

Erring on the Side of Generosity

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There are a lot of adages about misplaced trust and sympathies and the need to be alert and wise on being charitable and generous. I have always wondered about this and sometime even questioned it. But, growing up in India years ago, where there were poor and needy everywhere indistinguishable from cheats, it was very prudent that one is careful about whom to help.

But I got a good unexpected education from a serendipitous interaction one day in a Boston T.

Two summers ago, when my grand little ones were 2 and 5, one weekend, we decided to go to Hay Market and Quincy Market to enjoy the crowds and the jubilant atmosphere. To escape the parking issues, we decided to take the T from Alewife into Boston.

After boarding the train and when we had passed 2-3 stations, a young woman (in late 20s, and so more appropriate call her a Girl than a Woman) was coming through the train compartment with a Placard. Most passengers did not want to entertain her with whatever she was seeking.

When she came close to us, a Prosperous Gentleman seated close to us, asked for and read the Placard and then gave her a \$10 or \$20 note, pleasantly surprising her. There on she came to us, and inspired by the gesture of that Gentleman, I asked her what she was asking. She did not answer but just gave me the Placard.

Placard indicated that she is a student and she has a 3 month old baby at home. She is economically stretched now, and does not have money for taking care of the baby. She was trying to collect \$100 to take care of her baby for the coming month. She had written a lot more about her circumstances, notably of her being very sincere, a good student, but somehow got trapped into a relationship that has managed to push her under.

Some how she appeared sincere to me, and I went for my wallet, which had as usual zero cash. So I asked my daughter for some cash, and before handing me \$3 dollars, she lectured me on why I was silly and not doing the right thing. She said she sees such people all the time in and around Harvard Square. Anyways, I handed \$3 to that Girl. She was thankful and I saw a bit of glisten in her eyes as she looked at that Gentleman even as she moved away from us.

Soon I opened a conversation with the Gentleman and I asked his reasoning for giving the girl a generous amount.

He shared his reasoning in very simple terms. He felt that the Girl needed more than money - renewed trust and faith in Life and good things. He admitted he could have been totally wrong. May be she did not have any baby and everything was a spin. But, he argued, if he was little bit right, his token generosity would be handy for her as well as set her on a right path. And, if she was dishonest, he opined that his generosity would trigger some regret and remorse soon, and start mending her ways.

Either way, it was a small investment in someones life, which could only benefit her, far beyond what money alone can bring to her.

I was happy to hear and resonated with his simple philosophy. It also brought to fore the stories of my grandmother. She firmly believed that God will come knocking on her door and give her Salvation, very much along the lines of many mythological stories. So she gave generously to every mendicant who would come to her door, totally disregarding whether they were honest, needy and/or deserving.

I recalled another age old saying in my mother tongue that the world still runs only because good people exist, however small their count may be.