

"The Sources of Hope: The Kindness of Strangers"

Reading and sermon preached by Reverend Carolyn Patierno

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"Gate A4" Naomi Shihab Nye

After learning my flight was detained 4 hours,
I heard the announcement:
If anyone in the vicinity of gate 4-A understands any Arabic,
Please come to the gate immediately.

Well—one pauses these days. Gate 4-A was my own gate. I went there.
An older woman in full traditional Palestinian dress,
Just like my grandma wore, was crumpled to the floor, wailing loudly.
Help, said the flight service person. Talk to her. What is her
Problem? We told her the flight was going to be four hours late and she Did this.

I put my arm around her and spoke to her haltingly.
Shu dow-a, shu- biduck habibti, stani stani schway, min fadlick, Sho bit se-wee?

The minute she heard any words she knew—however poorly used—she stopped
crying.

She thought our flight had been canceled entirely. She needed to be in El Paso
for some major medical treatment the following day. I said no, no, we're fine;
you'll get there, just late, who is picking you up? Let's call him and tell him.
We called her son and I spoke with him in English.
I told him I would stay with his mother till we got on the plane and would ride
next to her—Southwest.

She talked to him. Then we called her other sons just for the fun of it. Then we
called my dad and he and she spoke for a while in Arabic and found out of
course they had ten shared friends. Then I thought just for the heck of it why not
call some Palestinian poets I know and let them chat with her. This all took up
about 2 hours. She was laughing a lot by then. Telling about her life. Answering
questions.

She had pulled a sack of homemade mamool cookies—little powdered sugar
crumbly mounds stuffed with dates and nuts—out of her bag— and was offering
them to all the women at the gate.

To my amazement, not a single woman declined one. It was like a sacrament.
The traveler from Argentina, the traveler from California, the lovely woman from

Laredo—we were all covered with the same powdered sugar. And smiling. There are no better cookies.

And then the airline broke out the free beverages from huge coolers— non-alcoholic—and the two little girls for our flight, one African American, one Mexican American—ran around serving us all apple juice and lemonade and they were covered with powdered sugar too.

And I noticed my new best friend—by now we were holding hands—had a potted plant poking out of her bag, some medicinal thing, with green furry leaves. Such an old country traveling tradition. Always carry a plant. Always stay rooted to somewhere.

And I looked around that gate of late and weary ones and thought, this is the world I want to live in. The shared world.

Not a single person in this gate—once the crying of confusion stopped —has seemed apprehensive about any other person.

They took the cookies. I wanted to hug all those other women too.

This can still happen anywhere.

Not everything is lost.

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Like the poet, I want to live in the shared world. I believe that for the most part, I do live in the shared world. "The inherent worth and dignity of all people" is something to take seriously if one signs up to be part of this faith. We commit to keeping hope kindled.

But on some days, I get smacked in the head with something like this.

I needed stamps. On Friday afternoon I took a deep breath as I stepped into the cool, dark of the post office ... who knows how long the line and always – always – just one window open. But it was my lucky day! No line. And TWO windows open. The stamps are great: a baseball series and post card stamps with apples. I admire the apples all in a perfect stamp-row.

And the stamps make me think of the perfect apple sitting on my desk like the prettiest girl at the dance, all sure of herself. My afternoon snack. But then, I'm distracted. How about a treat? A treat on this perfect spring afternoon.

The prettiest girl at the dance beckons: healthy. Crisp. I'm singing the apples praises but my feet take me to the Washington Street Coffee House where I hear myself order an orange carrot scone. And there is David Gonzalez Rice. We have a lovely and brief visit. I continue on back to the church – the scone so delicious and spring-afternoon-perfect.

And I no sooner get to Huntington Street when I realize that I am no longer holding the stamps. No big deal. I return to the coffee shop.

But the stamps are not at the table where David is sitting nor are they on the counter, although the young woman behind the counter remembers that the stamps had been in my hand. I retrace my steps from the coffee house to Huntington Street. Nothing. I can't believe they're gone so I return to the coffee house and now the young woman behind the counter just stares at me, like I've kind of lost my mind. Which, I guess, I have.

Because I begin to feel like my day is crumbling into finer crumbs than that of the fine scone that I decide to blame for this conundrum. But really, my heart is not breaking because the stamps have gone missing. Rather it's the missing kindness of some – any – stranger. In life, I expect that people will do the right thing, for example, return the stamps. Run after me shouting, "Hey lady! You forgot your stamps!" Or lacking that, a small offer of sympathy, "Bummer. Those stamps are really gone. That's weird. So sorry about that."

But: nothing. Nothing of the sort happens. I struggle with the truth that yeah, somebody took my stamps. And inherent worth and dignity notwithstanding, that stinks.

So we're backing up into this idea. In the absence of kind strangers, life can feel pretty awful for all sorts of big reasons – much bigger than pretty fortunate me losing some postage stamps. We are all at one time or another the woman Gate A4: alone, confused, desolate and in desperate need of kindness – any small kindness from a stranger will do – and does pull us out of our despair and you catch the plane. You maintain your sobriety for another day. You pay the bill. You hold onto your house. You find the Teddy bear.* You are treated with dignity.

In the wake of the travesty of violence in Boston, this congregation created the Random Act of Kindness Week. In the wake of the Newtown shooting, the affected families asked that people commit to 26 acts of kindness – one for each Soul perished on that terrible day. When violence rains down and the resulting loss incomprehensible; kindness is the only foil because kindness breeds hope. And hope is all you need.

Last Monday was a Red Letter Day for hope kept kindled through the kindness of strangers. Front page of *The Day* this headline: "Community rallies to help out ailing Groton couple." Struck with multiple myeloma, Cindy Grant of Groton was at a loss because her beloved husband, John, has multiple sclerosis. That's two too many "multiple" illnesses for one family. Their community rallied. A pasta dinner, not a free seat, people leaving early so others could eat. A bingo fundraiser will follow.

Onto the Region section. Again, the front page: "'Convoy for care' returns to assist parents of slain children". Remember that horrible incident: two children shot by their mentally ill grandmother? A gesture of support – a convoy of trucks. Said the angel at the helm of this effort, "I figured, there's something we could do to help. Something we all love to do is drive our trucks." Donate \$20, ride together down a set route and congregate at the end to present the proceeds to the family. \$1000 was raised.

Add to those this magnificent headline: "Help for New London's homeless makes great strides" Over 300 people participated in the Walk for the Homeless last Sunday, many for the first time, to raise funds for the Homeless Hospitality Center. Exuberance was in the air: all those people embodying the kindness of strangers.

Blanche Dubois famously says that she has "always depended on the kindness of strangers." She says this as a nice man is leading her off to a mental institution in the play *A Streetcar Named Desire*. The character is of course fragile, despairing, and lonely. For those who are familiar with the play, or familiar only with this iconic line from the play, "the kindness of strangers" is sometimes dismissed as an overly dramatic ploy for support when one might just as well help oneself.

Such a dismissal is wrong.

Because there is profound power in random acts of kindness – as much for the person offering the kindness as for the one receiving the kindness. Christian scripture encourages us: "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing so some have entertained angels unaware." Hebrews: 13:2 The poet at the airport, for example. At first she hesitates: "one pauses these days." But the despairing woman who soon becomes her best friend. The stranger who travels with a potted plant in order to stay grounded ... who travels with cookies that sprinkle powdered sugar and joy upon every hand that accepts her kindness ... that stranger becomes for the poet the angel that brings her to the place where she yearns to dwell: in the shared world. All because she took a chance.

And when you continually take a chance on random kindness to strangers the barriers that used to make you pause before doing so start to melt away until you are doing so as a matter of course. Take Maria Bareiss, for example. Our wonderful Maria. On Friday early evening I was driving up Truman Street, just near Jason's furniture, when I spotted Maria walking up the sidewalk. She looked intensely determined for someone who I thought was about to shop for some furniture. But when I followed her downward gaze, I saw that there was a man lying face up on the sidewalk. I began to pull over when I realized there was no need. Maria had it covered. I looked up ahead and saw her car, lights flashing. She'd apparently seen the man and had pulled over to help. "Maria!" I shouted. "Good going!" (Your minister is everywhere and sees all.) Later we texted. Me: I'm so grateful that you are in the world. Maria: Was going to assure you that I think he'll be okay. I left when the fleet of paramedics showed up.

This kindness and so many kindnesses just like it are a powerful source of hope. It is hope against loneliness. It is hope against fear. It is hope against violence and loss. And the seed to this hope is within each one of us. Look to the post-its! Be inspired. Be kind. Be hopeful.

Amen.

* A reference to the Story for All Ages, *The Teddy Bear* by David McPhail