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Dear Colleague:

A girl scout helping an old man across the busy street is a very appealing picture. A source of its appeal, I believe, is its unnaturalness. Old people no longer contribute to the gene pool, their knowledge in our fast-paced world is more likely to hinder than help the young, and yet there you are! young persons labor against nature, keep us old guys alive by helping us across the street, and no doubt before long they will have to share the burden of our social security payments as well.

An equally appealing--and more unusual--picture is math tutoring in the fountain square between Memorial Library and the State Historical Society. Mathematically talented students set up shop to help their peers in need. I see them drawing graphs and writing trigonometric functions on blackboards, scattered over the square. Each blackboard constitutes a shop. Each tutor is surrounded by his or her cluster of eager patrons. Again, this scene depicts for me something unnatural. Maths is not a natural language. Animals have no maths, and even humans can live very well without it. Yet what took place in the square adds, I think, dignity to the entire human race, as though it were something we are destined to do since the beginning of time.

Finally, writing clear prose is unnatural, and for this reason I treat it with special respect. In England and France, clear concise prose began to appear only in the early part of the seventeenth century. Before that time, people in those countries wrote long, rambling, sentences, in which clauses were tacked on for no particular reason other than the general need to gush. Also natural to us is poetry. Our first babbling sentences were full of poetic turns, as fond parents keep reminding us. Young children use metaphors naturally. As for adults, well, my first drafts are always more poetic--more full of purple passages--than my later ones.

Poetic language and rambling, fuzzy prose exist for a good reason. They make for misunderstanding, without which social life is practically impossible. We get along because what we say to each other is so unclear that we can always give it the gloss that we prefer. Clear prose removes or minimizes that possibility and so forces us to confront our severe limitations, our unwanted uniqueness and solitude.

Have a good summer!

