Opinion




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by Mariam Williams

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On a recent trip to the grocery store, I experienced something all shoppers experience at least once in their lifetimes. I scouted for the shortest line and jumped in it, only to find that the person ahead of me had many more items than I could see before I entered the line, and they needed a price check on the last item.

This is always an annoyance, but I don't usually say anything about it out loud, and certainly not to the other customer. This time was different.

This time, it happened during University of Pennsylvania's move-in weekend. Police block city streets so that no one except cars and moving vans with special permits can drive or park on them. There aren't many stores surrounding the area, so the usual level of crowdedness in stores built in the city (not the suburbs) is amplified. Coffee shops that had been quiet all summer are suddenly loud with noises from people in their early adult years. For the students, it's exciting and stressful. (I remember doing the same thing, except the dorms at my undergrad university were tucked away down a private road half a mile long, so there was no closing city streets.) For people who live in the neighborhood all the time and just want a few things from the store, it's an annual annoyance that gets more annoying when things like what I'm about to describe occur.

The customers in front of me were a family of three — mother, father, daughter. The mom was dressed in a U Penn shirt and baseball cap. The cart was loaded with items I recognized from my freshman and sophomore years in college: boxes of sugary cereal, snacks, a quick sweeper, dish detergent, etc., the basics for when you have don't have a real kitchen. The total came to $90.09. The last item scanned was a 12-pack of soda. It came up $4.99. The mom insisted it was $3.99. The cashier explained sale prices are only available with a shopper's card, and she could get one at customer service. She asked if he could scan one there. He did. Neither the price of the item nor the total changed, which means nothing she bought was on sale. The cashier told her it wasn't on sale. She insisted again that it was, there was a sign that said "$3.99." He had the associate who had been bagging go check.

Meanwhile, the line behind me grew with more people. The bagging assistant returned. "It's $4.99," she said. The mom was certain there was a sign there that said $3.99, and she asked the bagger to check again.

At this point, my patience ran out, as did that of her husband, who said from where he stood with the basket of bagged groceries, "Honey, come on." I said, "Is it really worth all this trouble to save a dollar?" She said, "I know, but it's just the principle of the thing." I replied, "Ma'am, your total is $90.09, and you're holding up all the people behind you for a dollar. One dollar." She said, "Well I know it seems small — " I cut in with, "It is" — "but you know sometimes if the total is wrong …"

I've been grocery shopping a long time, so I knew where she was going. "They don't give you the product for free if it rings up wrong at this store," I said. She replied, "Oh. Well we're new here." The price checker hadn't returned. I remained annoyed and unmoved. She continued, "If that price was wrong, maybe something else was wrong." I didn't point out that the cashier had already scanned the shopper's card that would've given her the sale price on anything on sale. I just glared.

"I'm sorry, it's just the principle of the thing," she said again. "It's not a good principle," I replied.

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The checker returned with a manager who confirmed the price was indeed $3.99. The persistent customer released the sleek black credit card she had been holding onto into the card scanner and paid for her daughter's merchandise. The family left, and in an uneventful transaction, the relieved cashier rang up my four items.

On my way home, I thought about everything I could have said and why the woman's determination to save one dollar bothered me so much. I figured out that I don't understand what principle she was standing up for. I don't think I would have said anything if her total had been something around 10, even 20 dollars. At that point, one dollar could have been five to 10 percent of the total price of everything in her cart. That, to me, is significant.

I don't think I would have said anything if she had been paying with cash. I live in an area in which the cash economy is prevalent, where people often manage their budgets by paying in cash. I would have been annoyed with the wait, but I would have considered that maybe she had $91.01 in her pocket and needed the total to be $89.01, the price it came to after the price change, so she would have the two dollars she needed to get on a bus and get her groceries home.



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The necessity to budget did not appear to be the woman's concern, or that of her family's. They were "new" there, wearing U Penn gear, and spending more money on the basics than some freshmen have saved to buy books. "If one dollar is of such a great expense to you, why don't you send your daughter to a less expensive college?" I had wondered as I waited in line. She didn't seem to need the dollar, and so I processed her persistence as something else. Not as that of a shopper who just wants to be treated fairly, but as a spoiled rich person inconsiderate of how her actions were affecting others, overly demanding of the blue-collar workers around her, and oblivious to her position in the financial hardships hierarchy.

And though I didn't mention to her any of the concerns and issues I thought about once I left the store, I think I said something, anything, because I knew she was oblivious to how comfortable her life is in comparison with that of most people in the neighborhood surrounding her daughter's school, and because I knew her daughter will spend most of her time in college living in a bubble where students are largely

protected from whatever goes on outside of it. And I wanted her to have a moment of discomfort.

Could I have misread everything about her? Yes. But I'm glad I didn't stay silent in my own discomfort.

[Mariam Williams is a Kentucky writer living in Philadelphia. She holds a Master of Fine Arts degree in creative writing and certificate in public history from Rutgers University-Camden. She is a contributor to the anthology *Faithfully Feminist* and blogs at RedboneAfropuff.com. Follow her on Twitter: @missmariamw.]

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