceremony of proxy marriage, the diplomat affected a proxy consummation by placing his naked foot, duly manicured, bathed and anointed, briefly and decorously in the bed where the bride--Anne of Brittany--lay.

Well, predictably, the bride was not satisfied: all that elegant symbolism was no substitute for the passionate and odorous real thing. It has often occurred to me how the unique problems of life that once afflicted only the very rich and powerful are now the burden of even the affluent middle-class. True, we can still find the time to go to our own wedding, but not much else. More and more, we ask others to substitute for our own duties and obligations: teachers to do our parenting, electronic media to do our teaching, Batman to do our battles against corruption, and (until very recently) Third World peoples to do our fighting. But the trouble with all this living by proxy, or living through images and symbolic gestures, is that it is not real living at all. Real living has to have its cycles of stress and distention, hassle and ease, sweat and the shower. Fox-hunting provided some of that for the aristocrats of old; jogging serves the same purpose for us middle-class types now. But, although the sensations of strain and release are real enough, is fox-hunting or jogging really adequate as substitute? Can we say that jogging is not merely a symbol of the kind of strenuous activity known to trench-diggers, but that it (mysteriously) partakes of the real thing? Or shall we honestly put on the mantle of aristocrats and proclaim (with Talleyrand), "As for living, our servants will do that for us"?

Best wishes,

