

Rev. Kim K. Crawford Harvie
 Arlington Street Church
 9 February, 2014

Out of the Goodness of Our Hearts

Last Sunday, at the Arlington Street Zen Center's annual winter retreat, we bundled up against the cold and walked in silent, single file – a walking meditation – in the Public Garden.

Later, I asked people if they had overheard any snippets of conversation they'd found compelling. Several people had heard a young man say to two friends, "That's some good stuff!" More than likely, he was referring to whatever they were smoking, though we liked the idea that he meant us.

On the other side of the pond, we caught up to two young women just as one was saying, "... Out of the goodness of our hearts...."

It's stayed with me:

That's some good stuff.
 Out of the goodness of our hearts.

Each Sunday, we say, "The service begins when the service ends." My mind turns to Nick's, a little two-pump service station. We raised our kids across the river in Cambridge; Nicks' was on the way to almost everything. Through a long succession of tiny Volkswagens that gave way to SUVs as our family grew, we almost never filled up anyplace else.

I couldn't tell you whether or not the gas is cheap. What I could tell you is that Karim was always there, a middle-aged gentleman from Lebanon with a few days growth of beard and a few teeth missing, dressed in a dirty parka and greasy pants. I'd pull into the station and he'd say, "We love you, honey! Everything okay? Going to the Cape?" For a long time, until our friendship had crept up on us and we learned his name, Kem and I called him "Going to the Cape."

When he saw us pull in, he'd run into the station and bring out meat from his lunch. Reaching fearlessly through the back windows, he'd feed our dogs. You couldn't convince him that, as a rule, that wasn't a good idea. "We love you!" he'd say. I think he was including Nick, the owner; and Mickey the mechanic; in that "we," and though they're great guys, too, it may have just been Karim.

Over the years, the cars gave out at various times. We always had them towed to Nick's. We trusted Karim. Or we'd pull in and I'd say, "Karim, my tail light is out," and he'd say, "Don't worry, honey. I'm getting a screwdriver. The kids all right? Going to the Cape?" You'd try to pay him, and he'd say, "Don't worry!"

Karim had left his wife and children behind in Lebanon and came to America to support them. He sent money at the end of each week, the same day he visited his sister in a nearby town on his half-day off. At Christmas time, I always stopped by with baked goods. Karim seemed mortified at this giving role-reversal. It was the only time he was ever quiet.

Even after we moved west of the city, I'd try to leave time to stop at Nick's to fill my gas tank. And then one day, Karim wasn't there.

He was sick, Nick told me. For the first time in almost 20 years, except for the one time he'd gone home to Lebanon, he was out of work. It wasn't like him at all.

Not long afterwards, I pulled in again, and a young man was pumping gas. He told me Karim had lung cancer, undoubtedly contracted working with hazardous materials in a factory back in Lebanon. Karim still asked after everyone, he said; loved hearing who had come by, appreciated everyone's prayers. Insurance was covering his care, thank g*d, and there was nothing that could be done.

I walked over to Star Market, read all the get well cards, bought a thank you card, put in some cash – even though I knew Karim would hate that – and wept as I wrote, "We love you."

One morning not long afterwards, Ann Clarke told me she'd just heard a radio show about some guy in a gas station. His name was Karim.

Here's a little of the transcript of that story, entitled, "Remembering Karim: A Lifetime of Kindness."¹ Hosts Michael May and Lisa Tobin "spoke to his friends and longtime customers as part of *Kind World*, a WBUR radio series featuring stories of kindness and the profound effect a small act can have."

Audrey Zabin: "... I went by that gas station every morning, and I would beep my horn.... He'd run out from the station office, [calling,] "We love you! We love you!" and I wasn't even stopping for gas."

Larry Tish: "Your first interaction with Karim is him filling up your gas, saying, 'How you feel?' ... You sign the thing and you're off.... And then the second time, your wife's in the car – 'O, is this your wife?' So it kind of builds, and then, just, he's like your brother.... He's cooking dinner [for you]. He had a hot pot and he put it on top of the tire fixer machine, you know? This one area, it's sterile. And he would just make this food and call me whenever it was done."

Maureen Strafford: "He's kind of like a gas station therapist. He didn't talk much, but he listened deeply. I'd be ... getting my car filled up with gas, and he'd say, 'How's your mother?' And I'd start crying, because my mother was in the hospital. He just let you say what was painful."

Larry Tish: "Basically, that's all he did, all day, while he pumped gas.... Pumping the gas, there's an automated thing there, right? You just ... start it; ... that takes about six seconds. And so, really, the rest of his day was ... all about just offering little acts of kindness."

Libby Lodge: "When I found out that Karim had cancer, I felt that we had to ... show him how much we cared about him, how wonderful he was. I certainly felt that way; I hoped that other people felt that way; but I wasn't sure. We sent out one email to the neighborhood, "Karim has been diagnosed with lung cancer," and the money just started pouring in. I mean, I can't tell you. The cards that came with the money, from all over the world, people who had moved away years ago and somehow found out about it...."

¹ December 11, 2013

Cipolla Moore: His side of the room was filled with cards, flowers, food, everything. And his roommate, Bart: nothing. Nothing. And Karim told me, ‘Bart has no one.’ So he’d always offer him things, talk to Bart. And even though Karim was suffering, you know, he was taking care of Bart, too.

Bill Warner: “Karim ... wanted to be buried in Lebanon.... \$15,000 to send his body back to Lebanon.... [But] it started to become apparent that this was going to happen; people were going to make it happen....

Maureen Strafford: “Watching this very special man confront death with this amazing dignity and grace was a gift. What Karim taught me is [to] never forget the day to day; that there is this incredible beauty in a kind word, a gesture.

Larry Tish: “Everybody has pain in their life, and it affects people in different ways. But somehow, Karim just turned it into love. What would happen if [we] offered little acts of kindness seven days a week for twenty-five years? What would that do? It would do a lot, and it has done a lot.”

Karim Alagha died on December 13th, 2012. Through the generosity of a community of strangers with one unlikely man at its center, his body was returned to his hometown in Lebanon, where he was buried beside his church, as he had wanted.²

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That’s some good stuff.

Out of the goodness of our hearts: kindness.

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Another story – just a little snippet, and you can go to the BBC archive and hear the whole thing. You really want to. I just sat in my car, mesmerized, listening.

One morning six years ago, suffering unto despair with mental illness, Jonny Benjamin went to jump off London’s Waterloo Bridge.³ By grace, a stranger saw him from the other side of the bridge and approached him, talking him away from the edge until more help arrived.

² Please see Michael May and Lisa Tobin, *Remembering Karim: A Lifetime of Kindness* at wbur.org/kindworld/2013/12/11/remembering-karim-a-lifetime-of-kindness

³ The Waterloo Bridge spans the River Thames

Jonny Benjamin got help, recovered, and is now a mental health advocate. Early in January, he decided he wanted to find his rescuer. “[The police] took me away,” he says, “and I never got the chance to say thank you...”

He didn’t know his name, but he’d always thought of him as Mike. He teamed up with the mental health charity Rethink Mental Illness and, on January 13th, started a Twitter campaign, using the hashtag #findmike.

It took off. There were more than 46,000 tweets around the world, from Canada to South Africa, Australia to North America. “To be honest,” says Jonny Benjamin, “I didn’t expect to find him.” He’d been so shaken on that day he couldn’t remember what the man looked like. “It was like [looking for] a needle in a haystack,” he says.

Two weeks later, a couple of days after it went viral, a woman saw it on her phone, and knew that Johnny was not looking for Mike, but for Neil: her fiancé, Neil Laybourn. Jonny and Neil were reunited on Waterloo Bridge on January 28th, and on January 30th, the hashtag was changed to #foundmike, with over 2,000 tweets in the first hours.

Neil Laybourn says, “It was incredible [meeting Jonny] ... very emotional for both of us, and really nice to have a [happy] conclusion to it.... We’ve got on so well since we met.... It’s nice to help Jonny get some closure and talk about it....

Jonny Benjamin says meeting Neil had made him “elated.” “When I went to the bridge, I was so embarrassed about what I was going through, I couldn’t tell anyone. But that simple act of telling Neil and having him listen made all the difference.... It feels amazing: Just to be opposite him and looking into his eyes and expressing my gratitude just means so much.... [And] I’ve had messages of support from all over [the world]. It’s just fantastic that I’m able to tell people that [we’ve] finally been reunited.

Neil Laybourn, now 31, remembers, “It was a very cold day, a very windy day, and Jonny ... had [on just] a tee-shirt, and was sitting over the edge of the bridge.... It was glaringly obvious why he was there, and I saw him a few hundred yards in the distance and just ... made a beeline for him....

“I stopped because straightaway I saw someone who needed help. It’s the first instinct, [the] first reaction that came to mind.... I just [did] what I thought anybody else would do....”

“I walked up around him,” he continues, “and just calmly approached him, and I said, ‘Hi, mate, can you tell me why you’re sitting on the bridge?’ And he told me that he was going to take his life....”

“We just went from there. I just kept asking questions and wanted to engage him, and [let him know] that if he wanted to talk, I was there.”

Jonny Benjamin, now twenty-six, says, “I’d just been diagnosed with schizo-affective disorder, which is a combination of schizophrenia and depression.” He felt that morning that his life had hit “rock bottom.” “All I remember was standing on the edge of the bridge and this guy just coming up to me out of nowhere and just talking to me and saying to me, ‘Don’t do this, we can talk about this, we can go for a coffee.’”

“The pivotal moment for me was when he said, ‘You can get through this; you can get better,’ because up until that point, no one had said it would get better.... No one had given me that message; that I could get through it.

“And this stranger just coming up to me and saying, ‘You can do it mate. You can overcome anything;’ that was the turning point for me.... I’ve just been so grateful to him ever since.”⁴

Now the new friends are eager for their story to highlight issues of mental health and recovery ... and to go for that coffee.

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That’s some good stuff.
Out of the goodness of our hearts: kindness.
It gets better.

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Beloved spiritual companions,
Let us run out every morning yelling,

⁴ “Blogger reunited with stranger who saved his life,” January 30, 2014. Please see bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-london-25966935 and “#BBCTrending: How #findmike became #foundmike,” January 30, 2014 and bbc.co.uk/news/blogs-trending-25961448

“We love you!”
Remember the day-to-day.
Let people say what’s painful.
Turn pain into love.

Let’s say, You can do it mate;
you can get through it.

Let’s say, Thank you.

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That’s some good stuff.
Out of the goodness of our hearts: kindness.
It gets better.

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The service begins when the service ends.

Amen.