

There have always been decorating rules.

There is always some sort of scripture floating around out there, like the Ten Commandments, ordaining who should do what to what, but perversely, it hasn't been widely shared. Perhaps you have to be among the initiated to be handed the rules—one of the chosen, so to speak.

Social rules tend to be more widely, perhaps democratically, disseminated. The assumption is that anyone can be polite. Part of a parent's job, I think, is to teach her children good manners. Every mother knows what a futile effort that seems to be, on the face of it. You'll tell a child how to behave, what not to do; his eyes will roll back until all you see are the whites, and that's the end of that rule. I've had a conversation with one son about manners that has lasted almost 20 years. (If you can call it a conversation. Mom: You know, you really should . . . Son: Mom, come on. No one does that.) Funny how you know, almost intuitively, what level they are prepared to handle: you get through the lesson on grabbing for the food, then on to the proper grip of fork and knife, then to not talking with a mouth full, and soon you are on to the finer points of conversation and attention. Well, at least you're moving through these levels of rules. Whether or not you are being followed is another question. When one of my sons was a teenager, and began to walk around New York City with me, I explained to him a finer point of sidewalk etiquette: the man should always walk on the street side of the woman, a rule that evolved from the days when carriages would splash onto the sidewalk, or God knows what would be thrown from windows. The man's job was to take it. My son thought this was an absurd rule, evidence of early onset etiquette senility on my part, characterized by a delusional clinging to arcane mannerisms. One day recently, that son and I were walking to the Museum of Modern Art. I had already several times maneuvered myself to the inside of the sidewalk, trying to demonstrate this point of etiquette, unsuccessfully. What a dance he led me. He literally sneered. After a few blocks we turned a corner and passed some homeless people sprawled on the steps of a church.

One man, wrapped in his blankets in spite of the 80-degree day, caught my son's eye and, with a sprightly tone to his voice, called out, "Hey, man, don't you know you're supposed to walk on the street side of the lady?"

I kid you not. My son almost fell over. Of course that only gave me an excuse to launch into one of my favorite disquisitions: the perilous condition of life, such that one wrong move might lead you to life on the street—but then I stopped myself. Why be karmically churlish? I had won that point of etiquette.

There are rules. And they were not made to be broken. Among the holiest is: *Thou shalt not* text-message people throughout dinner. We know what you are doing, fiddling with your keypad under the tablecloth. Your dinner partners know. Your hostess knows. You know. You should also know that you aren't kidding anyone into thinking that you are so important—or so mentally and socially impoverished—that you can't spare the two hours it takes to engage in a dinner.

Which gets us to decorating. If *you* are the decoration at a dinner party—i.e., in attendance—you have a responsibility to follow the rules, which are like the pattern in a wallpaper: established, regular, pleasing, predictable, neither loud nor mawkish. Just so. If, however, you are creating rooms that will, quite simply, become the background for the ebb and flow of the human

condition—the celebration, the feuding, the upstaging and downstaging, the backhandedness and the evenhandedness—then you should take all the liberties you want in your choice of decoration. Decorating rules may be handed down to the chosen few. But we will never care what they are, or when and where they operate. They may always, reliably, take the street side of the sidewalk, so to speak, in the way they try to make their rooms correct. But that only gets you so far. After all, the ones who break the rules are the ones who turn our heads.



Dominique Browning, EDITOR