

welcome

Teaching Respect

No, I don't think I can buy a rug like that." We were looking at a gorgeous old Tabriz, with a creamy background, and sinuous vines and flowers strewn throughout the ground—an exuberant garden of a carpet.

"But it's perfect. It will transform your room. Forget your room. It will transform your life."

Such is the mode of argument I resort to when desperate: wheedling and magic; it had already taken too long—by several years—for my friend to figure out what to do with her living room. I would never have the patience to be a decorator. I was accompanying her on a buying trip to give advice and moral support, as some people are overwhelmed by shopping. Stores are replete with possibility, but they remind some people of everything they do not know, the totality of their ignorance—and therefore the depths of their vulnerability—in the face of a very large world. Carpet weaving, in this instance. Libraries are full of books about carpets, so how are you supposed to begin to decide what to buy? Well, shopping should not bring on an existential crisis, but with some people a crisis is inevitable. Where I see promise and hope in shopping, they see treachery and bedevilment. It is best to coddle this sort of friend. And, since I am giving advice, it is not a good idea to suggest that while they are at it they should get rid of the rag on the floor in the bedroom as well, to say nothing of the one in the hallway . . . but I digress.

"What's wrong with *this* carpet?"

"The children will spill something on it. I'll spill something on it."

"Just drink milk and water, for heaven's sake."

But really, why must the children spill? Where is it written that children will be slobbers? Sure, every once in a while you come up against a real lunatic, the kind of kid who smears peanut butter on the walls. I don't think this sort of behavior is genetically mandated, but in response we have child-proofed our homes to the point of absurdity, filling rooms with junk so the children can jump on the sofas, swing on the curtains, tunnel under the armchairs. It is as if we feel, by setting limits on places to play (read: destroy), that we are depriving them—of what? Childhood? Or good manners?

Well, what are manners for, if not to protect the antiques? Whether antique adults, or antique mahogany, there's a

reason we teach children not to gouge with knives, not to paint with ketchup and mustard, not to kick anyone's or anything's legs, not to think of plaster as a blank canvas, not to decorate the carpet with fruit salad. I used to think people—like my mother—went too far in the teaching of manners. We couldn't sit down to a meal without some curt remark about an egregious breach. I used to argue that there was something inherently rude about interrupting everyone's enjoyment of a meal with a disquisition on the lifestyle of a pig. However, that was before I had children of my own, and before I began to dine in restaurants with other people's children. Now I have become a Manners Warlord.

Every Monday evening for years now we've been having Boys' Dinner at my house, which includes a nephew, sons, and whatever strays are in the neighborhood. It is always the same routine.

"No, boys. Wait until everyone is served. You don't need to preview the meal. Where do our napkins go? Where do we live, Bedrock? No, *Hurry up!*" is not an appropriate toast." On it goes. Once one of them has asserted his manliness by picking up a chicken leg with his fist, everyone settles down. The training process has been relatively painless, and I have never had to resort to buying carpets and upholstery that can withstand savage abuse.

Harder to teach are the sorts of manners that translate to empathy and kindness. My grandfather once had a small girl at his dinner table, and, perhaps waving her hand in excitement, or (more likely) reaching too far for the salt, she knocked over a large glass of milk. She watched in horror, not daring to look up at the grown-ups, as it puddled across the lacy white tablecloth and eddied around the silverware. Everyone was silent, and then suddenly Grandfather, whooping with delight, knocked over *his* glass.

"Why, we do that sort of thing around here all the time!"

Those are manners that transcend the rule books, the manners of a true prince. But try explaining that to the children. Manners, like shopping, are a subject that brings on existential crises. Why do we need them? Who cares? Do manners make the world a better place?

Of course they do. And they preserve the carpet.



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