**Kindness is**

When I was a teenager, I worked at a theme park in the games department. I was the fellow who provided everyone’s till in the morning and gave them change throughout the day, a cashier basically. I would come in the morning and prepare tills for all the games attendants in order to provide change, 5s,10s, and ones if memory serves.

I would be in the cash office and hand out the aprons with the cash prepared inside. Throughout the day, as their singles ebbed and their crisp stack thinned, replaced with grungy yet more desirable dubs and such, they would return. Leaving with their bankroll renewed, ready to exchange these bills for those of larger denominations from people hoping today would be their lucky day.

I liked this job, I liked the people, I liked that since we were out of the public eye, us employees could relax around peers rather than patrons. Looking back on these days was one of my first lessons in appreciation of the mundane.

So that summer there was a work program going on where individuals who where in a halfway house for (If I’m remembering correctly.. this was 19 years ago) non violent crime worked at the theme park.

They were great folks, I bet that most of these guys just hoped that we could understand something, that past mistakes don't always need to decide one's future. One's perception of others shouldn't be decided based on things that have no bearing on your shared experiences now. I would bet that some of the people we all interact with daily, have done things that would have put them into that halfway house, or worse, had things happened differently. But the intention of this essay one involving a cautionary tale, or even one of kumbaya. I want to share a couple weeks of my past that taught me about something I was not aware I had been lacking. Grace.

There was this this older dude, well, older than my 16ish years of age, he was probably in his 40s.. I wish I remembered his name! Yet I can, clearly remember his face and what I learned from him. He was a weathered, short stocky guy, he reminded me of Mario from Super Mario Bros, but instead of having Marios playful Italian timbre, he spoke with a warm, cheerful baritone that fit well with the musical rhythm of his Hispanic accent.

Since I was the cash dude, I interacted with everyone each morning and throughout the day. Exchanging those aforementioned stacks.. I remember during the first month or so of that group’s employment, he would rib me a bit, totally appropriate stuff, not mean, just normal, friendly banter and jokes. I was just an awkward kid who lacked confidence, so I wouldn’t know how to respond. Internally I would get pretty upset. I knew he wasn’t trying to be rude, but I always left the interactions feeling as if I had missed out. I started dreading the interactions. One day I let my feelings show on my face, it got to me.. I was just pissed. Being the brat that I was, I remember being sulky. Pretty quickly, he noticed but of course, I didn’t.

The next day, I thought it was business as usual, so when he came to get his till, my stomach started to hurt and I palms started to sweat. “Here we go again.. *how* should my face look? Is *this* normal? Hrrmmmm.”

When I saw his face, I realized I was completely off-base. He, without an ounce of condescension, and plenty of grace, apologized to me.

He genuinely wanted me to know he never wanted to try and get a rise out of me or upset me, and that we wanted me to know he was sorry if he caused me to be uncomfortable.

He followed this up by saying that he only messed with me because I was funny and he liked talking to me.

I don’t remember my response, I hope it was adequate. It probably wasn’t.

I think that was the first time someone in the “real” world, went out of their way to make things right. It took true humility and courage, combined with a desire to have a good impact on those around you. He was being real. Giving somebody more than they really deserve. I’m very grateful for that kindness.

The rest of that summer was cool. We had lunch often. (this dude would use so much sugar in his coffee!) He told me a bit about what got him to where he was, and talked about how he wanted to see other younger folks do better. He wasn’t gaining anything from this, it wasn’t preachy, it was nice. He gave thoughtful companionship and advice freely to an awkward kid who could barely look at people in the eyes.

While he still was intimidating, I saw it for what it was. It came from years, He owned his mistakes, had been through stuff, and was able to come out with his head on straight. What’s more, if I could go back quickly to the ribbing, he really wasn’t doing *anything* wrong, I was just soft. Most other people would have continued the jokes, or just stopped, and wrote me off as beneath them, others did.

He didn’t.

It showed me many things, like the futility of trying to assume other people’s intents, and the value of real communication.

I think about this summer often, about the impact little gestures can have on those around us, and what fundamental kindness can be.

Thanks for reading 8)