

**Two Encounters on the Cusp of Christmas,  
One Random, the other not so much  
A Brief Reflection on the Nature of Gifts**

Yesterday morning in the corridor between the Café and WIC space I was jolted out of my miasma, the lingering aftereffect of mistakenly watching the man put in the White House by the Electoral College standing on a stage displaying his trademark Darth Vader smirk surrounded by a group of sycophants and enablers while they lavished praise on him and themselves for apparently successfully stealing even more money out of the U.S. Treasury, by a voice, tinged with pain, "Mistah, can you help me?"

Female, my guess mid to late thirties, frizzy multi-colored hair, weathered copper complexion and tears streaming down her face.

"I'm hungry . . ." "She yelled at me", "I want to cook this," waving a microwavable package in front of me. "Please help .."

"She was mean to me."

Then, as I struggled to focus she launched into the 'scene stopper' "I want to talk to the boss here, you know, do you know the big boss?"

Oh dear.

"Well there are many bosses here, do you have a social worker, you know, a person you talk with."

The murmur of a name then she yelled at me "I got this anxiety" more tears.

"You know she's (the caseworker whose name I didn't catch) a really nice person, try talking with her. I'm sure she'll understand."

An unconvincing "OK" ended our conversation as I returned to my lamentations about our culture's 'fall from grace.'

Less than an hour later I was walking through the Common Ground when I spotted the same woman sitting beside a desk talking with the SHADOWS case manager.

Ah, one of our guests.

Now she looked up as I passed by and greeted me with a big smile, lighting up her face, and said "We're communicating. I feel good."

"You know, I'm happy for you. I really like the way your face looks now."

A day earlier, in the same corridor after exiting a meeting I was greeted by another voice accompanied by a smile.

"Chico"

There was Elizabeth heading toward me.

"I looked for you yesterday but you were out."

A big hug.

"Elizabeth, it's wonderful to see you. How are you doing?"

The last couple of years have been challenging ones for Elizabeth. Two major brain surgeries. She's finally able to come back on a very limited basis. Time will tell if she's able to do more.

Everybody Matters needs to be brought to life at the front door to ensure that the words are more than a mere tagline or slogan.

Before her illness, Elizabeth anchored the front desk at 7 Bishop. Often she was the first person someone saw or interacted with after entering the building.

As we catch up I try to convey to Elizabeth how important she is to us, to our culture, to me. We part with hugs and smiles.

Later yesterday morning as I stop by the Joan Brack Learning Center's holiday lunch and watch as our students and teachers enjoy each other's company, marveling at the fact that each of the six occupied continents (yes, even Australia/Oceania) are represented, two thoughts cross my mind:

"We are all in this together."

"Yes, this cultural vision which rejoices in diversity and economic justice is worth fighting the oligarchs pandering to the nativists and mini Ayn Rands for."

Two smiles, one from a staff, one from a guest, one from a familiar face, one from an unfamiliar face.

What cool gifts.

Jim Cuddy  
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