

Prop Master to the Stars

Graham

This is a story about yesterday afternoon.

It is the story of the single moment of genuine human interaction I managed to have all day while walking around downtown Toronto.

I had gone down to work but forgot some of the materials necessary to do the job at home. Oops. Since the work was not pressing, and I had evening plans in the area, I stuck around in the downtown core rather than squander the time and money to go home and come back. The rest of the day suddenly became open to do with it as I would.

I spent most of it walking around, looking in pawnshops at all the relics of the past that sit in dusty corners next to all the relics of the slightly more recent past—wooden radios beside plastic Inkjet printers.

I wandered into a large church and spent about an hour inside, trying to gather a sense why a lot of people had clearly gone to a lot of trouble to build such a building. Using my imagination, I placed myself in a previous time and tried to experience the church now as I would then.

That helped me to understand it a little.

But I was just pretending. Such a reality was all my imagination. Now, in the real world, like the antiques in the shops that surround it on all sides (“den of thieves”, indeed. *Luke 19:45-48*), it felt to me on this day like another relic of a dead past that has little baring in today’s world except as a nice thing to look at.

Incidentally, the church’s billboard read, “Prop Master to the Stars.”

Upon walking out of the church, I stepped onto the street rather directly into the path of an oncoming Mercedes. I admit, I half did it on purpose. I did see the car coming but chose not to stop my gait already in progress. I could have easily have stopped and waited for the anonymous vehicle blaze by without the barest of acknowledged existence to the human being trying to cross the street by the human being driving the car—but I think I’m just getting tired of doing that.

So I stepped in front of the car.

It stopped, of course. There is a chance it wouldn't have, but I figured chances were good that it would. The man behind the wheel, who I could now see, immediately threw up his hands and became very animated, gesturing toward me and appearing to speak very loudly, in what I gather were statements directed toward me rather than the cell phone at his ear, even though I could not hear him. Seeing that he was upset, I began to smile. I stood there.

The car was stopped and there was nothing to block my path. I could have just as easily have moved on, getting out of the way as quickly as possible, lowering my head and trying to purge my memory of the unpleasantness of the situation, or possibly cursing the driver for being so reckless. But I suppose I'm getting tired of doing that too.

So I stood there.

The man got out. He was a great deal shorter than me and I am not a tall person. He was very finely dressed, wearing designer sunglasses (despite it being a cloudy, gloomy winter day), a designer suit with a designer tie, and designer shoes. His designer girlfriend was observing silently from the designer passenger seat of the designer car.

I continued to smile. Incidentally, I went to design school.

The man initially approached me very quickly, as one might if one were about to strike another person. Upon leaving the sanctity of his climate-controlled leather interior, it quickly became apparent that he had little idea of what he was going to do now that he stood in front of me. He had given it no forethought, having exited the car blindly under the complete influence of a spontaneous emotionally reactive urge.

While driving under the influence of drink is illegal, driving under the influence of stupidity and childish anger is apparently not.

I continued to smile.

Had he been another man, he probably would have hit me.

But he didn't. Instead, he awkwardly stood in front of me, launching into a very verbose diatribe about (of all things) stupidity, mental illness, looking where I'm going, and crosswalks. He did not mention pedestrian right of way, driver awareness, the laws regarding cell phone use while driving, speed limits, or civility.

I remained silent.

He seemed to assume this meant I didn't understand him, even though his words were very simple and childlike in their expressions. I had no difficulty understanding them. As one would with a screaming child throwing a tantrum and making ridiculous demands, I chose to ignore them.

He then informed me he was going to call the police.

Why, I am not sure. Probably because I was not complying with his demands. While screaming children may not have cell phones to call the police, Mercedes drivers do.

Strangely, he asked for my permission first. He informed me as to his intention and then asked if that was what I would like. I gave him no indication as to whether that was what I would like or not. He seemed to interpret this lack of indication as a confirmation of what he had already been quite vocal in pronouncing as mental illness. I suspect in actuality he was not asking for my permission at all, but rather, was attempting to display an aggression of superiority by an appeal to authority in order to intimidate me into behaving in accordance to the manner he would prefer to have me behave, such as moving out of his way.

I continued to smile.

Fortunately for all of us, given the potential length of time to wait for the police to arrive, there was already a policeman present. A traffic officer who was doing his rounds in the area came over and the man began to repeat his verbose diatribe to the officer. The officer requested that the man calm down and asked me if I was okay or needed assistance. I indicated with first a nod of my head and then a shake of my head that I was both okay and assistance was not needed. The officer concurred with understanding of this non-verbal communication by saying, "okay." He then requested that I move to the side of the road. I thought this was a good idea, as the middle of the road is not a good place for a person to stand without causing a lot of trouble, as I currently was, and since he asked me to do so in a non-threatening way, I did.

The little man with the sunglasses had not ceased his diatribe during this entire interaction. The officer eventually asked the little man to be

quiet. He was not. Instead, he returned to his car, still babbling nearly non-sensically even after he was once again inside the climate-controlled leather interior and could not be heard. He continued speaking excitedly, possibly now to his passenger.

She had observed silently.

As soon as the way was clear, he accelerated the car rapidly and drove away.

That is the end of the story.

The single moment of genuine human interaction I had today was not with the little man. He was essentially talking to himself through his emotions during our entire encounter even though it was directed at another physical body other than his own. At no point was he aware enough of his own frivolity enough to see beyond it. Therefore, regardless of who I might have been—from a lowly crazy bum to god-almighty manifested in the form of a man—his reaction would have been the same. He could not see beyond himself in this encounter, so my role in the interaction required here was little more than as a placeholder. That is why I do not consider it a genuine human interaction. It was one-way. I fulfilled my role by neither confirming nor denying any of his statements. Functionally, I was not there, except as a smiling shell and a silent observer. Just like his girlfriend.

In hindsight, I wonder if I actually would have been arrested...

Anyway. The single moment of genuine human interaction I had today was not with the little man. It was with the police officer who asked me if I was okay or if I needed assistance. He understood my answer without words because words are not needed for genuine human interaction. Only the complexity of cursing, lying, boasting, accusing, and manipulating require words.

Incidentally, the little man sure had a lot to say today.

I guess it is true what we've been told all along after all—if you don't have anything nice to say, don't say anything at all.

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