

CHRISTMAS DAY, 1976
For Maureen and John

The afternoon shadows creep across the spacious, carpeted living room space of the apartment at 2602B Monument Avenue, Richmond, Virginia, that I'm sharing with four other people.

I'm alone, sitting on the floor directly in front of the stereo, listening to John Mayall, trying to hold it together. It's a gray, cold Saturday afternoon, with an unusual, for Richmond, early winter snowpack on the ground. Even Jeb Stuart, sitting on his bronze horse, dominating the exterior view from the living room window, looks miserable.

I'm alone and without transportation. Yesterday, with The Daily Planet closed for the holiday, 77, Pam and I headed off to Charlottesville in my 1966 Rover MKIII, to drop them off at Pam's parents' home. After hanging out with them for a while, I headed back to Richmond, stopping at a convenience store three blocks from my apartment for a package of bologna and some cheese. Pulling into the parking lot, a loud explosion emanated from the trunk, shaking the car. The Lucas electrical system had reversed itself, blowing up the battery.

I'm waiting while trying not to crawl out of my skin, gravitating between listening to the stereo and pacing the apartment. I'm waiting for my friends John and Maureen to come by and take me out to dinner.

I know that when I tailor a message in my writing, I often focus on individual acts of kindness and individual acts of compassion as being the key ingredient of substance, of nourishment, to help others meet life's challenges. Left unstated, of course, is the assumption that I'm "preaching" the importance of these acts because I've seen their impact on others. What's often unstated and perhaps not acknowledged, is being the recipient of one of these acts myself and the meaning that has had in my life. So, that's what I'm doing here, sharing in this brief essay why I know from personal experience how important these acts of kindness, friendship and compassion are, and how much meaning they hold for someone struggling in a difficult place in their life. It's not something I share easily and, frankly, I share this with a little trepidation, but at the same time, it feels important to do so.

I had become friends with John and Maureen five years earlier when I moved to Richmond to attend graduate school in Social Work. I spent a lot of time with John. We played basketball nearly every weekend. We were sort of an odd couple to form such a strong bond. A Midwesterner, John had

joined the Air Force after college and wound up as a B-52 navigator, guiding those behemoths as they unleashed bombs over the Vietnamese landscape. After leaving the military, he joined 3M as a Sales Representative, and was assigned to Richmond. I was an Army infantry platoon leader turned conscientious objector. He was a Nixon guy, I was a McGovern guy in the day when that difference really mattered. For me, basketball was flow, form and shooting. For John, basketball was elbows and positions and scrapping. He was the kind of guy I hated to play against but loved to play with. So we had some epic, one-on-one battles. My talent versus his grit. Of course, talent usually won out but that's just ego speaking. Back in my graduate school days, I felt like I was on top of the world, in a place I wanted to be, learning stuff, fully engaged in life, feeling at the top of my game whether I drained an 18 footer to beat John in our one-on-one epics, or feeling the connection between what I was learning about helping and therapy and how I could apply it once I finished school and returned to the Dr. Patrick I. O'Rourke Children's Center in Providence, Rhode Island.

I also felt a connection with Maureen. She had grown up in a big Irish Catholic family in the San Francisco Bay Area with a bunch of protective brothers whom I met while wandering around the country in a Volkswagen bus right after finishing graduate school in '73.

Now let's flash forward. It's three years later and I'm back in Richmond after my mentor from graduate school had thrown me a lifeline. I wasn't on top of the world any more. In fact, I was barely holding on. The experiences that brought me to that place are still scattered in various chapters and boxes in the basement of my house. Maybe some day I'll be able to finish the book, but that's a different story for a different time.

My friends had changed also. They were now parents, living in their first home, truly basking in the glow of family life. After being out of touch for three years, I just looked them up in the phone book and one Saturday afternoon a few months earlier, had knocked on their door. A friendship restarted, this time without the basketball. When they found out I was going nowhere for Christmas, they said "Let's go out for dinner. We'll get a babysitter."

So there I sat on the living room floor, as darkness replaced light, and my sense of isolation expanded. Then there was a beep of a horn and a knock on the door, and everything changed.

I don't remember where we went or what we ate. It seems unimportant. I don't really remember what we talked about, though I'm sure I touched upon my time at the Children's Center and the motorcycle accident that nearly killed me. I'm sure I shared my excitement with them about The Daily

Planet, how the place had come alive in the last few months with the characters who came in the door, and the mellow vibe that 77, through his presence and free meals, had brought to the place. It must have made an impression on them, because shortly after our dinner, John joined the Board, became the Treasurer of the organization, and less than six months later, raised enough money to prevent us from having to close our doors. So, while I don't remember the details, what I do remember is the feeling of connectedness, the feeling of care and concern and the laughter and conversation we shared that afternoon. I'm sure that John and Maureen were concerned about my reappearance in their lives. Maybe they didn't know what to make of all the changes that I had gone through, but they knew how to reach out their arms and embrace me.

Here I need to stop and issue a warning to the reader, as I warned René and Jerry several years ago. As I verbally careen down this alley, this essay becomes a tearjerker.

Then they moved. John proudly announced during one of our lunches in the late spring of '77 that he had received a big promotion, and that he, Maureen and their toddler would be moving to New York. By that point, my life was so chaotic, all I did was hug them, wish them well, as we all promised to stay in touch.

Then John was gone. Less than two years later, he died in a New York hospital after a losing bout with aplastic anemia. Maureen and her young son John came by to visit me at the Planet after the funeral. They were in the process of relocating back to California to be near Maureen's family. Not long after, we lost touch with each other.

It was probably at least ten years later, following the birth of my oldest son, that this experience found its way back into my consciousness. After all, this experience happened during the beginning of my tumble down a rabbit hole, and therefore, it took a long time for me to realize the importance of their singular act of kindness in my life.

So, here's what I reflect on each Christmas day. When I first met John and Maureen, I was on top of my game and thought I was going to be a great helper. When I reconnected with them several years later, that goal seemed unimportant. I was wrapped in confusion and depression. It took me a long time to crawl out of the kind of darkness I had fallen into. What did I learn? The only way I can phrase it is to say I learned a sense of humility. I know what it feels like to need help.

So, in closing, let me return to that long-ago Christmas dinner. John and Maureen's act of friendship was not out of the "pay it forward" or "random act of kindness" school of thought so popular these days. Taking me to dinner that day was a deliberate decision by two people who could have

easily, and understandably, wrapped themselves in the joy that many young families share on this particular holiday. Instead, they reached out to a friend who they were concerned about, arranged for a babysitter, and shared a meal and fellowship.

For me, John and Maureen's particular act of friendship was an action akin to dropping a pebble in the pond of my life's path - the waves from that pebble continue to lap against the shore of my value systems and guide my actions to this day.

Jim Cuddy
December 24, 2012