

What it means to 'be ever mindful of the needs of others'



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Growing up in the Pacific Northwest, just north of Seattle, Washington, my sister and I ate dinner with our parents almost every night. When dad wasn't working swing shift at Boeing, he would do a little baking, mom would cook up meat-and-potato dishes, and we would all sit down to eat together. Does this sound like an old movie?

Dad loved to laugh and make others laugh — or groan — at his puns and silly jokes. But he was a devout man and when we sat down at the family table, all heads would bow for Dad's grace. I don't recall that he ever said more than these simple words: "Thank you, Lord, for these thy gifts which we are about to receive, and let us be ever mindful of the needs of others. Amen." Those words, especially the last phrase, stuck in my mind as my mother's pot roast stuck to my ribs.

"Let us be ever mindful of the needs of others." An early experience at a downtown rescue mission drove the words home. Our youth group was serv-

ing meals to a large room full of people on skid row. (The phrase "skid row" or "skid road" originated in Seattle and referred to the way lumber mills would skid logs down the hills into the Puget Sound. The inhabitants of that area were the "skid road" people.) We scurried around the dimly lit lunchroom bringing heaping plates of hot food to each table. Calling out to each other, we made sure everyone had a plate.

Several times, my friends called over to me, "Chris, we need a plate over here" and once, when I was making my way back to the kitchen, a voice came out of a dark corner, "Thank you, Chris!" In my shyness I probably just waved and hurried on, but the words haunted me. This person, a nameless Someone, heard my name and used it to thank me personally for the simple act of running plates of food to tables.

I never forgot that gesture and never forgot that the smallest action can hold great meaning, for the giver and the receiver. As I went on to study biblical theology and world religions in college, then to seminary to study ministry, I carried that "Thank you, Chris" with me. I was drawn to do what I could do for people, whether they thanked me or not, and chaplaincy was a perfect way to practice basic helping.

Listening to another person, offering the human touch of a hug or a smile, buying a sandwich for a stranger, giving a ride or a blanket — all examples of doing something that becomes natural after a while, when you're being thoughtful. No more saving the world. No more rescuing someone from addiction or damnation. Those of us who do this kind of work, where theology and beliefs don't really matter much any longer, find a contentment in simply "being present" for another human being to do what can be done in the moment, and that is usually the best that can be done.

"Stan" came in off the street one afternoon, sat down, introduced himself and said, "I have a message for you." With a smile, I swiveled in my chair and said, with a bit of skepticism, "OK." Stan instructed me and my assistant to hold out a hand, palm up. He said, "Now, put all the bad stuff you've done into your hand." Smiles got wider. "ALL of them," he insisted. We concentrated. "Now, squeeze your hand closed." We did. "Put some more in there and squeeze again, there's more room!" With a laugh, we followed obediently.

"Is that all?" Stan asked, looking at us intently. Satisfied we were being honest, he said, "Now, give it to me." He

opened his hands and went to each of us to dump our heavy hands into his. Immediately he stood, shook his hands toward the floor, and said, "It's gone! Congratulations!" He sat back down with a big grin. We were amused but expressed appreciation and then offered him a cup of coffee.

Ever mindful. Stan's little ritual somehow helped, especially out among some very broken and wounded people. Maybe like a new sacrament.

The needs of others. Could it be so simple, to invite someone to give away their pain, their grief, their loneliness, their self-hatred, if only for a minute? Is this why some religious teachings have such a hold on people? If we were more mindful, could each of us lift some weight off another?

I suspect there is more odd, needful wisdom for us on the skid roads and in the dark corners that expose our own needs as well.

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