

Why I Keep My Heart Open Even When I've Been Deceived



By Merite Rotstein | [Tiny Buddha](#)

“You may be deceived if you trust too much, but you’ll live in torment if you don’t trust enough.” ~Frank Crane

I’m heading home with a latte in hand, listening to This American Life through my headphones when a woman sitting on a bench outside the café waves me down. She looks like she’s in her sixties with grayish brown bangs and a worn pink winter jacket. I pull my headphones out of my ears.

“Excuse me, can you tell me how far it is from here to 77 Westwood?” she asks. I take my phone out, Google map the address, and see that it’s thirty-seven minutes away in the suburbs.

“Aw, shit,” she mumbles. Spit collects at the corner of her mouth. Her teeth are yellowed and I wonder if she’s a smoker.

“What’s wrong? Where do you have to be?” My eyes rest on two leg braces leaning on the bench beside her that I hadn’t noticed before.

“My handicap transport cancelled on me at the last minute and you have to book those things like three or four days in advance, so now I’m stuck here and I need to get home.”

I ask if there is anyone that can pick her up. She shakes her head and proceeds to ask me, “How come people can be so mean?”

Apparently the person she asked for help right before me had sworn at her and told her to leave him alone, which shook up whatever faith she had in humanity.

With a heavy heart, she asks me questions I am not sure I have answers to like, why don’t people have more compassion? I can feel my heart inching out toward her. She has spoken to something in me that feels compelled to reassure her that not everyone is cold and heartless. There are good people in this world and it is important that she knows that.

Pointing to her legs she says, “This could happen to anyone.” She recounts how she had an accident but would do anything if she could just walk again to get from the bench where we were to the home where she longed to get back to.

In the five minutes I stand beside her this is what I learn: She’s getting her PhD in Child Psychology at McGill. She once had a diplomatic passport because her father used to work for the Prime Minister. She traveled all around the world with her parents and lived in Japan for many years. She is half Greek and half eastern European.

“My grandmother used to make the best gefilte fish.” Because it turns out her grandmother used to cook for the Steinbergs, a prominent Jewish family that founded grocery store chains in Quebec in the early 1900’s. At this point I take out my wallet and look at the two \$20 bills lying in there side by side.

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I start my day with a simple prayer that Marianne Williamson taught me from the book [*A Course in Miracles*](#). I ask the universe, “Where would you have me go? What would you have me do? What would you have me say, and to whom?”

Whoever I encounter that day or whatever happens, I believe in some way I am led to them. So for whatever reason, this woman sitting outside the café was put in my path.

When I hand her the bills she takes my hands in hers, and they are warm and soft. “God bless you,” She says. I look into her pale blue, kind eyes and am reminded of my grandfather’s eyes. A survivor of the holocaust, he had eyes that were deep wells of untold pain and stories and kindness.

I’m happy to prove that there are good people out there, that the universe is a kind place.

She tells me I did a “mitzvah,” clearly familiar with Jewish vernacular. I ask her how to say thank you in Japanese and she proceeds to delight me with a few sentences. I say goodbye and head home to tell my husband Dan about the woman on the bench I just met.

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The story could have ended there, but it’s what happened the following day that threw me off balance.

I was walking back from doing some errands when a woman caught my eye. She was sitting on a ledge outside the YMCA talking to another woman standing beside her. I positioned myself so that the sitting woman couldn’t see me, but I could still overhear their conversation. It went something like this.

“I’m sorry but my transport cancelled and I need to get home. Can you check on your phone how far it is?”

My heart dropped and I could feel my face getting hot. I stood there for a moment in shock watching as stranger after stranger continued to stop for her, wanting to help.

I went home and recounted the story to Dan. As I spoke, I felt my emotions transform from anger to utter confusion. I asked myself, was she really disabled? Was she really a student? What was true and what was just a story to pull at the hearts of strangers passing by? Did it even matter? I wasn't sure.

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