

January 1, 1991 (Vol. 6, no. 9)

Dear Colleague:

This is the season for fairy tales, so let me tell you a couple, with the warning that both happen to be true. About twenty years ago, I was flying nonstop from Minneapolis to Boston. We were served dinner an hour or so after we were in the air. A few moments later, a voice asked through the intercom whether there was a doctor on the plane, for one of the passengers--an elderly woman--had choked on her food. A young intern answered the call. He had the woman stretched out on the aisle. He bent over her, put his mouth over her mouth, and tried to suck out the vomit. The pilot told us that we would have to make an emergency landing at O'Hare airport. An ambulance already stood ready on the strip when we touched down. The sick woman was taken to the hospital, accompanied by the young doctor. We waited an hour for his return. I could hear voices of sympathy, but never once of impatience or complaint. What struck me was, first, the young doctor's quiet dedication (I won't want to suck out anyone's vomit, not right after dinner), second, the sense of community among the passengers, and, third, society's efficiency (like that of a Whitney-Rolls Royce engine) in providing the needed services. Who was the passenger? A movie star? No, just someone traveling economy class like me.

This summer I had lunch at a Chinese fast-food restaurant (Shanghai Minnie) on University Avenue, Madison. A young couple with a baby ate there. When they finished, the man put the paper dishes and plastic forks into the trash bin and returned the trays--McDonald style. The woman strapped her child on the stroller. The man opened the door for them to get out. And, then, to my surprise, he returned to the table and adjusted the chairs so that they stood as neatly as they did before the family occupied them. What's going on here? Well, I like to think it's nothing special--just civility.

"Nothing special--just commonplaces that happen all the time," one might say. But think, if true, what a high compliment this is to American society. When and where did Americans pick up these manners? At home? At school in civics courses? Is the McDonald ethos, exhibited to an exceptionally high degree by my young Madison family, something also native to Londoners, Parisians, Beijing-jen? Is America exporting good manners (the kind proper to democracy), along with hamburgers?

Happy New Year,

