

Thought to ponder at the beginning:

“That which you bestow freely and willingly
will bring you all the happy luck that a grateful universe knows how to return.”
– Sarah Adams

Reading “Be Cool to the Pizza Dude,” by Sarah Adams (a “This I Believe” essay)

If I have one guiding philosophy about life, it is this: “Be cool to the pizza delivery dude; it's good luck.” Four principles guide the pizza dude philosophy.

Principle 1: Coolness to the pizza delivery dude is a practice in humility and forgiveness. I let him cut me off in traffic, let him safely hit the exit ramp from the left lane, let him forget to use his blinker without extending any of my digits out the window or toward my horn because there should be one moment in my harried life when a car may encroach or cut off or pass and I let it go.

Sometimes when I have become so certain of my ownership of my lane, daring anyone to challenge me, the pizza dude speeds by in his rusted Chevette. His pizza light atop his car glowing like a beacon reminds me to check myself as I flow through the world. After all, the dude is delivering pizza to young and old, families and singletons, gays and straights, blacks, whites, and browns, rich and poor, and vegetarians and meat lovers alike. As he journeys, I give safe passage, practice restraint, show courtesy, and contain my anger.

Principle 2: Coolness to the pizza delivery dude is a practice in empathy.

Let's face it: We've all taken jobs just to have a job because some money is better than none. I've held an assortment of these jobs and was grateful for the paycheck that meant I didn't have to share my Cheerios with my cats. In the big pizza wheel of life, sometimes you're the hot bubbly cheese and sometimes you're the burnt crust. It's good to remember the fickle spinning of that wheel.

Principle 3: Coolness to the pizza dude is a practice in honor, and it reminds me to honor honest work.

Let me tell you something about these dudes: They never took over a company and, as CEO, artificially inflated the value of the stock and cashed out their own shares, bringing the company to the brink of bankruptcy, resulting in twenty thousand people losing their jobs while the CEO builds a home the size of a luxury hotel. Rather, the dudes sleep the sleep of the just.

Principle 4: Coolness to the pizza delivery dude is a practice in equality.

My measurement as a human being, my worth, is the pride I take in performing my job – any job – and the respect with which I treat others. I am the equal of the world not because of the car I drive, the size

of the TV I own, the weight I can bench-press, or the calculus equations I can solve. I am the equal to all I meet because of the kindness in my heart.

And it all starts here – with the pizza delivery dude. Tip him well, friends and brethren, for that which you bestow freely and willingly will bring you all the happy luck that a grateful universe knows how to return.

Sermon

Being Cool

(c) Sylvia Stocker

I have never been cool (although I did drive a rusted Chevette for many years). I've never aspired to be cool. Not in the high fashion, popularity contest sort of way. But I have, over the years, learned to “chill” sometimes – to let go of my sense of my own importance, or my own anxiety, or my own urgency, in the interest of making room for other people.

I was reminded of that a couple of weeks ago, when a couple of old friends were visiting. We walked around Mackworth Island down in Falmouth one day.

Now, normally, all three of us are fast walkers. One of us, in particular, hates getting stuck behind people who are just strolling along. Her way is to wait for a break in the clot of people and speed through it so that she can resume her usual fast clip. Then the other two of us wait for our openings, then make our moves to get ahead of the dawdlers.

But for a couple of months, I have had a torn meniscus, and I can't speed anywhere right now. Overtaking and passing on foot are beyond me.

So of course, you can guess what happened that day on Mackworth island. The three of us encountered a crowd of dawdlers taking up the entire width of the path, which was hemmed in on both sides by impenetrable stands of trees. They plodded along, oblivious to us and our desire to move at a faster clip. Annoyance flooded my friend, body and soul. She slipped into high alert, planning her move. I knew what was in store.

“Wait,” I said, “I can't.”

Both friends turned to me, perplexed as to what should happen next. I mean, seriously, was I suggesting we not speed by those slowpokes?

“I can't go fast,” I said. “Let's just stop a minute. Let's just let them get ahead of us.”

The two of them were like skittish ponies, wanting to prance ahead, and unsure of how to deal with this sudden departure from normalcy.

“Breathe deeply,” I said, demonstrating.

“Just chill,” I said.

“Patience,” I said.

I was exaggerating, and my friends laughed, thinking I was being funny. And I kind of was. But also, I kind of wasn't. Because, really, wouldn't my life be happier – wouldn't my friends' lives be happier – if we could just accept people who are out for a stroll instead of allowing their slow pace to annoy us? Wouldn't I be better off if I taught myself to breathe deeply and collect myself whenever I start to get annoyed by something trivial like that? I think so.

(But, just to be clear: I have been less successful at adopting this magnanimous attitude toward people driving campers slowly up Route 1. My poor spouse can bear witness to my impatience and crabbiness in those conditions.)

I love Sarah Adams' essay, “Be Cool to the Pizza Dude.” I stumbled across it about a dozen years ago, and I arrived in Brunswick with it tucked into my back pocket. I knew I would want to share it with you at some point.

Of course, I like the values Adams lifts up: humility, forgiveness, empathy, honor, honesty, equality. I love her use of humor and her vivid descriptions. I love that I can place myself in her shoes. I've seen the pizza dude speed by plenty of times. On rare occasion, the pizza dude has even stopped at my house. And I've known impatience, crummy jobs, and the need for reminders to keep moving in the direction my ethics dictate. I've know what it is to feel I own my lane – only to discover that, well, actually, I don't. I can relate to Adams.

Since reading the essay, I've never regarded pizza dudes in quite the same way as before. Seeing the pizza dude motoring along reminds me to collect myself for a moment and connect with my highest values. The dudes may think they are just delivering pizza. But, for me, they are delivering reminders of equality, the spinning wheel of fortune, humility, and the fact that I need to make room for the many with whom I share my time and space.

But are there other reminders that can stop me in my tracks, can get cause me to detach from my own harried life for just a few moments and remind of the most important things?

Human beings are forever creating symbols and signs that are meant to move us to connect with ideals. Religious symbols are meant to stir the common values of religious communities. Tibetan prayer flags remind Tibetan Buddhists of peace, for instance. The cross reminds Christians of Jesus' sacrifice and the tenets of the religion that sprang up in the wake of his death.

Sometimes such symbols can backfire, of course. The American flag is meant to move Americans to a feeling of patriotism, for instance, but instead, these days it moves many to a feeling of anger and tears.

Sometimes human beings come up with their own personal signs, which remind them of the things they hold most high. I've thought of a couple from my own life. I'd be curious if you have some examples of your own. The first sign I thought of was those occasions when nature just keeps right on going, even

when it seems impossible she can. Most particularly, I love seeing things grow where you wouldn't think it would be possible. I actually cultivate those occasions and use them to marvel at the indomitable spirit of life.

Some months ago, I told the story of spotting a pansy growing in the crack between the cement foundation of the Wyler's building downtown and the brick sidewalk abutting that foundation. Even though nothing, *nothing*, should have grown there – there was scarcely a speck of dirt, for goodness sake – for several weeks, I watched as the green leaves poked through, then the plant grew bigger and bigger and then festooned itself with bright yellow blossoms.

I can no longer remember the topic of my sermon that day, but I can tell you Mark Smith was taken with the notion of that pansy growing in such barren conditions. He went home and wrote a poem about it:

Wonder, by Mark Smith

Mother Nature works her magic
in some of the strangest places.
I know of one of those spaces,
where cold concrete meets hard red brick.

Between that brick and grey concrete,
I saw a tip of green appear,
and grow, as warmer days drew near,
beside a busy city street.

Then sun and rain transformed that green
into yellow springtime flowers.
Color brought to a barren scene,
courtesy of magic powers.

These lone pansies reminded me,
there still is wonder here to see.

Yes, there still is wonder here to see. Being confronted by the pulsating, unstoppable power of nature, I am reminded of that wonder and of my own small place within it.

Incidentally, I emailed Mark to tell him I was using his poem today. He replied that he would enjoy it from afar because he was with his family on a beautiful pond enjoying kayaking, swimming, and listening to the loon.

Ah! The call of the loon! Is there anything more hauntingly beautiful than the call of the loon? For me, it, too, is a reminder of wildness and beauty and the web of life of which I and all of humanity are just one tiny part.

Both life asserting itself in unlikely places and the call of the loon are beautiful reminders, but they are somewhat seasonal. I wanted to think of a sign that shared the ongoing randomness of the pizza dude. Here's the thing about the pizza dude: He or she can appear at any time, any season. Granted, the pizza dude is more likely to speed by at meal times. And the pizza dude only delivers when the pizzeria is open. Even with those limitations, the pizza dude seems to me to be like one of those meditation bells that people install on their smart phones. The bell goes off at random times ... and when it does, you're meant to stop what your doing and take a breath. A simple breath. When the pizza dude motors by at unpredictable, random times, one receives that sudden blast of enlightenment: "Oh, right, now I remember: I value humility, forgiveness, empathy, honor, honesty, equality. Thank you, dude, for bringing that to my mind."

Can you think of a reminder in your own life that shares those qualities of being commonplace but also unpredictable and random? Here's one I've thought of from my life: Pedestrians in crosswalks ... that is to say, the pedestrians I stop for when I am driving. Common enough, but one never knows when they will be there. Plenty of times crosswalks are empty. You never know when someone will appear, wanting to cross the street.

I'll be driving down the thoroughfare, big and powerful in my motorized vehicle. And a stranger at the side of the road, entering a crosswalk on foot, completely unprotected by steel and combustion engine, can make me stop and wait. Now there's an exercise in humility and inclusion. There's an example of waking up and paying attention. There's an example of the folly of being too certain about my ownership of "my" lane.

One of my favorite theologies – liberation theology – posits the idea that God is most present in the lives of those living at the margins ... those seemingly cast aside because of poverty, or gender identity, or race, or sexual orientation – or any characteristic that keeps them from enjoying the privilege of those in power. "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God." (Luke 6:20.) A perfect liberation theology sentiment.

If I'm driving along, who could be more at the margins than a pedestrian trying to cross the street? A vulnerable boarder crosser? They are literally at the margins of my vision. They are at the margins of power, too, for they do not enjoy the protection I do inside my two tons of steel. I stop and wait for them ... and am reminded that as I sojourn through this blessed life, I need to make room for others, particularly those who are most vulnerable.

Do you have some signs like the pizza dude, or the unlikely advent of nature in barren places, or the loon, or pedestrians in crosswalks? What are some of the reminders you count on to reconnect you with your highest ideals?

In the end, much of what the pizza dudes, the cross walks, the loons, and even the flowers growing despite brick and concrete remind me to do is to make space for others ... Because you can't build a world of justice and peace unless you step back yourself and allow others to occupy equal space, time and attention. You have to stop owning the lane and allow others to be there, too. You can't build a

world of honesty and valor, without making space for the truth. And you can't apply all that energy to building a world of justice, peace, honesty, and valor unless you take time to refresh yourself, to stop and marvel at the wonder that is still here to see.

That's what my friends and I had to do that day on Mackworth Island: We had to step aside, to hold back, to stop, to make space for other human beings occupying this glorious earth. When my friends and I moved on a couple of minutes later, we encountered those slowpokes again, of course, only now they had settled onto a bench to rest. In the end, there was plenty of space for them and for us.

I imagine I will return to my usual practice of walking quickly. And I'll come upon people simply strolling along. And I'll probably overtake them, because I like the feeling of walking briskly. But I'll try to quell any rising annoyance and replace it with gratitude: Before I pass by my fellow travelers, I hope I will remember to take a deep breath, to chill, and to thank them inwardly for reminding me that I share the earth with many, and there is room enough for all.

Be cool to the reminders. Chill. Make space, that all the world may flourish.