

“The Kindness of a Stranger”  
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This is a time of year when a lot of us are thinking about gifts. If we're mature, we're thinking more about the gifts we're giving, and not so much about the ones we're hoping to receive! But I find I'm also thinking about some of the gifts I've received over the years. And not just the kind that come in packages. And not just at this time of year.

Sometimes, some of the most appreciated gifts we ever receive aren't material things at all. They're acts –acts of generosity and kindness.

We all have those times when we're not feeling strong, when we'd really like to have someone to lean on. Or we may not even be looking for help. All we know is that we're in a tough spot and we don't know what to do.

I remember a time many years ago when I was the young mother of a three-year-old girl and a two-month-old baby boy. We had just spent a couple of hours at Musikfest, Bethlehem's annual music festival. It was August and we were all hot and the baby was getting hungry. I got the kids back to the car, which I had parked on the street. We got in, put the windows down and I prepared to nurse the baby. In a minute, I heard a horn honking. There was this guy, waving at me saying, “Are you going to be leaving?”

One of the not-so-great things about Musikfest is that parking is always at a premium, and Musikfesters creep up and down the city streets, like tigers on the hunt, ready to pounce on any available parking space.

“No,” I shook my head. A minute later, another car cruised up beside me, with the driver asking if I was leaving. “No,” I said.

Again and again, drivers looking for a space stopped and asked me if I was leaving. I happened to have a baby who needed a quiet and calm place to settle down and nurse. All three of us were hot and frustrated. Clearly, we were getting nowhere.

A moment later, the face of an elderly woman with pale blue eyes appeared outside my door. I was about ready to tell her to buzz off, when she said, “Excuse me. I live in that house right there. Would you like to nurse your baby on my front porch and we can all have some lemonade?”

Who is this woman? My fairy godmother?? My mouth fell open and I stammered, “Oh, uh, yes. Please. That would be wonderful.” I almost cried right then and there.

She led us up the steps onto her elegant Victorian porch. We sat on her porch furniture; she brought my daughter and me glasses of lemonade, and my son was finally able to nurse in peace.

I think in order to appreciate the story fully, you have to understand the dynamics in Bethlehem during Musikfest. People in Bethlehem for the most part do not like the festival. The crowds, the cars, the closed-off streets can make life very unpleasant for residents. Many of them resent the festival-goers. Back in those days, I lived in Emmaus. So, technically, I was her enemy.

She could have been very annoyed at me and all the people who were making noise on the street outside her house, jockeying for a parking space. But she apparently saw a young mother in need, and that trumped those artificial divides between the residents and the festers. I will always be grateful to this woman who offered me a quiet place to nurse my baby.

When someone is kind to us, that act of kindness triggers something within us. It breaks us out of our sense of existential loneliness. Someone has seen us, has recognized us. They have tuned in to us, hearing the need and coming to answer it. We are alone among strangers, but through this connection we realize that we are not truly alone after all.

We tend to expect love and kindness from our family and friends, and so when a kind act comes from a stranger, it can have an exquisitely sweet and precious quality. We have done nothing to ingratiate ourselves with the stranger; we have not earned their favor; an offer of help is not presumed nor is it expected.

These gifts of kindness can be very powerful. I read about a woman who was in a serious car accident far from home. She had to be hospitalized for three weeks, then had to go to physical therapy.

“There I was,” she said, “all by myself in a strange area far from friends and family. When the staff realized I had no one, they came to sit with me and brought their church group to cheer me on to recovery. They were total strangers, but I have never felt so loved.”

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Being a recipient of the kindness of a stranger can say to us, “You matter.” “Your well-being is important, simply because you are you.” The details about our lives – what we believe, who we vote for, who we love – are not important. These simple gifts of kindness can be things that we remember all our lives.

A friend of mine who’s a construction worker told me about a time he was driving late at night and one of his tires got a flat. So he pulled over and changed the tire. Just as he was putting the old tire in the back of his van, he noticed that another one of his tires was also flat. This was in the days before cell phones, and he wasn’t sure what he was going to do.

A truck driver appeared and offered to help. “Matt,” my friend, explained the situation. The truck driver said, “I know a place down the road that can fix that tire for you on the spot. Grab the tire and hop in.” But Matt was reluctant. “I’ve got all my tools in my van. I can’t take the chance of leaving it here and having it broken into.”

The truck driver wasn’t fazed. “Here, give me the tire. You stay here. I’ll get it fixed for you, and bring it back.” So Matt handed over the tire and \$10. He wasn’t sure he’d see either the truck driver or the tire again. But an hour later, the driver was back with the now-fixed tire. He helped Matt mount it on the wheel. When they were done, Matt tried to give the guy some money, but he just shook his head and wouldn’t take it. “You gotta let me do something for you, buddy,” Matt said. “Naw,” said the truck driver. “Just pass it forward.”

“Just pass it forward.” The woman who was hospitalized said because of her experience she realizes how much power there can be in kindness, and she tries to bring that to others.

I think there is even more significance to these moments of kindness by one stranger toward another. Moments like these help us to feel connected to another person –not because of our family relationship, or friendship, or any other kind of relationship, but simply on the basis of our common humanity. Sometimes these moments feel almost sacred. They can feel like divine love, pure and unadulterated. Some people would say that these acts of kindness are examples of “God with skin,” God acting through other people.

I’m reminded of another story; maybe you’ve heard it or a version of it.

A torrential rain storm hits a town. A warning goes out that the riverbanks are starting to overflow and there’s going to be a flood. Everyone in the town is ordered to evacuate.

This one man decides to stay. He says, “I’m going to trust God and if I am in danger, then God will send a divine miracle to save me.”

The neighbors come by his house and say, “Come on! Get in the car!” But the man says, “Oh, no. I have faith that God will save me.” The water gets higher.

A woman in a canoe paddles by and says, “Hurry; get into my canoe!” But the man says, “No thanks, God will save me.” The water gets higher.

A motorboat comes by and the people yell, “Come on! Get in!” But the guy says, “That’s OK. I have faith that God will save me!” At this point the water is so high the guy has to stand on his roof.

A helicopter spots him and drops a rope ladder. A rescue guy comes down the ladder and says, "Grab my hand and I will pull you up!" But the man STILL refuses. He folds his arms and says, “No thank you! God will save me!”

So, pretty soon, the floodwaters sweep the man away and he drowns.

This is a Universalist story, so of course the man goes to heaven. He stands before God and says, "I put all of my faith in You. Why didn't You come and save me?"

And God says, "Let's see here. I sent you a warning. I sent you a car. I sent you a canoe. I sent you a motorboat. I sent you a helicopter. What more were you looking for?"

Whether or not you see random acts of kindness as appearances of "God in skin," or the universe shining on us, or as revelations of the goodness of humankind, at this time of year, we are often reminded of the generosity and kindness of strangers, as people get into what we call "the Christmas spirit."

The kindness of a stranger is an act that is at once personal and universal. It is personal because it is directed toward US and our needs; it is also universal in that it is a gesture that points to the essential connectedness of all humanity.

May we be forever grateful to these strangers who were there when we needed them. And may we find opportunities to "Pass it forward." May it be so.