

A Passing Stranger

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One bone-chilling rain-storming February morning, I was at a fast food restaurant, intensely prepping for the college class I teach. My downward glance apprehended the vision of bare feet exposed to winter by flip-flops, followed by uncovered legs, a sundress, sweater, see-through plastic shopping bag, and one lone pink curler atop the head of a middle-aged woman, who was now at my table asking for spare change. Internally, I rolled my eyes at the interruption, then gave her some cash.

Ah! A return to reading! But then, a counter commotion over her ordering more food than she had money caused me to get up again. Sheesh!

Finally, no interruptions! My chapter that day was about relational influence. How significant others treat us shapes us. However, even one passing stranger can help shape us, too, if the person makes a lasting impression.

Reflecting on this concept, I thought perhaps I could immediately apply it by way of offering this woman more than just cash. I could offer my company. Therefore, with her permission, I sat down and asked her questions, like how she happened to become homeless, if she had family, etc. She answered my questions willingly, making no excuses for herself or her life.

Her father had been a violent, abusive man who beat her mother. The woods behind their house became a place to which she fled. When I asked her what she did out there, she said with passion, "Why, I prayed!" Her mother had taught her that.

When the child was 12, her mother disappeared, and that was the last anyone saw of her. Life then became twice as hard. The girl took over her mother's role while still attending school, including cooking, keeping house, making sure her younger siblings got off to school, and being violated. It was an impossible life. When she was 16, she ran away.

As far as I could tell, it had been a tough life for years. Filled with personal agony over her life traumas, I blurted, What keeps you going, anyway? She looked at me with sincere eyes, and said straight out like it was obvious, "Why, I ask for help, and it comes."

Amazingly, she appeared to have little self-pity, or even lack of self-respect. Her calm uncomplaining response stunned me into humility. Why? Because I doubt I would have had her hopeful and self-effacing attitude had our situations been switched. After all, wasn't I the person who had just griped heartily about having had my reading interrupted twice? Suddenly this person with a pink curler and bare feet seemed to have so much more dignity than I. I felt embarrassed for myself.

I don't think she had any sense of her impact on me, but I was keenly aware of a desire to be more like her. Yes, a passing stranger, just by sincerely being who they are, can make a positive and lasting impression.

Source: HeroicStories.com