

Alec Baldwin just a symptom of decline



By Jay Evensen, Deseret News, Utah

Conventions may change, but not basic manners.

And so, the only difference between Alec Baldwin and the woman who shot pepper spray at fellow shoppers on Black Friday is a matter of degrees. Both were social boors whose behavior seems to be more common these days.

Baldwin made headlines — the very definition of a good day for some entertainers — when he was removed from an American Airlines plane last week while on the ground in Los Angeles. Witnesses said he was playing "Words With Friends," an online Scrabble game, and became belligerent when a flight attendant told him to turn off his device in preparation for takeoff.

The unnamed woman shopper, on the other hand, was so worried about getting an Xbox video game console that she cleared the path by shooting pepper spray at about 20 fellow shoppers at a California Walmart.

The way we treat other people, the founder of the Charleston School of Protocol and Etiquette in South Carolina told ABC News, "is not about how they are, it's about how you are."

And apparently, many of us are not well.

You can visit charlestonschoolofprotocol.com and take a quick quiz to see how well you understand manners. But while you're agonizing over which lapel is the proper one for displaying a nametag, consider that what we're talking about here is much more basic. It concerns not hurting other people while pursuing something you want.

That is a fairly basic requirement for a civil and orderly society.



The rest of what happened between Baldwin and American Airlines is a bit unclear, except for the part about how he sent several Twitter messages about the airline and its flight attendants, comparing them to "Catholic school gym teachers from the 1950's."

Here's a guess: Whatever stereotypes may have arisen about Catholic gym teachers in the '50s, they probably had a better handle on manners and etiquette than many Americans do today.

They may have been like Constance Millender, who, at age 15 in 1959, wrote an essay on manners for the Chicago Tribune. "Ways of behaving still are good or bad according to the motives they reveal," she wrote. "Good, if they show consideration for the rights and feelings of others; bad, if they show thoughtlessness, rudeness, and immaturity."

Maybe the '50s weren't so backward, after all.

It's easy to generalize, of course. Louts existed in previous generations, too. Few things are more consistent from one generation to the next than anguish over the declining manners of the current one.

In 1933, Ruth Strang, an assistant professor of education at Teachers College, Columbia University, surveyed 4,114 high school students with 100 questions about basic manners. The results were not good, prompting her to scold that, "Knowledge of social usage is often a factor in happiness and success." It is important, she said, for "good mental hygiene."

Now there's a term you probably haven't heard since the days when mothers would routinely wash foul mouths with soap.

But just because our grandparents fretted over manners the way I am now doesn't mean our worlds are the same. The handwringing wasn't for nothing. The trend has been steadily downward. Examples can be found almost anywhere, but here is one to consider. In 1925, the New York Times reported that Brooklyn's new Jefferson High School would allow student dances so long as students followed the rules of proper behavior. This included maintaining correct posture while dancing and allowing for one waltz "about every fourth selection."

By 2004, according to a reviewer at insideschools.org, students entering Jefferson each day had to pass through metal detectors. Three years later, the school was closed because of its dismal attendance record and low graduation rates. Posture wasn't even a consideration.



Baldwin and Black Friday shoppers are only symptoms of a greater problem. Despite all the fretting through the generations, this is a battle society is losing decisively, and the implications are frightening.

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