

Everyday Charity

Making someone's day is easier than you think.

"Wow, that floor looks so shiny. You're doing a great job."

I'm not sure what prompted me to say it. Walking across the marble floor of a building lobby, I happened to notice the middle-aged woman in the maintenance uniform. She had both hands on the buffing machine, and was carefully peering for spots that may have been missed.

Well, she turned and just looked at me for a moment. Then her face suddenly broke out in a warm, touching grin of gratitude. She looked directly at me and whispered "thank you," holding in her voice and, just perhaps, her emotions.

Such as it was, it was clear she personally cared about being great at her job, and that's sometimes not as common as it should be.

I also knew intuitively that she hadn't gotten a compliment for her extra efforts, from her boss or anyone else, for a very long time.

I tried to hold that lesson in my heart, and have since, on occasion, offered a word of positive input to workers in public who no one else seemed to notice. The guy carefully stacking apples in the produce department. The parking lot attendant working alone, late at night. It could be anyone. "Glad you're here!"

People of all races, people of all ages, people of all stations in life. People whose stories just might break your heart.

It's also occurred to me that this inexpensive form of random charity can be bestowed by what one doesn't say as well as what one does say.

Back at the supermarket, this time standing in line behind an elderly gentleman who was fumbling with his wallet, looking for the PIN number to complete his transaction. Finally realizing I was there, he looked up and said, I'm sorry, I hope you're not in a hurry.

I was, of course. But I swallowed that small nugget of irritation, because I've been around long enough to know when the universe is trying to teach me a lesson. No problem my friend, I said as cheerily as I could. Take your time.

Don't get me wrong; I'm no saint. No doubt I miss more opportunities to spread a little sunshine than I notice. Because, well, I'm probably plowing along as usual, lost in thought about the things in my life that aren't perfect.

But I know one day I'll be that older fellow fumbling at the checkout line, and it would sure be nice if the shopper behind me offers a warm look instead of a cold one.

In the meantime, I'll try to remember that my few regrets in life have nothing to do with what I've done. Just what I could have done, for others, and didn't. There may be no act more spiritual than giving, without expectation of return; it lifts both the giver and the receiver.

So watch for those little opportunities yourself, okay? Everyone you see needs to feel appreciated. Everyone you see is struggling with something. In fact, you'll never know whether your kind word and smile pulled somebody, somewhere, back from the edge.

- Tom Tortorici

