

Random Kindness and Senseless Acts of Beauty

It's a crisp winter day in San Francisco. A woman in a red Honda, Christmas presents piled in the back, drives up to the Bay Bridge toll booth. "I'm paying for myself, and for the six cars behind me," she says with a smile, handing over seven commuter tickets. One after another, the next six drivers arrive at the toll booth, dollars in hand, only to be told, "Some lady up ahead already paid your fare. Have a nice day."

The woman in the Honda, it turned out, had read something on an index card taped to a friend's refrigerator: "Practice random kindness and senseless acts of beauty." The phrase seemed to leap out at her and she copied it down.

Judy Foreman spotted the same phrase spray painted on a warehouse wall a hundred miles from her home. When it stayed in her mind for days, she gave up and drove all the way back to copy it down. "I thought it was incredibly beautiful," she said, explaining why she's taken to writing it at the bottom of all her letters, "like a message from above."

Her husband, Frank, liked the phrase so much that he put it up on the wall for his seventh-grade students, one of whom was the daughter of a local columnist. The columnist put it in the paper, admitting that though she liked it, she didn't really know where it came from or what it really meant. Two days later, she heard from Anne Herbert, who lives in Marin, one of the country's ten richest counties, where she house-sits, takes odd jobs and gets by. It was in a Sausalito restaurant that Herbert jotted the phrase down on a paper placemat, after turning it around in her mind for days. "That's wonderful" a man sitting nearby said, and he copied it down carefully on his own placemat.

"Here's the idea," Herbert says. "Anything you think there should be more of, do it, randomly." Her own fantasies include: 1) breaking into depressing-looking schools to paint the classrooms; 2) leaving hot meals on kitchen tables in the poor parts of town; 3) slipping money into a proud old woman's purse. Says Herbert, "Kindness can build on itself as much as violence can." Now the phrase is spreading, on bumper stickers, on walls, at the bottom of letters and business cards. And as it spreads, so does a vision of guerrilla goodness.

In Portland, Oregon, a man might plunk a coin into a stranger's meter just in time. In Patterson, New Jersey, a dozen people with pails and mops and tulip bulbs might descend on a rundown house and clean it from top to bottom. In Chicago, a teenage boy might be shovelling off the driveway when the impulse strikes. What the hell, nobody's looking, he thinks, and shovels the neighbour's driveway too.

It's positive anarchy, disorder, a sweet disturbance. Senseless acts of beauty spread. They say you can't smile without cheering yourself up a little --likewise, you can't commit a random act of kindness without feeling as if your own troubles have been lightened, if only because the world has become a slightly better place.

And you can't be a recipient without feeling a shock, a pleasant jolt. If you were one of those rush hour drivers who found your bridge fare paid, who knows what you might have been inspired to do for someone else later. Wave someone on at the intersection? Smile at a tired clerk? Or something larger, greater? Like all revolutions, guerrilla goodness begins slowly, with a single act. Let it be yours.

Don't walk in front of me, I may not follow.
 Don't walk behind me, I may not lead.
 Just walk beside me, and be my friend.