

Chapter 2

You used my money for what?

It is Friday morning, September 2, 2005. I am packed and will be leaving for the airport in a few hours. Steve is leaving for work. He smiles and I know something is worrying him. I ask what is wrong. He says he has never learned to do the laundry. We laugh. He practices a load before leaving, Steve adds the soap, practices pushing, pulling and turning the dials. He writes it all down step by step and tapes it on the washer. He leaves for work and I notice all the darks, colors and whites are humming along together in hot water. His underwear will be pink tonight. Steve is the best thing that has ever happened to me. We have been married for 36 years.

I need to go to the ATM a few blocks away to get money for the trip and decide to put on my new Red Cross shirt. It has never been worn, never washed, never shrunk. It has that non sexy look somewhere between relaxed and just plain old baggy. It is 6:30 AM, still early. Laura my neighbor is in her driveway. She looks up, sees the red shirt and says with a knowing smile, "I thought you would be going." How did she know? I didn't know myself. I call Baudri my neighbor next door and leave a message asking her to look in on Steve. He is not used to my going away and leaving him. Early on in our marriage Steve often went off for business trips to the orient, sometimes for two weeks at a time and we never thought much about that. We had more of an old fashioned traditional relationship than I acknowledged. You Tarzan go off to hunt, me Jane, stay home shop, cook, clean. It was actually wonderful at the time.

At the ATM machine, outside the bank a man smiles at me. Is he trying to pick me up at 7 AM? I'm not that beautiful. He waves and says "I just wrote a check to the Red Cross". I smile back and feel support. We share a commitment and a sense of connection for however fleeting the glance and smile were. This was a beginning of the recognition of how little time and effort it sometimes takes to be inspired and encouraged.

I begin to think about being in devastated areas and wonder what to say to people who may have not eaten for 3 days. Will they have eaten a meal before we meet? I bring a shopping bag full of cereal bars and tuna packs on the plane. Mental plans are made to buy more snacks upon landing in Houston.

I stop in the office before most people are at work and leave an e-mail to say goodbye to my co-workers and realize that fund raising for the Red Cross should not wait until next week when I return. Listening, talking, hugging, and using social work skills feel insufficient. People need food now. A co-worker is in early. Her name is Tierney and I ask if she would be in charge of collecting money for the Red Cross while I am gone.

Tierney is a beautiful young woman with long strawberry blonde hair. She has a fabulous natural fresh scrubbed wholesome girl next door look. Tierney just went back to school for a new master's degree, works full time, comes in early hours and is always

involved in advocating for animal rights, the environment, good nutrition etc. She has a heart of gold. Everyone loves Tierney. She says yes.

A short e-mail is written saying goodbye to my co-workers. A check is handed to Tierney for \$100 to the Red Cross and she begins the drive. We are social workers, counselors, secretaries, financial staff, managers etc. It is a non profit agency. None of us earn a huge salary. . I expect she will collect a few hundred dollars.

Steve meets me at work and we drive to the airport. It is strange. Steve always handles the tickets, hotel reservations, rental cars and I let him. He always takes care of me. We say goodbye not knowing if cell phones will work, electricity will be on, where I will be. It is good that he will have a busy week. He will not have time to worry.

Inside the gate at the airport, while standing on line for tickets, there are two young men who smile at me. Mike and George are just 18 years old. In a few weeks George will go into the marines. He says he will be in Iraq. They both see my red shirt and excitedly say “hey we are Red Cross too.” A bond begins. They show care when I briefly misplace my boarding pass, (it was in my back pocket instead of my folder). Mike offers to carry my bag. He goes back to the gate to check for my pass. I feel embarrassed that the pass seems lost. They are new and I’m setting a terrible example by being disorganized before even getting out of the gate. They are going to be great Red Crossers. They take charge, are compassionate and I feel cared for.

We board the plane and end up sitting far apart. An hour passes and I find some forms Mike and George will need to know how to fill out. I get out of my seat and walk down the aisle to the front of the plane where Mike and George are sitting. A pretty young woman behind me is named Maggie. She sees the red shirt, taps me on the shoulder and says “hey I’m Red Cross too.” She is smart, well organized and knows how to take charge. She points across the aisle to a young woman sitting on the other side. Alisha she says is from Chicago and she is Red Cross too. They both work for Cisco. I expect they are both light years ahead of me on technology. After all they both work in a very prestigious high tech company in one of the most competitive, progressive areas in the nation and probably the world. I try not to badger myself for thinking I’m less technically adept and decide to focus on how great it is that bright young enthusiastic Silicon Valley minds have joined us.

Just before landing Maggie speaks to an airline steward and asks that he make an announcement to find out how many people on the plane are Red Crossers. He makes the announcement and 10 hands go up. Maggie asks the steward to suggest that we all meet at the baggage claim around the woman in the red shirt. We will organize and strategize about where we are going. The steward makes the announcement and then adds a thank you to us for going. The whole plane erupts in spontaneous applause. Wearing red is certainly a good beginning.

After landing we all meet in the terminal, call headquarters and are told to go to a hotel at the airport for the night. I was prepared for a shelter, but it was late evening and we have to be at an early morning briefing at the airport. We are therefore assigned to a hotel at the airport to expedite arrival for the early morning briefing. At the hotel the reservations clerk greets us cheerily and tells us too find a partner, sign a sheet of paper with our names and she will give us a key. Wow, how do they know who we are? Anyone can ask for a room. I marvel at how they have cut through the red tape and simplified paperwork. ID's are not even taken. I make a mental note to harass my supervisor when I get back home about the need to eliminate paperwork, unnecessary details and focus on what is really important. This has long been an ongoing issue and here today it all seems so clear. Why do we get bogged down with multiple reports and multiple ways of saying the same thing? When looking for a new job doesn't a work history of 30 years get put on a one page resume?

We go to pick partners to share a room with and I choose a tall good looking young man who is 1/3 my age. It breaks the ice and we all laugh. Steve, if you are reading this I really shared a room with Alisha, the smart young woman from Chicago.

We get to the room and I'm amazed. I call Steve to say we arrived safely, proceed to tell him the name of a great hotel where we are staying and indicate the thread count of the sheets. **"Is that what you used my money for"?** he yells. Tell the Red Cross to buy food and clothing for people. He is mad and definitely a bit jealous that I'm having a good time while he is home, lonely and trying to defrost a frozen dinner.