



PERSONAL ESSAY

The Goodwill Girl

FIRST-HAND EXPERIENCES AT A SECOND-HAND STORE.

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FOR A YEAR when I was 19, I was really good at counting money. I fingered through rumpled singles with ease, straightening them out and rearranging all of them to face the same way, President side up.

My small hands deftly glided through crisp twenties, counting sets of a hundred in my head: “Twenty, forty, sixty, eighty, one. Twenty, forty, sixty, eighty, two.”

I knew that a roll of quarters contained \$10; a roll of dimes was \$5.

My manager at Goodwill, Kathy, taught me how to count money. My first week there I stumbled through the process of counting all the money in my drawer, trying to make sure it broke even with the amount of merchandise I sold that day.

Kathy gave me tips on how to do my math correctly and how to use the store’s frustrating, archaic calculators. She brought me a can of balm that I began using to make my fingers sticky, which made counting bills easier.

Kathy and I talked a lot during the year I worked at Goodwill. We talked about babies, breast cancer, periods, boys and men, and our favorite places to eat in Columbia, Missouri, my college town and her home for many years. We talked about her two grown children who live at home with her; we talked more about her two dogs who slept in her bed.

At 19, I learned more about people in my year working at Goodwill than I had in all the years leading up to it.

I learned about a group of people who were very different than myself through daily interactions with my coworkers. I learned from women with sore hips and

bad legs and bent backs who did their jobs with a grace I’ve never seen before or since. I learned from men with long gray hair in ponytails and hands that shook and feet that ached who spoke to me like an equal, unlike men I’d worked with at previous jobs.

These women and men went home to kids and bills and responsibilities I didn’t have, and some to worlds I will never understand.

I come from a white, upper middle class family. My parents have graduate degrees. My house always has books in it. We are new money living in a new money neighborhood with dogs and tall trees and endless looped cul-de-sacs.

Before working there, I frequented Goodwill for its funky, cheap clothes that set my style apart. I shopped at Goodwill because “thrifting” is trendy; I spent almost no money on unique clothes and became the veritable queen of homemade crop tops. I thought that because I enjoyed shopping at Goodwill that it would be easy to work there, plus it was really close to my apartment and I needed a job.

What I found when I began was a reality that I was able to ignore as a shopper, but not as an employee. Most of the shoppers I interacted with were not college students looking for old Levis to make summer cut-offs, or crafty moms looking for supplies for a Pinterest project. The people I saw every day were people who shopped at Goodwill because they couldn’t afford to shop elsewhere. There is no data on the demographics of Goodwill shoppers to support this — only the statistics that Goodwill releases about itself, like total retail for the year or the number of people employed by the

company. But the majority of customers I served were anxious parents shopping for school supplies for four growing kids; patrons who would painstakingly count and recount change; folks who whispered to one another, “Are you sure we have enough?”

I often found that my friends would tip-toe around asking me about my workday, or people would take on a sort of “bless her heart” tone when I told them what I did. My experience there was not glowing, canonized servant work,

privilege did not afford me anything special, and this was important for me to understand.

I learned how to hold a conversation with anyone. I learned how to deep clean a public bathroom — truly my most humbling experience to date. I learned to have empathy. I learned how far a genuine compliment could go.

“That dress is beautiful on you,” I would say.

“Are you sure?” was almost always the response, but with a soft, subtle smile

“A woman told me about losing everything she had in a house fire. Another woman told me just how much she loved the WWE (World Wrestling Entertainment) upon discovering an ancient VHS collection of greatest hits. A man bought his daughter a treasure box and asked me what kind of surprises he should put in it. One woman bought dress pants for her husband’s funeral.”

and to assume so is condescending and reductive. I was working eight-hour shifts — five days a week full time, three days a week part time — with real people who I couldn’t afford to view as any different from myself.

Every day, I was taught that my coworkers and my customers were my equals and my peers, neither to be pitied nor dismissed. There was no time in our fast-paced schedule for me to begrudgingly mope about my responsibilities or refuse to do a job because I felt it was beneath me. My

that told me I had helped a woman believe it, even if just for a little bit.

At least once a day, I would ring up a customer who, upon finding me friendly, would share a part of her life with me. A woman told me about losing everything she had in a house fire. Another woman told me just how much she loved the WWE (World Wrestling Entertainment) upon discovering an ancient VHS collection of greatest hits. A man bought his daughter a treasure box and asked me what kind of surprises he should put in it. One woman bought

dress pants for her husband’s funeral.

It was a hard job. I left after a year because I moved downtown and wanted a job closer to my apartment. I still see people I worked with there, and I still go back to shop and say hello. I started dating my current boyfriend while I was working there, and the ladies who work in the back always ask me when we’re going to get engaged. They still remember his name.

I’m a senior in journalism school, but working at Goodwill taught me something I’ve yet to learn in any of my classes: People don’t get to talk about themselves very often.

I don’t just mean shouts into the social media void, a snippet of our private lives hurtled into space, waiting to bounce off someone on our Facebook feed who understands or cares, or at least “Likes” what we’ve curated to say. And on a related note, having and engaging with social media is a privilege itself, for those who can afford computers and smartphones. I mean conversation that makes you feel full afterward because somebody took the time to listen.

One conversation stands out distinctly in my mind. My co-worker Amanda and I were waiting for our shifts to start. We had finished counting our change and were sitting in the office, idly shifting in our desk chairs while Amanda told me about her children. She was a few years older than me, maybe 25, and had three kids. I asked about her relationship with her children’s father, and she responded with a verbosity I had yet to hear after working with her for a few months. When we finally went onto the sales floor to start our shift, she said, “I haven’t

talked about that in a really long time.”

“Why?” I said.

“No one ever asked,” she replied.

I’ve thought a lot about her response and how revolutionary it is to listen to a person’s story, regardless of his or her class, race, gender, age, ability, or sexual orientation. I’ve reworked over and over again in my mind the fact that I found this idea revolutionary. I realized that all my life, my parents have told me that my voice is important. My story has always been given gravity. At Goodwill, I interacted with people whose stories had never been given this weight, stories that had never been truly listened to and acknowledged. Once I started asking questions, people talked quickly and emphatically, as if I were going to lose interest halfway through.

This understanding has informed my career as a journalist in the years since I left. I found that I listen better, more honestly. Goodwill instilled within me a patience that only comes with retail experience, sure, but more importantly, it taught me about the human condition and that people want their personal experiences to be valued and recognized. A good will, then, is not assumed, but learned. You just have to be willing to listen. **B**

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