

CHRISTMAS GOODWILL

It's one of those major chilly days, a week before Christmas in New England, when I prefer not to leave the warmth of home. Even so, my coat is on and I'm out the door headed for the grocery store. Having arrived in the pre-holiday congestion, I wrap myself up warmly and begin walking briskly towards the store entrance. It wasn't the sound of the Salvation Army volunteer's robust bell that drew my attention, but the fact that her chapped red hands were clasped around cold metal without winter gloves.

As I stood by her side, offering a few dollars into the bright red can, I asked, "How come you're not wearing gloves, aren't your hands freezing?" Her response was startling. "I don't have any gloves. A hat and coat are what I have." Stunned by her response, I thanked her for volunteering, she thanked me for contributing, and we parted ways. Inside the store, I kept replaying what happened just moments ago. My compassionate heart wouldn't let it go.

With shopping list in-hand, I walked up and down several aisles lost in a mirage of thoughts about what to do. This went on for quite some time until I rounded yet another aisle, and landed directly in front of a display stand of winter hats and gloves. Suddenly my mind was clear in the face of this synchronicity. The right thing to do was to offer the Salvation Army woman a pair of gloves.

Feeling a sense of inner peace in this resolve, I immediately abandoned my shopping cart and exited the store. When I arrived at the Salvation Army post expecting the woman to be there, she and the bright red donation can were nowhere in sight. So, I retraced my steps, walked back into the store, and joined the line at the customer service desk.

Twenty minutes later and the number of people in line had significantly swelled in size. All around me the impatience of waiting had caused the energy to go heavy and flat. My attempt to lighten up the space was pretty much met with despondency. This long line of exasperated people with whom I was sharing space was devoid of holiday spirit.

Finally my turn had come. After asserting my question about the whereabouts of the Salvation Army woman, I was cordially asked to step aside and wait for the store manager. In the time it took for the manager to arrive, it seems that my unusual customer service inquiry had contributed to the already weird energy. People in line were looking at me like 'you've got to be kidding!' Not to say that such a reaction is unheard of especially when people are impatient to move on. The opportunity to practice tolerance comes in many forms.

Soon enough I learned from the store manager that the Salvation Army woman was on a smoke break. It was suggested that I hang out for fifteen minutes and then set out to find her again. My initial reaction upon hearing this was whether I wanted to pursue this compassionate

pursuit any longer. I had already hung out a lot longer than I intended to, and hadn't even begun tending to my shopping list. Needless to say, I was feeling a bit self-conscious at this point having walked up and down the same aisles many times without putting any items in my shopping basket. If caught on camera, I might have looked like a suspicious character with something up her sleeve.

During my aimless store walkabout, I had plenty of time to think about how daily life offers each of us constant opportunities to 'walk on by' or 'take a stand' for making a positive difference. Extending generosity and kindness isn't always quick and easy, certainly not today.

I returned to the Salvation Army post to extend my offer to which Salvation Army woman let me know that she couldn't accept gloves because she couldn't pay me back. It took a great deal of effort for me to find a way into this 'sister's' heart. Perhaps she was not accustomed to being offered gifts or had difficulty in receiving gifts. Finding the words that gained entrance, she finally opened to receive my gesture of thanks for her volunteer time during the Christmas Season. Linking arms, like dear ole' friends, we entered the store. I will never forget the eyes of workers and customers staring at the sight of the two of us together. You know... that old worn out story of how judging appearance causes people to stare.

We made our way to the glove rack for her to inspect the array of gloves. Watching her peruse each unique pair was like watching the spirit of joy burst open in a child. I will always remember the beautiful sight of gratitude shining from her eyes in that moment of making her choice.

Standing at the check-out counter paying the cashier, 'sister with gloves' extends to me a high five gesture of appreciation and goes on her way. A lovely transaction has come to a close and I am grateful that I saw it through. As I begin to take my leave, the store manager and several observant customers have congregated around me. Unexpectedly, I'm being showered with congratulations for my goodwill deed. It appears that what they have witnessed is special, rare, and unusual. Inasmuch as I find that sad, I can relate to their response.

Everyday living offers us plentiful opportunities to slow down our all-important pace and plans to make caring and sharing a priority. Doing so is a blessing that uplifts the world one loving kindness deed at a time setting hearts aglow as a result. More hearts glowing makes for a glowing world! In the words of Amma (India's hugging saint): "God has no hands, legs, eyes or body other than our own. He moves through our hands, He walks with our legs, He sees through our eyes, and it is He who beats within the heart of each one of us." I invite you to visit <http://www.ammany.org/amma.php> to learn more about the extraordinary mission of Amma.