

Be an Angel

Acts of kindness don't need to be random.

BY ROBERT SULLIVAN

ANGELS LIVE AMONG US. They look like you and me but live their days differently, doling out unexpected kindnesses from dawn to dusk. A quick example: Several years ago I was driving in New Hampshire, and I slowed at the Hooksett tollbooth to pop my quarter in the bucket. The toll-taker leaned out of the booth and put up his hand—*Stop!* He told me the fellow in front had a dollar, and rather than accept the change, he said, “Let the next three cars through on me.”

I recalled that incident after hearing about what seemed, on the surface, like a very similar one involving a man named Arthur Rosenfeld. You may have heard about him. His story unfolded last December in the drive-through line of a Starbucks in Pompano Beach, Florida, when a guy got impatient

Winging It One man's good deed inspired dozens to pass it on.





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because Rosenfeld hadn't moved his car up sufficiently enough to free up space at the microphone. The guy in back started yelling and honking. Rosenfeld, rather than giving the honker a pop in the kisser—as he could have, being a martial arts master—calmly told the barista, "Let me pay for the coffee of the guy behind me." He paid the tab for the honker, and this, believe it or not, set off a spontaneous chain reaction of people paying for the next car's coffee that lasted throughout the day.

I wondered what motivated Rosenfeld, the guy in front of me in New Hampshire, and people like them. I'm not an angel. But I figured if I could talk to them, I could learn what makes them tick. And maybe I could start acting like them.

I DECIDED TO seek answers. I'll get the least inspiring stuff out of the way first: Starbucks, it turns out, encourages the angel game. For the past couple of Christmas seasons it has run a Pass the Cheer campaign, replete with pre-printed coupons to get these "cheer chains" started and keep them going. I figured I now knew why the chain in Pompano Beach went on as long as it did, and probably why Rosenfeld acted in the first place.

With the latter assumption, it turns out I was wrong. Arthur Rosenfeld, a Yale-educated author and teacher, told me that he specializes in Chinese philosophy with a major in martial arts—ideas that underpin the practice of Tai Chi. In other words, he knows how to stay calm.

"This guy was on my tail, yelling 'Move up you idiot!'" Rosenfeld told me. "When I felt my own Irish come up, all I could think to do was to change my mental attitude. I asked the girl at the window if I could pay for guy's coffee, and instantly I regained my equilibrium."

"You didn't know about the Pass the Cheer promotion?" I asked.

"No," he said. "It was for self-centered reasons. It's a very Taoist concept. Anybody has an instinctive desire to gravitate toward the positive, and if we all tried it for ourselves, well, it's all about making the world a better place, isn't it?"

Lots of organizations other than Starbucks think so. You can give people hugs with the Random Acts of Kindness Foundation, the U.S. delegate to the World Kindness Movement. Or you can do a favor for a complete stranger with the Pay It Forward Foundation that perpetuates the philosophies of Benjamin Franklin, popularized by Catherine Ryan Hyde in her 2000 novel and the subsequent film. There are even special days and weeks. Mark your calendars for Nov. 10–16 (World Kindness Week), Nov. 13 (World Kindness Day), and Feb. 9–15 (Random Acts of Kindness Week).

Quite an angel infrastructure. But while I found Rosenfeld's motivation fascinating, I remained skeptical. What fueled other angels? What about that guy who, long ago, paid my toll in Hooksett?

I thought about other encounters I'd had with random acts of kindness. Thru-hikers (people who hike a major long trail end-to-end) know a special subspecies of seraphim called "trail angels" who leave water and non-perishable snacks by the side of the path. I had come upon such gifts in my tramping youth. As you can guess, trail angels have grown in sophistication since then. Hikers along the Pacific Crest Trail benefit particularly well. Bill and Molly Person operate as PCT angels for one month each summer out of their cabin near Donner Summit in California. The Persons pick up hikers from the trail four miles away, house them, feed them, and even deliver mail. I asked Bill why he did it.

"Hospitality to those on a journey is an ancient tradition," he told me, and then he quoted Gandhi: "You must be the change you want to see in the world."

Turns out, Bill was paying it forward. "I remembered help I received on the Appalachian Trail when I broke a tooth in 1996," he said.

"Do you ever think of getting out of the angel racket?"

"Every year I'm glad when it begins," he said, "and glad when it ends."

Rosenfeld acted to steady himself. Person acts for a psychic reward, to repay a kindness, and because he believes

Gandhi was right. But what about people who, you might say, do it professionally? A few years ago, Father Mark Connell started a school in Newburgh, New York, to help at-risk children. After Katrina hit, he led 19 students to New Orleans to help rebuild victims' homes and work in soup kitchens. Father Mark leaps into these endeavors with seeming spontaneity.

I asked what it takes to be an angel. "There are layers to that," Father Mark said. "Your question is about charity and kindness, but also the human condition." How so? According to Father Mark, lots of people approach kindness and charitable acts with an ego-centric attitude. "I have something to give, and when I do, I walk away from that experience thinking better of myself," he says. "How often we say, 'That made me feel good.'"

Father Mark thinks one solution involves ridding ourselves of the notion that we have to feel good after giving: "When I have the opportunity to be kind, I am in an experience where I might prof-

it even more from the other person than he will from me. I give, but I also receive. The other receives but also gives."

THE OTHER DAY, someone at the office brought in brownies and left them in the pantry for all of us. I still don't know who baked the treats. My son's Cub Scout pack recently chose to sing at a nursing home rather than work on their Pinewood Derby cars. My daughter Caroline's former teacher, Mrs. Cousins, showed up at a five-hour Saturday swim meet to watch her students compete.

Why? Why do these angels do it?

I finally arrived at the only possible answer, if one is to believe in angels: It does not matter. Some do it for themselves, some out of a charitable instinct, some to feel exalted, some to feel humble. No reason takes priority, and furthermore, none of them do it accidentally.

Rosenfeld, Person, and Father Mark are all conscious of their actions. Being an angel requires focus and will. It may

seem to others that these are "random" acts, but they are in fact the opposite.

Is angelhood worth your effort or mine? I think yes, because I have come to buy into the underlying thinking that dates back to Gandhi and Ben Franklin and, well, the Buddha and Krishna and Christ. Everything accumulates in this world. Old tires pile up at the dump, cities grow larger, the digital revolution leads to the iPhone that leads to the next big thing. We leave both detritus and fortune for the next generation, who adds to it in their own way.

In one heap, there are kindnesses. The thinking is that as this pile grows, the mass encourages others to help build it. Maybe some day routine kindness will be so overwhelming a presence in our life, it will seem like normalcy itself—as if that big mountain were always there, and our tolls were always free.

Robert Sullivan is the editorial director of Life Books.

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