

Conventional

To be conventional is to follow common custom where you live. Conventionality can vary from place to place. In China it is conventional to eat with chop sticks, in Mauritania to eat with your fingers, in Iowa to eat with cutlery. Convention is not compelling. If I ask for a knife and fork, in Hunan Province, I am likely to get it, or if not to be good naturedly invited to try out the chop sticks. If I ask for chop sticks in Cedar Rapids, I am likely to get them, depending on the waitress' mood.

Examples

1 Le style français

I used to want to be, and above all to appear, unconventional. When my mother took me to France, in my late teens, I was fascinated by French public lifestyle—at that time, just after WW I. Berets, and the cocksure way my French contemporaries wore them while strolling, seemed to me the last word in bravura, and when I got back to Urbana, Illinois, I sported a beret when I went out walking. With time, however, I have discovered the joys of conventionality. I don't want to stick out. I want to be one of the crowd. Inside, to be sure, I carry—and I suspect most of us do—a pride in my uniqueness; but the last thing I want to display is that uniqueness. My type stays under the radar. You order a burrito, I take a burrito; you salute the flag, I salute the flag.

2 The flag

Conventional wisdom, in the culture I grew up in (America; 1928-45), was that 'our' country was the strongest, most benevolent, and happiest in the world. Consequently it took no effort to salute the flag and say the pledge of allegiance in school. Sometime in those years, however, I began to hear dissenting voices inside me. One day in the late thirties I went down the street to play cards with my friend, Charles, later an eminent historian but then a patriotic young ten year old, on whom nationalist fervor—war was on us!—had descended. That day we listened to the radio, and there happened to be a broadcast of some national ceremony. The National Anthem was played. Charles rose and stood at attention, hand on his heart. I had done that occasionally in the past—my family was less patriotic than his—but this time I burst out laughing. The convention had lost its power for me.