

An outbreak of good manners

by Theodore Dalrymple



I am so used to lamentation – my own, that is – that I know that I am sometimes inclined to overlook how much better certain things have become of late years. We notice deterioration; we take improvement for granted the moment they have occurred.

Among the things that have improved in the London Underground. I spent most of my early life in London but am now only an occasional visitor, and I never cease to be astonished by the improvement in the underground service. The trains are cleaner, more rapid, more frequent better-ventilated, roomier and quieter than I remember them. I recall with a kind of condescending or indulgent amusement that the civilised are inclined to employ towards the primitive that people once actually smoked in them and took the fug for granted, as a quasi-natural phenomenon.

Another thing by which my wife and I have been surprised is the politeness of the passengers: they invariably stand up for her and when they see that I am with her, they stand for me

too. They do so with an ease, grace and naturalness that that suggests that their politeness is habitual. Even those whom I would otherwise tend to regard as tattooed monsters often offer us this courtesy. Sometimes I don't even have to be with my wife for a seat to be given up for me.

Of course, there is a cloud to any silver-lining, such as this of politeness persisting into modern times. I find it particularly alarming to be offered a seat when I am not with my wife. When I look in the glass I do not see the kind of face that, in my youth, would have induced me (thanks to strict maternal training) to give up my seat to the man who had it. No, I am far too young for that. In my youth, I offered my seat only to the old, or to ladies (and every adult female was a lady). Now that I am on the receiving end of such consideration, I begin to wonder how I must appear to others: old, worn-out, wizened, even incapacitated?

Whether I should accept causes me some heart-searching. To do so means acceptance that I do not appear to others as I appear to myself, which is painful. But not to do so is ungracious and ungrateful – one must learn to receive as well as to give – and risks extinguishing such small but encouraging signs of persisting common decency. In general, then, I accept, surprised at how much of a physical relief to me it sometimes is to do so.

First published in