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# Gentlemen regard restrooms as sanctuaries of privacy

*By Diether Haenicke  
September 09, 2009*

In an earlier column, I noted that a woman will sometimes publicly announce her departure to the ladies' lounge and that other women interpret this announcement as an invitation to join the excursion. Similar behavior in men would be met with amazement and even suspicion. I take this as another one of the many inexplicable idiosyncrasies that sets men and women apart.

Men have a different relationship to those islands of privacy, and unlike women, they don't consider them loci of gregariousness and social encounter. Men hardly ever enter restrooms for other than the obvious purposes, which they transact swiftly and with a minimum of talk. Acquaintances are greeted fleetingly, and eyes remain fixed firmly on areas above the shoulders. I always found useful my father's advice to wash my hands carefully, but to make absolutely sure that they are bone dry when leaving, so that any doubt and suspicion is removed from the mind of the first person who shakes your hand outside in the hall.

Several memories come to me in connection with men's restrooms. Most restaurants display signs reminding their employees that they must wash their hands before leaving the bathroom. Once, in a fine restaurant in Paris, my cousin Willy stood next to the chef in the bathroom and noticed that he left straight for the kitchen without stopping first to wash up at the sink. This instilled in Willy such a lasting, generic suspicion about hygienic conditions in French kitchens that, whenever in France, he would eat exclusively boiled eggs and bananas, two foods he could peel himself, confident in the knowledge that his meal had not been compromised by potentially soiled human hands.

He consumed the rest of his calories by concentrating on wine, giving no thought to the possibility that the grapes might have had contact with naked feet.

In Germany, many restaurants have personnel outside the restrooms who see to the facilities' cleanliness. One rewards them with a coin upon leaving. During my student days in Munich, we usually ate our early morning weisswurst at the Donisl beer hall, when hoards of tired women would trot in from all over town paying for their breakfasts with nothing but dimes. We started the day when the toilet women's nightshift was over.

Travelling with me in Germany, my friend Greg Dobson was once leaving such a guarded toilet but found himself without a coin. A big glass door separated the men's room from the restaurant, and I could see from the other side Greg trying to sneak by the toilet lady without paying her. However, to his horror, the glass door would not open, no matter how forcefully he pushed it. I saw the toilet lady shouting at him. Panic spread over Greg's face, because he could not explain to her his predicament in German. Had she locked the door by electronic device to stop freeloaders? After moments of agony and embarrassment, Greg was freed. Another relieved customer, also leaving, opened the door with ease by pulling it. It opened only in one direction. The toilet lady had actually meant to be helpful. She had yelled to pull, not to push, which my friend had translated as: "Hey, fellow, you pay or you are stuck in here." Nevertheless, from then on Greg made sure he had a coin when the urge arose.

Another time, standing at a urinal at LaGuardia airport, I noticed right next to me a famous face: David Brinkley. I kept concentrating on my business. But another traveler approached him and asked the well-known and temporarily quite occupied newsman for an autograph. Brinkley exploded in anger. The rest of the crowd agreed that the principle of sanctuary had been violated and drove the autograph hunter away.

Forever memorable to me are the words spoken by my former boss, Wayne State University President George Gullen. We were engaged in our own very private business in a men's room on campus when a student entered, recognized the president, and cried out: "Good morning, Mr. President!" Mr. Gullen turned around and said calmly: "Call me George, young man. In here we are all peers."

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