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Natascha Engelbrecht

The cookie boy

A few weeks ago I went shopping. As I was walking towards the shopping mall, a little boy who usually begs for money and food in that area approached me. He asked me for money. Everyone I know always warns me not to give "these people" any money, because they'll just spend it on alcohol and drugs. It's difficult for me to imagine a little boy of about ten years old, sniffing glue, but I often hear that I am too naïve and trusting. All that said, I offered to buy him a loaf of bread. Inside the shop I decided to buy him a box of cookies as well, as a loaf of bread alone is too boring. What ten-year-old boy doesn't like cookies? He is a boy after all, not just a faceless beggar.

I don't know what I expected when I handed him the food, but he just grabbed it and took off without thanking me. How rude and unthankful, I thought, as if I needed a reward for doing something good for someone else. On the other side I thought, my job is done, my guilt is gone, I've done my good deed for the day, and I don't have to think about this issue again. But this issue wasn't and still isn't about to go away

Later that day I saw the boy again, and again he approached me to beg for money. I told him that I already bought him food earlier. He couldn't remember me, and said that I was lying. After I mentioned the cookies, he immediately remembered, not my face but the gesture. He looked shocked, and walked away without saying any thing. I felt offended and hurt that he didn't remember me, even though I have never claimed to do anything for someone else simply for personal gain. My reaction towards his behavior made me think. Why do we help other people? Is it genuinely to help them? Is it to make myself feel better and seem to be a better person, or is it simply to get the person or problem out of my face? To get rid of a feeling of guilt, which can be a very uncomfortable feeling to possess.

Instead of buying the boy warm clothes for winter; I give him some money. Instead of taking part in charity events or working at shelters that are specifically there for children that don't have a home, I buy the boy a loaf of bread and a box of cookies. These shelters protect children from exposure to crime and drugs, and they also offer the children education that can enable them to become more qualified to apply for a job one day. A job will enable such a person to buy his own bread and cookies one day, on his own terms, without the shame of begging for it. The food I buy him makes his tummy full for now, so he'll stay on the street one day longer where he can get food, money and sometimes even cookies. For me it was a quick fix and I expected an applause, but without him or me knowing it I am simply feeding the problem not the little boy. More times than not, people help other people out of selfishness and not selflessness.

The one motto I live by is that you should treat others, as you would like to be treated. It's just... I find it difficult to place myself in someone's shoes that comes from such extreme poverty. I can't relate to this person and imagine how to treat him. I was brought up to be very proud so I cannot imagine that I would ever resort to begging. Furthermore, I cannot imagine how degrading it must feel to beg for a living. I always wonder what could have happened in a person's life that he or she has absolutely no other choice than to live on the street and beg for survival. What make these

uncomfortable feelings of guilt more complex is the racial aspects. As a white South African woman I experience racial issues from time to time. The aftermath of Apartheid is still ongoing with widespread poverty across the country. Because I am white I can't help but feel and am sometimes held responsible in some way, even though, funny enough, I was only seven years old when Apartheid ended and we became a democratic country. Whenever a black person asks me for food or money I feel that can't say no. Firstly I think that they will think I'll only say no because I am racist, which I am not. Secondly, I don't want to give white people a bad name, as we can be pretty unpopular in certain times and situations. I don't want that black boy to think that white people are stingy and selfish. It is completely irrational of me to think that I can compensate for the past mistakes of other white people by handing out a few cents to black beggars every time they ask. I shouldn't feel responsible for something I had no part in.