

A BRIEF MEDITATION ON LEADERSHIP

This piece contains four encounters that occurred recently and ends with an observation or reflection. The names in the essay have been altered to insure some degree of confidentiality for the folks I'm writing about.

Thursday, 7:45 a.m.

I'm walking to the back door of the building. My head's down, kind of lost in thought about what the day will bring, when I hear a voice, "Hi Mr. Cuddy." I look up and see Stephanie getting ready to climb into the passenger seat of a van with one of our Ready, Willing and Able crews. Stephanie is a young woman of 22 or 23, thick glasses and quite a few earrings. I've gotten to know her over the past few months and have been impressed by her sweet personality. Stephanie was referred to us by her sister, a former Board member, who was allowing Stephanie to crash on her couch. Stephanie had wound up here after fleeing from a domestic violence situation down south. She had a two year old son who we needed to come up with a plan for and what we wound up doing was placing her in SHADOWS, and making arrangements to have her mom come in from the West Coast and take temporary custody of her son. The abusive father seemed to be out of the picture, or at least out of the picture to the point where Stephanie didn't seem worried. So, we placed her at SHADOWS and got her hooked up with Ready, Willing and Able, and then began to work on a long-term plan with her.

"Hi Steph, how's it going today? What's been happening?" Stephanie proceeded to tell me about the small apartment she was lining up and the plans to have her son join her on a permanent basis.

"That's great news. You've worked really hard to get to this point. I'm really impressed with everything that you're doing." Then I looked her in the eye and said, "You're doing great. Have a good day."

About ten minutes later, I was sitting in my office when there was a knock on the door, the door opened, a head appeared, and what looked to be a middle-aged woman said, "Mr. Cuddy, can I talk to you for a second?" I felt myself sort of stiffening up in response, like "Oh, goodness. My space is being invaded." I caught that reaction and said,

"Yeah, come on in. How are you?", trying to place the person in front of me in the context of everything.

"Do I know you?" "Hi, I'm Lottie, and I was wondering if I could leave this material here with you to pass out."
"Sure, bring it over." She handed me a flyer from a local retail store that was advertising a special. I kept looking at her and said, "I know you, right?"

"Yes, I'm a Serenity House graduate."

"Oh, of course, the last time I saw you was at the Serenity fundraiser a year ago, right?"

Lottie nodded and then went on to remind me that she had gone through the Serenity House program about five years ago and she has held the same full-time job in the retail sector. "I remember our discussion. I remember you telling me about this. You're still working for this store."

"Yup."

"How are things going? Where are you living?"

"I'm living in Westboro."

"Is it going OK?"

"It's going great."

"It's great to see you. I'm really glad you're doing well and I'll make sure I get these flyers out." In the back of my mind, I'm thinking that if Lottie takes a look at my office, she'll have no confidence in my ability to get a flyer out, but I thought I shouldn't bring that up. I got up from behind my desk, shook her hand, walked her to the door and said, "Great to see you. I'm glad you're doing well. You've made my day. Thanks for stopping by." And we both looked at each other and smiled.

I'd say fifteen or twenty minutes later, Sue, my Administrative Assistant, came down to my office, knocked on the door and said, "Sean O'Malley's outside. He'd like to see you." Again, I felt myself quietly hesitate, but then said, "Of course. Give me one minute. I'll be right out." I know Sean well. A middle-aged guy, came to our

shelter system years ago, lives on Gordon Street, on disability, works at RWA. He's a real reader, and while I am not all that familiar with his genre of choice, mysteries, I have a passing enough familiarity with it to always connect with him about either the Mickey Spillane novel or John McDonald novel that he's reading, and we talk a little bit about it. Sean's a pretty dour guy. You don't see a smile on his face much. Occasionally, when he loosens up, he talks about liking to try to write a short story. As I said, he's lived at Gordon Street for years.

So I went out to get him, we sat in the conference room next to my office, probably because I was too embarrassed about the state of chaos in my office to meet with anybody in there.

"So, how's it going, Sean?"

"Well, listen, Jim, I'm really thankful for what you did for me, but I'm feeling really uncomfortable." Sean was referring to the fact that he had been on the maintenance crew at 300 Howard Street and then, when we had opened up a new program for homeless vets, and were looking for overnight staff at the building, we had arranged for and trained RWA workers to take the shift. By doing that, we were able to craft an almost full-time job for Sean at the Safe Haven Program.

Sean went on to tell me that, after a few nights, he was uncomfortable there, it just didn't seem like the right fit to him. I said, "You know, man, I can understand that. It would be tough for me to do something like that, so, putting myself in your shoes, I can hear that." Then he looked at me and finally came out with what the real reason for his visit was. "You know, Jim, I can't work there any more. I'd really like to start back with RWA on the maintenance crew, but I just talked to David and David told me he'd put me back in the rotation, but I still haven't gotten any hours," and I could see Sean beginning to slip to a place where I'd seen him go before, which was getting really down on himself, really discouraged, disappearing for a while and then reappearing months and months later. I said to myself, "You know what, I've got to make sure this doesn't happen again."

"Look, Sean, why don't I just walk down to David right now. He tells you that you're on the list to get back there.

Let me try to make that happen. Let me try to accelerate that. I appreciate your telling me that he's been fair to you. I appreciate your telling me that he's got you in a rotation and there needs to be an opening in the rotation. But let me see what I can do for you. OK?" "Oh, thanks a lot, Jim." I said, "I'm going to have David talk to you before the end of the day. I want to try to make that happen." "Thanks a lot, Jim."

After Sean left, I mused to myself, "I'm not sure if I lifted any of the weight of his world off his shoulder, but I've got to do this right now, because if I don't, I'm going to forget about it." So, as soon as I told Sean we would check things out, I walked down to look for David Davidowicz, the head of our RWA operations in the Common Ground, because I thought I really needed to tell him about Sean and see where things were, etc.

So, I get down there, and his assistant, Carrie, said, "He's around here somewhere. Let me two-way him." So, as I waited for David, I looked at Carrie and said, "So, how's it going?" Carrie is a middle-aged woman, approaching 50, who started working in RWA several months ago and had risen to be David's Administrative Assistant, scheduling people, making sure payroll was in, connecting with people. I didn't know much about her at all. I don't know her story, don't know what happened to her. All I knew is that somebody told me she was living over at 73 Hollis Street, which means that she most likely had come through our shelter system or a treatment program, because 73 Hollis Street is First Step Housing, predominantly male, big environment, not the nicest building in the world. It's one of our oldest buildings, we've owned it for 25 years. It's been a tremendous resource for people beginning to put their lives back together again, and somebody had mentioned to me that Carrie was living there. When I had asked about her the day before, somebody said, "Oh, I think she's getting ready to move over to 90 Lincoln Street."

So, as we waited for David, I said, "I hear you're getting ready to move." She smiled and said, "Yeah, I'm going to be moving Friday." "Wow, are you excited?" She said, "Yeah, this is going to be great." And I simply looked at her and said, "You know, you're doing a great job here. You've earned it. Good luck." I got a big smile as a response.

David showed up, we had a quick conference about Sean, and David promised me that he would get Sean back into the maintenance rotation and expand his hours. I left and walked back to my office, knowing that David would deliver. Indeed, I saw Sean later in the day and he thanked me. He had already been put back into the maintenance schedule.

Those meetings/encounters took up about 20-30 minutes of my day. They happened between 8:00 and 9:00 in the morning last Thursday. I'm having trouble with what I did the rest of the day as I write this, and can only remember everything else that happened if I look back at my schedule. I imagine the schedule was filled with meeting with staff, trying to make decisions, looking at budgets, talking about real estate, talking about strategy, dealing with the myriad of issues that can come up with an organization like ours. But the encounters I described were the events of that day that resonated with me and continue to resonate with me as I write these words.

So, here's a quick reflection or meditation. People always talk about leadership. People talk about how the person responsible for the organization, the leader of the organization, is responsible for setting the culture. I have done this work a long time. I agree with that. It's the leader's responsibility to set the culture by example. I know that there are as many leadership styles as there are leaders. I know there are lots of different skill sets that are required of a leader. I know that there are a lot of demands. I know it's easy to get lost in those demands. I know it's easy to limit the number of contacts you have with people that rely on our organization for assistance as you try to do the job of running the organization.

It's essential that in helping organizations that the culture be paid particular attention to. And I know in order to help others and do it effectively, it's got to be a culture that amplifies all the positives that one can find, even in the midst of personal crises and challenges. And I know that what that means is providing an ounce, a speck, or a moment of hope. And here when I speak of hope, I talk about the hope of an affirmation, of a pat on the back, of a smile, of an encouraging word, in an encounter that can last a minute, two minutes, five minutes or an hour.

I believe that a culture of affirmation, accessibility and hope provides the raw material and the energy people can use to transform their lives, to meet the challenges, to get through that one day, to take things one day or one step at a time. People simply need a smile, an encouragement, a positive word, and affirmation, again, if you will. That's where I believe hope can be drawn from, and that's what I believe a culture has to offer. It needs to be respectful. It needs to be affirmative. It needs to be welcoming. And I need to be able to convey that in the course of the day, to as many people as I run into.

No matter how I'm feeling, I need to be able to communicate that. I don't need to communicate that hope consists of meeting expectations that are unrealistic. I can't communicate that by trying to avoid people or avoid difficult situations or avoid decisions. I can embrace that challenge by smiling, by shaking somebody's hand, by nodding in the affirmative, by patting somebody on the back, by giving an "attaboy." If I do that, then I hope that those actions can reverberate and resonate within the context of the culture. It's got to be an example that the leader shows. And in human services, when you're dealing with folks that are facing all kinds of life challenges, who knows what a simple smile or a simple pat on the back or a simple friendly word, who knows what the other person will do with that? Maybe that will be just enough to get them through another day, to help them in that long journey as they reconstruct their lives.

So, that's it. That's what I think. That's what I believe about leadership in human services. It isn't complicated. It has to be real and it most definitely has to come from the heart.