

“It’s Okay.., Not Today.., but I Support You Guys Anyway.”

Jonathan Lewis Smith

A month ago, I started working as a street side solicitor for a nonprofit organization fighting for the environment. Since then, I've talked with hundreds of people. It is interesting being on the other side of the solicitation coin. Growing up, I had seen plenty of people outside the grocery store asking for cash or memberships or both; plenty of times I walked on by.

It hurt the first time I was told, “Not today.” That was terrible because it acknowledged the problem but betrayed an unwillingness to act. Worse were the quickly stated, “It’s okay” comments; how easily and haphazardly people blindly shunt aside information and dismiss moments of importance that exist right before their eyes. It’s funny now to hear the infinite variations of, “I support you guys anyway” -- a perfect excuse that both expresses and bypasses one’s values and ideals.

It is difficult to describe the kind of person who stops. There isn’t any rule of thumb. Some people have heard about the issues I’m advocating. Some simply mishear my words and stop for the sake of resolving their confusion. Others are genuinely curious about an unknown topic, either because of their truly caring nature or because of some random neuron that fired in their brain. In any case, I accept the people who stop with love and energy, just because their listening is so valuable to me, when compared to the callousness and disdain of some.

Many people are in a real rush – I don’t begrudge them. But there are some liars. These claim to be in a rush, but swagger on. They upset me. Then there are those who claim to have signed on before – but from the nuances it’s obvious they have not. The difference is clear. For these people, “Thank you, have a wonderful day” is often the best gift I can give them. Along with those people who call me a Communist for my making a strong case for the importance of nature -- all I can wish for them is to have some influence in their lives, even if it’s to show them kindness.

I didn’t become an advocate to ruin your day, to kill capitalism, or to waste your time. I came out here to find fellow spirits, those rare souls who do more than stop and listen in the moment of opportunity. Beyond the capability and circumstances which enables someone to contribute (n.b. no solicitor has ever begrudged an honest inability to pay), what is it that makes someone willing to act and give?

I’m partly responsible, that’s a consistent truth. As a representative of an organization, if I fail to express legitimacy in myself and the endeavor, there’s no way people will enroll. My own commitments and demeanor have to inspire confidence, and it’s also my job to make the experience safe and enjoyable – it’s a balancing act between earnestness and delivery in every conversation. But that’s the job description. Really, the pivotal point in engaging someone in a transformation exists over there, somewhere in the heart and mind of each person that walks by, and in the mystery of their constitution.

What is it that makes the difference? When they read Dr. Seuss, "[The Lorax](#)" as a child and gained an appreciation for nature? Perhaps, it was a vacation in a national park that forever changed a their relationship to the mountains and trees? An encounter with dolphins at sea, or

the pure kindness of the family dog – anything could have the power to instill someone with compassion and empathy for all life's equal footing in this world.

The diversity is astounding. There's a spark of action and willingness inside everyone surely – but it's not a crapshoot when trying to evoke someone's listening to the environmental movement. Each time it works, even for those beautiful souls who stop, listen, and contribute from genuine and innocent curiosity and caring, there is some overarching character trait that enables them all – it's always self-perception, more specifically the perception of self as more than "Me" and "I."

If you want to know something, study its opposite. The people who yell at me, slander me, and accuse my non-profit of foul play and bad behavior, they are united by the absence of "we" language. Somehow, we are already enemies. It's immediately "you" versus "me", and there isn't a moderator or negotiator I've encountered who can bridge that gap in the 10 seconds I have before they're gone.

What utterly negative people don't see is how close new possibilities are to them. It matters that many of the worldviews that reject environmentalism are constructed and perpetuated for their own ascendance. I cannot recall meeting someone who was both rude and completely authentic. Always I feel agendas beneath the surface; lifetimes and histories of socialization and identity building that has left some people as drones – emotional, rational drones who are fully autonomous, but with blinders.

Let me be clear; each person is a fresh experience. Trying to predict how each new person will be is neither fun nor effective. Creative indifference is necessary. It's important to develop tough skin for my job; but without naiveté, passion, and faith in my cause, I would quickly fall into discouragement or anger. It takes strength to move on from another human being who already knows it's not their problem. But it's worth it. If you want to know something, study its opposite. I am here to open a path for others to act in ways that are focused and good for the planet. I am here to make your day better. I don't mind your political opinions or your religious beliefs. I'm excited for what we can accomplish together. And I won't bend. Each success makes the world a better place, and successes happen every day.

"No thank you, not today" you say? Well okay, "Have a nice day! We'll keep fighting for you! Next time!"