

Golden Moments in Unlikely Places

By Maurice Carter in The Covington News – March 31, 2013

I heard the whoosh of a sliding door and the hurried clip-clop of a man's shoes on the tile floor, but I couldn't see him as the elevator doors closed across my view. I reached hesitantly with my right hand, slow enough to be able to tell myself "I tried." It was almost too late when I extended my finger to press the button and open the doors. A fellow business traveler lurched into elevator. "Thanks," he said, exhaling as he fell back against the wall.

Mine was a small gesture, not heroic or out of the ordinary. It was one of the millions of mundane moments that fill the space around the highlights of our human existence.

But, why did I press that button? I was deep in my own struggle – worn down by a tough week of business travel, rushing to get from the rental car return to the ordeal of airport security screening. Yet, in that moment, I wasn't seeing through my own tired eyes, but with those of a man watching doors shut in his face. I recalled how I feel when life is making things tough and nothing is going right. I had a chance, in a very small way, to make something go right for someone else. So, I did.

It was a reminder of another scene seven days earlier at the very same airport, headed to catch the exact same flight.

The security line to my concourse was long last Thursday, but no longer than normal. I'd arrived in plenty of time so I could settle in for an important conference call before boarding my flight. My fellow travelers seemed of a similar mind, accepting the delay and trudging towards the checkpoint and the screening line beyond. I watched as a young man hurried up along the outside of the waiting line to approach the TSA agent at the desk, cutting off the next person stepping forward from our line.

The man was late for his flight and he pleaded for an expedited pass through the line. "Sir, you need to go to the end of the line," said the agent. The man persisted, and the woman held her ground. "You need to go to the back of the line and wait like everyone else here. They have planes to catch too." She was a small woman, but she wasn't budging.

The more he insisted, the firmer the woman became. The words, hand gestures, and body language were uncomfortable for those of us watching in line. "Just let him through," several muttered. By now, the time she had spent blocking him had delayed us far more than if she had just checked him through.

At last, after a long, unpleasant confrontation, the distraught young man stomped angrily to the back of our lengthening line. Almost immediately, others began pulling the poor fellow forward through the queue. "Here, get in front of me, they were saying."

One by one, they escorted him back to the front of our line, with the consent of everyone along the way.

When he reached a different checkpoint across the way, the same agent spotted him from her post. Determined to exert her power, she came across the room to again pull him from line. "Just let him go!" we said. Finally, reluctantly, she relented and the man moved on through the line. I saw him an hour later, slumped in a chair at the gate. He missed his flight.

The common thread between my elevator scene and this much more public incident in the security line is empathy. My pressing a button and the crowd pulling that man to the front of the line were driven by the same thing: our ability to put ourselves in someone else's shoes. We've all felt the frustration of just missing an elevator when you're already in a hurry. Most of us have experienced the helplessness of being stuck in a backed-up airport security line -- our blood pressure rising as the minutes left until our departure tick down.

I don't blame that agent for standing firm. She feared the chaos she believed would ensue if everyone charged to the front of the line waiving a boarding pass. She was maintaining order. But, the situation left me believing we would need far fewer rules, regulations, and enforcement if we all just trusted our empathy.

Sometimes, one rule is enough. Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. It really is golden.

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