

Recent scandal out of S. Korea not just a nutty news event

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In some ways the flap about former Korean Air executive vice-president Cho Hyun-ah and an on-board snack seems too trivial for media attention. After all, I am quite sure that every flight attendant in the world could tell story after story about hard-to-please customers and silly antics on airplanes. This story is especially interesting, however, because it is a story of extremes.

Imagine all the tragic news, the disappointing news, the shocking news that has caught international and local attention these past 14 days. You'd have thought that by now, this blow up over a bag (not a bowl!) of macadamia nuts would have been easily forgotten. News three days ago on the situation focused on a prosecutor's investigation into whether obstruction of justice has occurred. This insures more shelf life yet for an event that began as a mere temper tantrum, quickly turned into a gargantuan ego trip, and has, say some, shamed all of South Korea.

It really is obvious that sometimes it is the undeniable extremes of an incident that cause us to pause and think. That appears to be so here with the story of the airline executive and a handful of nuts. The extremes? Well, the story is so extremely silly.

A passenger objects vehemently to being served a few mouthfuls of macadamia nuts not in a bowl but, my goodness, in an ordinary, unopened little plastic bag. Imagine such an offense!

Well, after all, a bag you must open by yourself. A bag is not at all like a bowl. Now, a bowl is user-friendly. But you have to scrutinize a darn bag of nuts, or little envelop with them inside, whatever you want to call the package. It is stressful and time-consuming to locate the nearly invisible perforation at one end or the other of the bag, you know, that little slit in the side of the plastic that you're supposed to grab and tear. Who wants all that trouble?

Once you locate the perforation, you still have to tear the package open, and woe to you if you have a hang nail. Look out, I say. If you're not careful getting to the macadamia nuts inside that sack, you're likely to screw up even the best of manicures and cause yourself untold grief.

Then there's the touch of class you miss with a bag of macadamia nuts on a flight as contrasted to a bowl of them. We won't go into that here, but class is always important, and we all know that, even if we feel uncomfortable admitting it.

This thing about class spurs our awareness of another extreme here, the fact Ms. Cho is the daughter of the chairman of the board that directs Korean Air and was, at the time of the brouhaha, a vice-president of the airline. That is a fine example of what we call pedigree, "class" in a special way.

What a pity that flight attendants may not be aware of the extremely big mistakes they are capable of making. All employees of a family-run business know two things. They know when quitting time is, and they know the golden rule. The golden rule is: always keep the owner of the company and members of the owner's family happy. In the case of the bagged, not bowled macadamia nuts, the ill-fated flight attendant was doubly vulnerable. The offended passenger was not only the boss's daughter but, oh no, in some sense, a mini-boss as well. Talk about bad luck!

Because the disgruntled customer was so, ah, "high classed," she was able to do extreme things. She was able to command the pilot to turn around on the runway, return to the gate of JFK International Airport, and toss the offending employee off the plane. Reportedly, Ms. Cho's outburst included behavior even more extreme than what I have described. Contemplating when I've just written, humor aside, a few questions arise in my mind.

Although I am but a small cog indeed in a big machine, do I occasionally make myself a problem for others because of who I am or who I think I am? How can I make life more pleasant for those around me? What does this story suggest I do when I feel upset or offended? Finally, if I hurt others by making a jerk of myself, do I apologize? Ms. Cho has in fact apologized several times now.

Good for her. (Daniel J. Bauer SVD is a priest and associate professor in the English Department of Fu Jen Catholic University.)

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