

February 1, 1994 (Vol. 9, no. 11)

Dear Colleague:

The temperature, plus wind-chill factor, is a record low of -70 F! I was seated next to the window having my Saturday-morning breakfast at the International Pancake House. I could see a young woman going to her car in the parking lot. A moment later she got out and lifted the hood and stared at the engine in dismay. Her car won't start and it was obvious she didn't know what to do. At that moment a young man came out of the restaurant and went to his car, parked next to the woman's. They chatted a while. The man opened his trunk, took out jump-start wires, and tried to attach the clamps to the batteries. He had to remove his heavy gloves to do so.

From my window seat I could see the transformation in the woman's face from the tight look of despair to radiant smile. I know I am making a big fuss about very little. The young woman, after all, was not in serious difficulty. She could always step back into the warm restaurant and wait for help from a service station. But that's it--I mean, that idea must surely have also occurred to the young man. Why then did he bother to offer help? Was it a sort of reflex action, something he had learned in boyhood about gallantry--about knights rescuing fair damsels in distress, or was it something more contemporary American, something to do with the test of manhood?

Most of us feel occasionally tinged of nostalgia for the past--Mom's apple pie, Swiss chalet, the Maypole dance. Do we also feel guilt-ridden nostalgia for certain virtues of the past? Humility, for instance? Gallantry? Noblesse oblige? The past is dangerous from a moral point of view, for it lends itself so easily to sentimentalization. A quaint old European town is all very well, but think of the hegemonic social condition that produced it. As for the old-fashioned moral excellences, they are all tainted by elitism; they all derive from a feeling of power. Noblesse oblige. That's a giveaway, isn't it? Gallantry, ditto. As for humility, well, look who first introduced it into Christianity--no less than the Son of God himself! He could afford to be humble, but who are we--mere creatures of dust, transient glowworms, victims of society--to pretend to such extravagances?

Having put myself in the right with current moral thinking, let me end on a nostalgic note and a confession. I still like what I saw from my window seat in the International Pancake House.

Best wishes,

*Y. Fu*