

Reflections

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With coin in hand

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Participating in a medical mission in Poland to aid displaced Ukrainians was powerful, and humbling. In the cavernous shelter, most residents congregated by family, whether at their cots, or for meals. I saw one family at the same table every day at lunch. There was a middle-aged mother, sitting amongst two grandparents (her mother and mother-in-law I imagined) in wheelchairs, a daughter who appeared to have Down Syndrome, about 10-years-old, and a son who looked to be six-years-old. It was likely the father was either fighting back in Ukraine, or had already died.

Seeing all the suffering and loss around me, I found myself close to tears much of the time. Seeing this family that day, I lost control of my pent-up tears. I forced myself to look elsewhere. But look where? At the line of mostly women and children waiting patiently for food? At the weary but determined volunteers serving food and coffee? At other families? At those sitting alone? I settled on my shoes and headed off to get some coffee. However, I was unable to keep my eyes off the three-generation family eating lunch. My head buzzed imagining the pain, uncertainty, and indignities they have endured, and will yet endure.

Using the hot coffee as a means by which to gain control of my emotions, I found myself walking toward them. Standing next to them, I suddenly recalled, I don't speak their language. The young girl looked directly at

me through thick glasses, and we held eye contact for a few moments. Our very different paths in life, briefly intersecting. I was unable to speak to her, but I smiled, and she smiled back, and I sat down next to her, across the table from her brother.

I know one magic trick, coin sleight of hand, that I can parley into a few minutes of fun for young kids. In my knapsack, I had a bag of coins I brought with me from home just for this purpose. Gesturing Charlie Chaplin style to wait a moment, I rummaged for my coins, pulling out two 50 cent pieces.

The mother and grandparents watching ("what is this tall stranger in blue scrubs doing?"), I show the coin to the kids. I then do the trick, pretending to put the coin in my left hand from my right (Keeping it in my right). I then pretend, when showing my empty left hand that I have lost the coin. I look around a bit, and then use my right hand to pull the coin out of her left ear.

It is at this moment that this either falls completely flat, the kids either bewildered (too young) or not entertained at all (too old), or, hopefully, the kids laugh, look at each other and both put their hands to their ears looking for more coins.

In that moment, before a reaction, I feel like an idiot. How dare I invade their space, approach them, sit with them. I have so much, they have lost all but each other, and even that is partial, and maybe temporary. Who knows if they'll be able to stay together wherever their next stop will be.

Did I really think a clumsy coin trick is going to reach them? Isn't their veil of loss impenetrable to such a superficial gesture? Maybe an American with a secure, comfortable home and loving family has the room and time for frivolous play, but surely a family

finding themselves in hell will not be distracted by something as meaningless as what I was able to provide. Internally, I planned how I would handle my slink away if it didn't go over well. I would get back to the clinic where I belonged.

Both of them laughed out loud, and checked their ears for more coins. Upon seeing her children laugh, the mother, watching us closely, smiled. I did versions of the trick a few times. They laughed, their eyes big, and they wanted to try to perform the trick. I gave them each one of the half dollars to use.

The way it goes with the kids doing it, is that they obviously pretend to put the coin in one hand from the other and put out both hands for me to pick which one it is in. It is usually easy to intentionally pick the empty hand, letting them feel like they can do the trick too. We go back and forth for a few minutes, I do the trick and pull the coin from my ear, or their elbow, or from under their lunch tray, then they do the trick for me.

For a few moments they weren't displaced Ukrainians, they were who they should be, children having fun, believing in magic. I am under no illusion that the kids will remember any of this, nor did a few minutes of fun help address any of their awful life circumstances. What is true is that, if I could, I would have sat there making them laugh forever. If it were in my power, I would hug them, tell them how wonderful they are. If I was really able to do magic, I would give them their old lives back.

As I got up to leave, both children automatically offered their coin back to me. I found that so touching. I refused, saying, "no, please keep them," in English and via hand motions. I looked at the mother, hoping she would allow them to keep the coins. We locked eyes, and I did not need to speak Ukrainian to understand her. While I could not imagine what she had been through, and what horror she has tried to shield from her children, I know a grateful parent when I see one.

As I walked away, I looked back once, and saw the kids each performing the trick to one of their grandparents. I guess the mom was watching me leave, for our eyes locked again. I am not sure what, if anything, she was thinking. I'm sure she couldn't see it in my gaze, but I was offering my love, and my wish that I could do more.

Being well along the atheist-agnostic continuum, I don't pray. So, I'm not sure what to call it, but at that moment, I asked the universe to be kind to this family from now on. Give me less, give them more.

Before going back to the clinic, I took a brief walk outside to try to settle my roiling emotions. In the

brilliant sunshine, all I saw were families who have so much less than I do. It was still too early in the morning back home to text my own family, so I reviewed the texts I received the night before. They were full of kudos, telling me how proud they are of me, how much they love me. This only served to reinforce how much more unearned good fortune, safety, and security I possess.

While intellectually, I know that I was doing a good thing by coming to Poland, I had been feeling ineffectual. What these displaced residents needed went well beyond anything I could offer clinically as a physician. It was surprising that a few minutes in the cafeteria, simply being a kind person, doing a trick I learned as a teenager, left me feeling that I made even a bit of an impact.

The moments I spent with that family will certainly be forgotten by them as they endure wave upon wave of pain, loss, and anxiety. I will make sure that at the very least I do them the honor of not forgetting them. Not forgetting them when I hug my wife and sons upon my return. Not forgetting them when I fall back into my life with worries about nonsense. Not forgetting them as I watch my grown sons' lives unfold and bloom. Not forgetting them when I someday hold my grandchildren who will want for nothing.

Can I hope that the connection with the mother helped her get through one more night worrying about what would happen next to her family? Maybe the coins kept the kids occupied for a few minutes so that she could let herself cry without them noticing? Probably not. They are still, a displaced family with a very uncertain future.

I'll never know what happened to that family. I tried to pack as much love and hope into those two coins as I could. It meant little to them, but for me, it was the most meaningful dollar I ever spent.

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