

May 15, 1992 (Vol. 7, no. 18)

Dear Colleague:

In New York, 1958, I bought a book in a bookstore on Fifth Avenue. Back in my hotel two hours later, I found that I had lost my wallet. I could have left it at the bookstore, but what was the point of going back to retrieve it? Well, I did go back, if only to do something, and found my wallet on a stack of books next to the cash register, right under the noses of clients who waited at the checkout point. Nothing was stolen. In the spring of 1968, psychologist Harvey Hornstein and his colleagues "lost" wallets on crowded sidewalks of New York city at the rate of 40 per day. Of the many hundreds they lost, an astonishingly high 45 percent were returned completely intact. Think of the inconvenience of wrapping up the wallet, putting stamps on the envelope and getting it to the post office.

On the night of October 10, 1975, eighteen-year-old Bradley VanDamme was involved in a serious one-car accident. By the time bystander Billie McCullough reached the car, the rear of the vehicle burst into flame and spread rapidly into the front seat. McCullough crawled into the car and with the greatest of difficulty pulled VanDamme free. Moments later the entire car exploded. VanDamme was badly burnt, but he eventually recovered. McCullough, a twenty-two year old laborer, was later awarded the Carnegie Medal, an honor given for "outstanding acts of selfless heroism performed in the United States and Canada." Fifty-six such medals were awarded in 1977, eight of them posthumously. (Why do we hear so little of these Medalists, and so much of Madonna, Magic Johnson, and Lee Iaococca?)

The Congressional Medal of Honor, our highest military honor, has often been awarded posthumously to soldiers who threw themselves atop live grenades to save their comrades (Robert Frank, Passions Within Reason, 1988).

When the Titanic sank on April 14, 1912, more than 80 per cent of those who drowned were men. Many had relinquished their lifeboat seat to women. In a recent survey, only 35 per cent of the men on Titanic II would today cede their lifeboat slot to children or women who weren't their wives (Time, April 27, 1992). Is it too cynical to think of this shift in the last eighty years as progress--as a decline in sexism and ageism, a shedding of outmoded conceptions of noblesse oblige?

I wish you all a happy and lazy summer.

*Z. Tu*