

Introduction

“Act as if what you do makes a difference. It does.”

—William James

I wasn't sure if it was the screaming that woke me up, or the rather large man standing above me, but either way, I was awake. In that moment I realized my decision to sleep on the mean streets of Pittsburgh might not have been the wisest. But often my worst decisions have led to my greatest experiences. It was by saying yes to adventures (especially the crazy ones) that I found myself in those blood-pumping, soul-expanding moments of life.

I looked around the dirty, gum-stained sidewalk on which I had been invited to sleep. Tony, my new friend and host, was also now awake, as Richard, the man pacing between our makeshift beds, yelled at no one in particular, “I don't feel safe here!”

I had just arrived in Pittsburgh that afternoon. I had nothing in my pocket and was relying solely on the kindness of strangers for food, shelter, and gas to make it across the world. That's right, the world. After looking for a place to stay all day, I headed over to a local park, the kind where old men play chess while younger men deal drugs. But Tony was neither. He was just a good man who had fallen on hard times. When I asked him if I could stay

with him that night, he responded with a sad smile, “You could if I wasn’t homeless.”

And that’s how I woke up, sleeping on the streets, in the rain, with a man standing above my bed, screaming that he didn’t feel safe. He wasn’t alone. I pulled up my ratty blanket to fight the chill—cold and tired and well, let’s face it, a little more than mildly scared. You might as well have frozen a camera on my face and heard my inner voice scream: “Why on earth am I doing this?”

Which I must admit wasn’t a bad question. The truth was I was having an existential crisis. It wasn’t my first. In fact, it wasn’t even my second. Apparently, I get my existential crises as often as other people file their taxes. About once a year I seem to be struck with this knowledge that though life might look rosy on the outside—health, wealth and friends—things felt pretty murky within.

It’s been a few years now since I suffered the “Big Kahuna” of existential crises. You see, I used to be someone else. I was living in London working as a successful broker in a family run business. I was completely uninspired, deeply depressed, and however hard it is to admit, at my darkest times, suicidal. I had little hope for myself, and even less for the world I called home. Then it happened. I stumbled across the film *The Motorcycle Diaries*, which chronicled the inspirational story of Che Guevara. On Che’s journey, he crossed South America relying solely on the kindness of strangers, and his story lit up my mundane existence.

Here was a romanticized version of the legendary revolutionary connecting with people. Living. Exploring. I wasn’t quite ready to overthrow the Cuban government, but I did want to start a revolution of sorts. I wanted to revolt against the predetermined structure of my own life. In Che, I saw a man who was living his dream, a fully realized, absolutely free human being. Someone

I wished to be. In the moments after the credits of the film had rolled into the ether, I knew something inside me had irrevocably changed. She was *my* proof that there was more to this little trip on planet Earth. Much more.

Over the next few weeks I found the courage to rise from my slumber. I gave up my comfortable life to travel the world. The apex of those travels was walking across America with only \$5 in my pocket and that generosity of strangers making up for the rest. This ultimately led to my first TV show and book “Amazing Adventures of a Nobody.” I left the cold dreary streets of London and moved to Los Angeles: the city of dreams. And to a certain extent, I *was* living my dream. Or at least more than I had been before—I had a lovely girlfriend, a very friendly dog and a job that most days kept me busy. I thought my existential crisis had been resolved, but maybe it had only taken on a different face.

Because though I had gone out into the world, changed my life, and brought back some stories, there was something within me that felt trapped. I felt like I was waking up every morning to live someone else’s life, to do someone else’s job. I was once again wearing an old familiar mask.

I had a collection of those masks. We all do. Whether it’s a young mother in a Belizean jungle or a businessman on the streets of Manhattan, we each have some preconceived notion about what kind of life we think we’re supposed to live, and then we become trapped in that perception. We give up the childish dream, or we exchange it for something that feels safer, more grown up. I was no different. But even when I shook off that first mask in London—the mask of playing it safe—and went across America on \$5 a day, I learned how many masks were still hiding beneath. And then one afternoon I found myself walking down Hollywood

Boulevard and my whole life changed . . . again.

I had gone out to lunch and was walking back to my car when it happened. The palm trees stood out in the distance, the sun beat down on the star-lined sidewalk, and then I saw him. He was sitting by an over-packed grocery cart with a dirty baseball cap on his head, torn jeans, and a grime-stained face. But in his hands, the homeless man held a sign that stopped me dead in my tracks. Some people might call these moments, turning points. I am one of those people. And I always know when they happen. It's as though the world comes to a standstill, the orchestra of sounds and words and cars and life fade into a quiet hum, and the moment gets etched so deeply into my memory, I can always feel it right there under my skin. My face softened as I read the sign in the homeless man's hands. It said, "Kindness is the best medicine."

Here's the funny thing about getting everything you *think* you want. You always want more. But for me, I didn't want more money or more fame. Throughout my previous Amazing Adventures, I had gotten a taste of connecting with people in a way I never thought possible. I had made friendships. Real, deep friendships. Our connections were about more than where we lived or what we did for work, they were about two humans trying to make it through this crazy world. Together.

I realized that I was missing the one thing that had brought me here: connecting with people through the language of kindness. And I don't just mean big, life changing, "Whoa, did that just happen?" kindness. I also mean the small whispers, the quiet reminders that happen every day when people drop their masks and reveal their hearts. This river of kindness flows through each and every one of us, connecting us together.

Because kindness is more than just medicine. The act of giving

and receiving is where the real magic of human connection occurs. It's where people move past the monotonous bullshit of what we do for work or how we feel about the weather, and we move into those private interior worlds, or as some people call them, souls, to connect with one another and to heal. And I wanted more of it. Much, much more. What I discovered on my previous walk across America was that there is a rare and magnificent magic that happens when a stranger walks into town. Humans want to know about each other. They want to connect. So I figured what better way to find that magic again than by embarking on a mission of kindness around Earth?

I stood there on Hollywood Boulevard and began to cry. Like really cry. The kind of crying men don't do, at least not in the middle of the day on a busy street. They were old tears. Tears from growing up in a world where the people around me were often more interested in keeping a stiff upper lip than genuinely connecting with the people around them, including me. And the only way to heal from that, the only way for all of us to heal, is through other people. It all made sense in that moment. I approached the homeless man with his serendipitous sign and put two \$20 bills into his decrepit hat. That one act of *giving* was able to make me feel what I hadn't felt in years: communion with another. Sure, I felt connected to the people in my life—my girlfriend, my family, the people I worked with—but what I was missing was that deep and impenetrable feeling that I was one with someone else. The man on the street smiled at me. I smiled in return. Then I rushed home, knowing exactly what I had to do.

And by rushing home, I mean crawling along in a Los Angeles-sized traffic jam. But that's the upside of traffic, it gives you time to think. It was then that I formulated my plan. I realized

that my first foray across America had been all about *receiving* kindness, but for my next journey receiving was not going to be enough.. This time I needed things to go full circle—I needed to offer kindness as well as receive it.

By the time I had emerged from traffic hell I had already decided to circumnavigate the globe and that I would do it on a vintage motorbike. Like Che. The bike had to have a sidecar because you never knew who would need a helping hand. And it had to be yellow. Yes, yellow. Because yellow motorbikes are way cooler. I would have no money. No food. No place to stay. And the unnerving part—no gas. I decided right away that I would also not accept money. People could offer me food and lodging, but they could not give me the cash to pay for it myself. I wasn't looking for a free ride; I was looking for a shared one.

It dawned on me that I might be in the process of creating the first vehicle powered solely by kindness. Just as asking for help had allowed me to connect the last time I travelled across America, I figured it would do the same thing this time. “Why change a winning formula?” I mumbled to myself.

But on this journey, I wouldn't just be asking for help, I would ultimately be offering something in return. Something life-changing. I wanted to reconnect to the world and hopefully in some small way, reconnect my brothers and sisters of the world to themselves and to each other. I would use my own money to repay the kindness of those who had helped me. No one would be aware of my intentions beforehand. I didn't want people to know that if they showed me a random act of kindness they would receive anything in return. That's not the way it works. We don't give to get. We give to give. I couldn't help everyone who was kind and loving, but I would help as many as I could. And I would do so in

life-changing, “Whoa, did that just happen?” ways.

I made it home and ran up the steps to my house, taking them three at a time. I rushed into the living room to see my girlfriend sitting on the couch with her computer. Lina smiled at me from across the room, and as it often did in her presence, my heart relaxed a little. I breathed in deep, knowing this was *not* the big announcement she wanted to hear.

I went towards her and without even realizing it, I found myself bending down on one knee in front of her, “Babe,” I began. “I need to tell you something.”

I could see a flicker of joy in her eyes, and then I realized Lina was expecting a far grander proposal. For the last couple of months (ever since we had moved in together), she had begun to hint in increasingly stronger nudges that she wanted something akin to a promise from me. A promise that this was heading to commitment, heading towards children, heading towards the kind of life where she and I would be together, forever.

For. Ever.

Realizing that a bended knee was probably not the right gesture, I quickly stood up and announced, “I am going on a journey.”

“Great,” she said, her blonde hair falling loosely around her face as she looked back at her computer, hiding the swift disappointment I had seen cloud her eyes. “Where you off to?”

“Los Angeles.”

“We’re in Los Angeles, silly?” she laughed. “Are you going to the grocery store?”

Here goes, I thought to myself. It was now or never, “Not exactly, I’m going from Los Angeles to Los Angeles. I am going to circumnavigate the globe on a vintage yellow motorcycle.”

Silence.

More silence.

“Babe,” I began, a little concerned for my safety.

The laptop snapped closed and she was back to life, “Are you serious??” Her face began to darken as she pleaded. “Leon, please tell me this is just another one of your wacky ideas.”

Well, it certainly was wacky.

I hesitated. Did I really want to risk my relationship, my career . . . for kindness?

“I am deadly serious.”

Then the crying began. And it didn’t stop.

“Babe, I need to do this,” I explained, the passion that had been missing from my life suddenly returned. I felt like Che driving out of that final scene and into the journey that would forever change his life, and many others. It wasn’t just about seeing the world anymore; it was about bathing in its river.

“Why,” she cried. “Haven’t you already done enough existential cliff diving?”

“Yes, but the last time, I did it for me.”

I stopped myself. I don’t think I had quite realized it yet, but I didn’t want this trip to be about me. Honestly, I had had enough of me. I wanted it to be a part of something so much bigger, something so much more important. I wanted it to be about you. Yes, you.

About all of us.

As I stood there trying to explain to the girlfriend who had just moved in why I now needed to leave, I actually thought that I no longer needed a revolution in *my* life. Instead, I yearned to create the ripples of Che’s revolutionary spirit in others. It was about offering people the type of gift that wouldn’t just change them, but transform them in the way that only kindness can. And through

that transformation they would pass the torch to another, lighting the world through our connections.

“My trip is just that first spark,” I tried to explain to Lina.

She didn’t reply at first, which was concerning. I honestly don’t think there is a crueller punishment on earth than silence. But finally she looked up at me, and asked the question I had tried so diligently not to ask myself: “Oh Leon, will you ever be able to stop running?”

I had no answer.

After about an hour of tears and recriminations I managed to persuade her that although I was going to be away for up to six months, it would fly by quickly. She could see in my eyes and by this time, *my* tears, that I felt destined to take this journey. I knew my feet were taking me there. It wasn’t a choice anymore.

“Just tell me this,” Lina finally asked, wiping away her tears, “Do you think you can ever be happy . . . here?”

“Of course,” I replied with as much honesty as I could muster.

Lina looked at me and sighed, “Look, I am proud of you for wanting to change the world, Leon. I just hope next time you can do it closer to home.”

Change the world? Apparently, Lina has very high expectations.

* * *

Before this big adventure could happen, however, I had to deal with logistics, the great hurdle to any worthwhile dream. I needed to find a motorbike that would survive the rough roads and tough times that the journey would surely entail. I decided I would call it Kindness One because much like Air Force One it would be an Ambassador to the world . . . only a little yellower. I had to settle on an outline for my route around the globe. I also had to find a

way to cross two oceans, a number of continents, a laundry list of cities, and a few hostile states on kindness alone, all with my yellow bike tagging along. And I needed to get visas, lots of them.

Then there was the little detail of *how* I wanted to do this. Would I bring along a TV crew to catalogue my experiences or would I be documenting my own adventure? I wanted the journey to be as intimate as possible yet I also recognized how many people could potentially be touched by it through the medium of TV. I decided to go with the TV crew. But only under one condition: they would stay back until I invited them into whatever story or life I was joining. I wanted to do this trip alone. And I wanted to connect with people first before cameras showed up in the background. The crew would be the silent sidekicks of my adventure; but in many ways, they would also be my witness. As will you.

By the time this journey is over I hope you will see how an act of kindness *really can* change the world. You will meet Tony, the homeless man who taught me that true riches don't reside in our wallets but in our hearts. You will see the courage shown by my friend in Cambodia whose life was ravaged by illness, loss, and natural disaster. You will meet a doctor whose passion for service literally restores the sight of the poor. You will see how one well-intentioned, but flawed human being can travel around the globe on the kindness of others and be reborn. And there are many others who you will *not* meet: strangers who for a moment became friends, passing quickly through the day to offer me food, gas, and the means to keep going.

Salman Rushdie once wrote, "To understand just one life you have to swallow the world." We don't have to travel this entire blue planet of ours to have that experience. We just have to be willing to *see* each other. I see you and you see me. Then the masks of who

The Kindness Diaries

we think we should be get dropped. And we greet one another in ways that need no language, that demand no masks. We set out on the journey of life, getting to partake in this brief but beautiful adventure together.