

## Acts of Kindness

This morning I wish to share with you two stories, one that I told you about last year and one that I heard more recently. Each story relates to an act of kindness. The stories come from the United States and I imagine that you can find them on the internet if you care to look. I have added my own names to the characters and added one or two small details to press home the point of what I am about to say.

The first story comes from Chicago. Mary is a successful young woman working for an international law firm in the Downtown district of the city. Everything is comfortable in Mary's life and recently she became engaged to her long-term companion David. One afternoon last winter Mary packed up her papers and belongings after a busy day at work and left her office. On the way out of the building she stopped at the washroom to freshen up and wash her hands. On the night that David asked Mary to marry him he gave her a beautiful diamond ring. Mary did not want to get soap trapped in her new ring so took it off when she washed her hands and slipped it into the pocket of her coat. That was when Mary's nightmare started.

Jimmy had been homeless and on the streets of Chicago for as long as he cared to remember. It had been a difficult life for Jimmy who suffered from mental illness and depression. In his bid to escape from the pressures of everyday life, Jimmy had resorted to sitting on the sidewalk day after day with a plastic container placed on the concrete in front of him. Jimmy's favourite place to sit was close to Mary's office.

The first signs of the cold Chicago winter that would soon envelop the city greeted Mary as she walked out of the building where she worked. Making her way along the street she saw Jimmy crouched over and staring at the plastic container at his feet. Feeling that she wanted to help just a little Mary reached into her coat pocket where she always kept a handful of coins for taxi or train journeys. Without giving it a second thought Mary put all the coins in Jimmy's container.

It was only when Mary had reached her apartment and started to prepare the evening meal that she realised that she was not wearing her engagement ring. With a degree of panic, Mary rushed to her coat only to find that the ring was

missing along with all the coins. It was then that the awful truth hit her. Mary rushed back to where she had seen Jimmy but he had gone for the night. Both Mary and Jimmy spent a sleepless night, one trying to stay warm as the temperature dropped and the other in a state of anguish.

The morning could not arrive quickly enough for Mary. She went to the place where she last met Jimmy but he was nowhere to be seen. Mary went to work despondent. It was at lunchtime that Mary next went to see if Jimmy had returned and to her relief there he was sitting in the same spot on the sidewalk. Yet Mary did not feel confident that she would see her ring again. It was worth a lot of money and Downtown Chicago was full of pawn shops. Jimmy would have had no difficulty getting rid of the ring for the price of a few meals and hot drinks.

Yet Mary's angst would not last long. Jimmy looked up at her and said 'I believe that I have something that belongs to you'. Mary could not believe her good fortune and did not know what to say when Jimmy passed over the diamond ring. She took out her purse and gave him all the dollar notes she had before thanking him again and again.

As the days passed, Mary felt that her thank you was not sufficient and that she wanted to recognise Jimmy's honesty in a more tangible way. So she posted her story on Facebook and circulated it to her friends with the request that they also pass on the story to all their friends. Mary also posted details of a bank account she had opened specifically for donations that she hoped to pass on to Jimmy. Mary's Facebook story went viral. Tens of thousands of people were touched by Jimmy's honesty and after four weeks Mary's appeal for donations had resulted in US\$185,000 being raised. Mary has transferred the bank account into Jimmy's name. Hopefully, Jimmy will now be able to live his life without the need to beg for his next hot drink.

My second story concerns a very old couple called Ted and Wendy. Ted and Wendy had been married 70 years before Ted's death in 2010. Wendy was so upset when he died but gained strength from the memories of the many happy times spent together. After the funeral service Ted was cremated and his ashes placed in an urn that Wendy kept on the table in her lounge at their home in Tennessee. Yet Wendy felt sad that from this point on Ted was

restricted to spending his days on the lounge room table. She felt that Ted would have wanted more after his death.

Ted and Wendy spent many summer holidays at a small town on the coast of Virginia. They would sit on the sand watching the waves roll in and dreaming of lands beyond the horizon. Ted and Wendy had always wanted to travel the world but never had the opportunity to do so. It was with this picture in mind that Wendy came up with an idea. She went to the kitchen, found an empty plastic bottle and poured Ted's ashes from the urn into the bottle. She wrote a letter explaining who she was and what she was about to do. Wendy placed the letter and some dollar bills in the bottle, tightened the cap as much as she was able, left the house and took the long-distance bus to Virginia.

Three years later a woman named Veronica was walking along her local beach. Proud of her pretty town she would look out for rubbish to pick up and dispose of properly. Picking up a plastic bottle that she thought was full of sand she noticed a piece of paper and what looked like some dollar notes. After unscrewing the cap and reading the letter she realised that the bottle's powdery content was not sand but Ted's ashes!

In her letter Wendy explained that she and Ted had always longed to travel and that this was her way of giving him that opportunity. After her bus journey ended Wendy had walked to the end of the jetty in that Virginian town and dropped Ted into the water. Three years later Ted was in Veronica's hands hundreds of kilometres to the south in Florida. Wendy had written her telephone number in the letter and the dollar notes were to pay for the cost of a telephone call. Veronica called Wendy immediately to say that she had found Ted and to tell her where he was. Wendy was overcome with joy. Furthermore, there was another letter in the bottle to say that Ted was washed up on a beach further north the previous year. Somebody else had found him on that occasion before returning the bottle to the water. Veronica's final act of kindness was to gather her family and friends together on the beach to pray for Ted and to wish him well on the next leg of his next journey. She then sent Ted on his way.

Two stories that convey genuine acts of kindness. Jimmy, Mary, Wendy and Veronica each put the needs of another before their own interests. Each

wanted to do the right thing without seeking any reward or favour. Our world would be such a better place if we thought of others rather than ourselves.

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