

May 24, 2019

It Made a Difference for That One...

I had in mind something very different to write about this week. It'll keep. What I was going to say was overshadowed by something in the news last weekend. It's not uncommon for me to take my cue for a Friday offering from something in the news. The most recent example was probably the March 15th "Ripped From The Headlines" piece about the admissions scandal. In that piece, I wrote about how the fallout from the scandal might impact on our work in disability services, and how it might be counteracted. I have taken the same approach to other breaking news stories periodically, suggesting how to "spin" nasty articles in the *Chronicle*, or how to prepare for fallout from reported (negative) survey data.

Over the years, I occasionally have tied *The Last Word* to other current events, from the Academy Awards, to the Olympics, to the latest release of the Beloit Mindset List. In each case, I tried to imagine how coverage of those current events might be coopted to provide some fun, unique insights into our professional world and what we do.

In this case, though, I can't think of a disability services tie in, or a way to relate what happened in the outside world that pertains directly to what we do as disability service providers. In this case, the only direct tie I see is to who we are as *people* – and who we want to be. The item in the news? Entrepreneur Robert Smith's incredible act of kindness and generosity in announcing that he will pay the student loan debt for the Morehouse College graduating class of 392 students.

It wasn't a "grand gesture." Grand gestures are deliberate acts performed to prove a point – usually proving one's commitment to a significant other. And I don't think it qualifies as a spontaneous gesture. You don't make a public promise that could cost up to \$40 million dollars without making sure that you have that kind of money to give to that stated purpose.

It was an unexpected kindness.

Unexpected kindness is the most powerful, least costly, and most underrated agent of human change. (Bob Kerrey)

Robert Smith doesn't know those 392 graduates. He isn't asking to know them, or for them to do anything for him, in return. And while he will receive a great deal of praise and public attention for his actions, I don't believe he took the step with that in mind. He would have received just as much positive publicity and praise if he had offered to pay of the debt of the ten top students in the class, or the 100 students who had the highest debt, or??? Instead, he stood at that podium and essentially said to 392 young people, "I am going to give you an opportunity. Make the most of it – whatever that translates to for you, personally."

An unexpected kindness.

None of us are in the position to do what Robert Smith did this weekend. I don't know of anyone who can, independently, provide the opportunity for such significant change for so many people at one time. But, to me, what makes his gesture so important is that he did something, for someone(s) he didn't know, that MIGHT make a difference in their lives, and he did it without expecting anything in return. I want to be like that.

Last December, an elderly neighbor lost her granddaughter (a 22-year old, within months of college graduation) to suicide. I don't now if they ever determined what drove the young woman to take her own life. To the family, knowing the reason would not have brought her back. Her parents took what seemed to me to be a remarkable step. They asked every member of the large, extended family, to do some unexpected kindness for someone in Anna's memory. To meet the charge, it had to be an act that the family member would not otherwise have done, involving someone they didn't know. This wasn't about donating to some cause in Anna's memory, or to prevent the same thing happening to someone else's child – they could do that, too, if they wanted. But what the parents asked was that everyone in the family perform some conscious act to help someone on their daughter's behalf. Her legacy would be the ripples of unexpected kindness that would begin in her memory.

I helped my neighbor think of something she could do. We went through her cupboards and basement storage and found a dozen sturdy blankets that she was never going to have need for. We put them into several large trash bags and took them down to a free kitchen, serving meals in the poorest part of the city. We arrived during their lunch "seating", with about 150 folks milling around, waiting to get into the lunchroom or having just finished their hot meal for the day. We were directed to put out the blankets on a table in the inside hallway. I have little doubt that they had been claimed – by people who truly needed them – before we made it back out to the car. Did any of those blankets change a life that day? I don't know. It doesn't matter. It was the act that was important, not the outcome.

A kindness doesn't have to be with/for someone you don't know. For example, it could be making the extra effort to make someone you know feel appreciated, or less isolated. For me, though, I would like to do more of those things because I know they are needed -- if I can help the people in my life, then I should. That is just kindness, and I would like to think I practice it as often as possible. For me, a true unexpected kindness would be making a conscious effort to do something for someone else that falls outside my comfort zone, or my scope of responsibilities (or my limited horizons, for that matter).

For me, it means doing something for someone else NOT because I should, but ***because I can.***

Janie

We rise by lifting others.

Do your little bits of good where you are. It's those little bits of good put together that overwhelm the world. (Desmond Tutu)

It is amazing how much good can get done in this world when you don't care who gets the credit.