

An Unexpected Angel

By Karel Murray

Sometimes, what you did in the past explodes back into your present. It's a lot like when politicians run for office and the media uncovers an event that either exalts or destroys the individual. Have you ever told a story to your friends or family so many times that pretty soon, you wonder if you have the details right? Or whether the event really happened the way you remember?

January 1, 1988, I started a new career in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. It was an exciting time and a wonderful opportunity for me as I assumed the role of a regional administrative manager in an insurance company located in downtown Pittsburgh. Everyday, I had to ride the commuter train, disembark, and walk six blocks to my office. The stroll was enjoyable because of the pleasant attitude of the daily commuters as well as the beautiful historic buildings.

To keep me warm during these walks, my husband purchased a full length beaver coat as a Christmas present. I did not look out of place, as many other career women taking the same stroll each winter day wore exactly the same thing. Just another busy, warm person striding on her way to work. I fell in love with Pittsburgh and all it had to offer.

In the 3rd week of January, at 7:00 AM, I wound my way through the busy foot traffic, hustling to my office. The gusting winds blew sharp needles of ice against my face and snow impeded my distance vision. Any slush on the ground quickly froze. It was a treacherous morning. Standing at a stop light of a four lane street, I glanced across at the group waiting to cross over to the other side. Among the sharply dressed women, my eyes settled on an elderly gentleman, filthy dirty, unshaven, torn clothing, weaving on his feet. He leaned against the traffic light pole, sighing with relief. Dismay filled me when I realized I was probably looking at a street person who was inebriated already - so early in the morning. A large city has its sorrowful issues also. I decided I wouldn't look at this person... just ignore him and continue on my way.

The light changed and I began my crossing with a score of other individuals. Jostled by someone from behind, I turned my head and stared directly into the eyes of the homeless man.

And I was riveted.

The clarity and intense blue of his irises as well as the soulful calm and forgiveness in his yes blessed me. I almost stumbled in surprise. I truly believed

I had gazed into the eyes of an angel. So compelling was his look, that when I reached the other side, I turned around to look once again to confirm what I had witnessed.

And I froze in shock.

Across the now busy four lane street, I saw a crumpled form on the pavement, about 10 feet from the curb. Blood was running from his mouth and beginning to freeze to the pavement. An arm was turned at an impossible angle. Snow was already beginning to create a light dusting of white over the still form. But it wasn't this image that made me start shouting and pointing. A sea of people had actually parted around the man, and no one stopped. A sidelong glance was the most attention he received.

Rationally, I could understand their total lack of involvement because of the AIDS scare. In 1988, we were just beginning to learn about the issues related to the transmission of the disease and touching tainted blood could increase a person's risk factor. However, emotionally, I saw this man, in pain and obvious jeopardy being ignored like road kill.

Shrieking, I ran back across the four lanes of traffic once the light changed and slid to my knees beside the still form. Those eyes... He looked at me in complete peace and kindness as if to say..."Ah.... There you are..." My heart clenched and my anger faded. I gently asked him if he could move his neck because I had to put my coat under his head to prevent his skin from freezing to the sidewalk. He nodded that it was okay for me to do this. I stripped off my new fur coat and gently placed it under his head.

I then noticed that he was going into shock. His face was getting extremely pale and his breathing erratic. I clutched at a passing commuter and asked him for his coat to drape over the man. He stopped immediately and handed me his wool duster. Another man offered his jacket which I gladly accepted. Next I shouted to a woman on a cell phone to call 911. She quickly dialed for help. By this time, there were at least 20-25 people gathered around me and the injured man.

Taking advantage of the attention, I requested that the crowd create a tight circle, shoulder to shoulder, hip to hip, and surround us so that the wind could be blocked effectively. They did this without hesitation. The previously bitter and despairing day became a testament to our human capacity to help our own.

The paramedics arrived about 10 minutes later. They quickly and efficiently lifted the elderly man onto a gurney and placed him inside the ambulance. I gave my card to the medic and requested an update on the man's condition later in the day. The entire time, the angel's eyes never left my face and his total expression of peace and forgiving touched me to my very core.

My new coat was splattered with blood, but I didn't mind. I wore it proudly. It's what drycleaners are for. It's just a coat.

Later that day, the medic called and told me that this man worked in the steel mills at night. He was on a cleaning crew. During that time in Pittsburgh, steel operations were shutting down and this was the only work he could find. The man was 68 years old and unable to survive on his social security. That day, he was on his way home and he was tired. He had taken a cold tablet and it hit him a bit hard - enough to make him dizzy. Thus, leaning on the traffic light gave him the much needed support. He had fractured his jaw as well as a rib. His arm was severely twisted, but no breaks.

Do you suppose it would make any difference whether that man was a homeless alcoholic or an elderly overworked gentleman? In our lives, we never know how we are going to act until we are tested. I sincerely hoped that I had passed my own personal trial. Today, I wonder what would have happened if I hadn't seen his eyes and looked back. Would some else have helped? I'll never know.

About 3 months ago, during an Ethics class, I was telling this story, tying it into a concept we were discussing. Immediately upon the end of the story, a student requested loudly that I allow a break. Thinking that this had really emotionally impacted her, I dismissed the students for ten minutes.

The first words out of the student's mouth was "Did this happen on January 22, 1988?"

I said, "Yes!"

She then told me the Pittsburgh cross streets where the incident occurred. I was beginning to suspect that she was psychic! She just laughed and said "I just moved here from Pittsburgh. I've always wanted to meet you! My cousin was the paramedic called to the scene. He had never seen anything like this ring of people surrounding a coatless woman and an old man sheltering them from the wind and snow. The level of cooperation from the bystanders was incredible. He also said that you refused to allow him to tell the media. My cousin says you are considered the angel of that corner by the paramedic group!"

My breath catches every time I think of her statement. Because of my unthinking panicked assistance, I had risen to “angel” status. Something that I never felt would happen to me. But it has occurred to me that we all have that ability in ourselves. I believe we just have to recognize when others have a dire need and then doing something about it. Not stand back and hope someone else will help. It’s taking action when it is most needed. For you never know if that emergency might include your parents, your child or yourself.

Go be someone’s angel today.

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