

CELINE'S GENEROSITY

“We should give as we would receive, cheerfully, quickly, and without hesitation; for there is no grace in a benefit that sticks to the fingers.”

Seneca

Last week, we were visited by two close friends from Kentucky, Robert Elliott (formerly a pilot with *Evergreen Airlines* who flew 747s around the world) and Patty Elliott (retired high school principal and my best student at Alice Lloyd College, despite being a mother of four young children at the time). They have a beautiful house “fourth and plum at the head of Finance Holler” in the mountains of Floyd County, Kentucky. Their friendship—and our common travel experiences from Hawaii to various ocean beaches over the years—have been an unqualified blessing for Ima and me. At any rate, they stopped to stay with us a couple days.

The afternoon they arrived, we walked across the street to the *Benihana Steakhouse*. At our table (arranged around the hibachi grill) was another couple, and two young girls with one (Celina) seated next to Robert. Robert could, as they say in Kentucky, carry on a conversation with a corpse. A hulking, gregarious son of the Appalachian mountains (who, appropriately enough, flew under the call sign “Bubba”), Robert immediately struck up a conversation with Celina; telling her about his glory days in the cockpit and showing pictures of his boys (two of whom are now pilots). I enjoyed watching Robert in action.

Across the now empty hibachi grill, I began a conversation with a young man with his glasses, goatee and young wife. He was starting his own consulting business after spending several years in the DoD missile community. We had an interesting exchange about places like Alice Springs, Australia and Wellington, New Zealand, as well as Elon Musk’s latest exploits with *Space X* and his *Starlink* constellation of satellites.

Pieces of data, based on disparate experiences in travel, foreign languages, teaching, medical therapy, aviation, missile technology, military and government service flew like small, powerful idea-ICBMs back and forth over the hibachi grill. I've never participated in a dinner conversation quite like it.

Neither had Celine.

She slipped away from the table—ostensibly to use the bathroom—but we discovered that she had arranged to pay the check for all of us.

A total stranger.

It easily cost her over \$400.00.

The rest of us were stunned.

She said she genuinely enjoyed the conversation.

She politely refused any notion, urged repeatedly, by the rest of us to chip in for the meal.

Celine is a young medical therapist probably in her early to mid 20s, with a beautiful face, long brown hair, prize-winning smile and a bubbly, contagious personality. She displayed polished conversation and listening skills. (My wife instantly went into matchmaker mode.)

In one special evening encounter, Celine restored my faith in this country's young people.

As I reflected on the evening, I thought of other circumstances where I had witnessed obvious—and in my mind God-orchestrated—acts of generosity by strangers.

Sadly, it is a short list.

Several years ago, Imogene and I were at Branson, Missouri, (I was teaching at the College of the Ozarks at the time), and accompanied our friends, Oliver and Harriett Hursh, to a dinner at a nearby steakhouse. Oliver wore a ballcap signifying his veteran status as a member of the U.S. Marine Corps, and I—as is my practice—wore a cap identifying myself as a U.S. Air Force Vietnam veteran. We had an enjoyable meal (Oliver and I enjoy the pile of fresh tomatoes at this restaurant) and were enjoying our post-meal conversation. When we asked the waitress for our ticket, she told us the couple who just left paid

for our meal. Imogene chased them out to the parking lot to thank them. Their son, it turns out, was in the military and they had listened in to snippets of our table conversation. They ministered at a church in another part of Arkansas.

We were blessed.

Another incident comes immediately to mind. Ima and I were driving on Christmas Day from the mountains of eastern Kentucky to Missouri (for the new semester at college). On our way, we stopped in the morning at a waffle house, the only thing that was open. It was packed. When we finally got a table, our waitress came by to take our order and her eyes were red and swollen. She had been crying. We asked if she was okay, then she showed us a hand-written note.

The note had been left on the table by her previous customers. The wording expressed their appreciation that she, as a mother, was working on Christmas Day. Folded in the card was a \$100 dollar bill. The generosity of that couple changed her life. She wept as she told us. I will never forget the look on her face.

I honestly want to live a generous life.

I look for opportunities to bless people, especially when they least expect it. I try to listen for the small, still voice of the Holy Spirit when it regards these things: planting seed in fertile spiritual ground and softened hearts will reap incalculable rewards for the Kingdom; on the other hand, wasting precious seed on hardened hearts or based on worldly pity, never yields results beyond immediate gratification.

We are to be wise stewards of what God has entrusted into our hands.

Moreover, I'm married to the most generous person I know. When Imogene hears of a need, she is quick to pull out the checkbook. I love that about her.

As a result, we have been blessed repeatedly: from strangers ahead of us in the car lanes at McDonald's paying for our meals, to neighbors paying for breakfast, to total strangers blessing us out of the blue ...

Like Celine.

Be kind to others—you never know what inner struggle they are dealing with ...