Spirituality
Soul Seeing



(Unsplash/Claudio Schwarz)

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The guy sitting in the window booth of the bagel shop, surrounded by six or eight odd-size bags and packages, could have been an aging hipster. It was that sort of

Chicago neighborhood.

Outside, beyond the window, L trains rattled the morning as they lumbered overhead every few minutes, north or south, anchored by stolid yellow-painted girders rising up above the cold, late-winter sidewalk covered with overnight frozen snow.

I was halfway through my cup of coffee when the guy in the window booth got up and gathered his bags and packages around him and spoke a kind of happy babble to the young clerk. He was going back on the street, and the clerk came out from behind the counter and pointed to a display of potato chip bags, raising his eyebrow in a question.

Yes, the man with the packages signaled, and he took a large bag and made his way out the door.

"That was a nice thing you did," I said to the clerk.

"Yeah, we give him food all the time," he said and smiled. He liked doing good.

Don't we all? Of course, we do. When we're selfish, we're isolating ourselves from everybody else. When we're selfless, we are connecting with the other person.

One way to think of this is that maybe we're all programmed by evolution to want to do good. It seems like that would be a trait that natural selection would opt for, since it would tend to benefit more members of the species than greed.

As Christians, we see this as the movement of the Holy Spirit in our days and in our lives, nudging us in the right direction. We have free will. We can be mean or we can be nice. It's that simple. And, I suspect, one of the jobs of the Holy Spirit is to remind us that, yes, it feels good to do good.

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This came up recently in a discussion that our faith sharing group had about how to react to all of the injustice going on in our world: the rabid attacks on immigrants and American citizens by masked government agents, the bombing of a school in a war not sanctioned by Congress, the slashing of food benefits for poor people, the racist efforts to whitewash history, the thoughtless firing of thousands of federal

workers, all done in the name of our nation, as if, as a citizen, each of us has endorsed such actions.

There is great work that is being done and needs to continue to be done to fight such cruelty, brutality and arrogance through protests and in the courts and within the political system. But many of us find ourselves feeling hopeless in the face of the continuous exercise of conscienceless power.

That bagel shop clerk, though, is a reminder of a huge reservoir of hope that's available to us. We just have to keep our eyes open for it.

Look around, and you can't help but see people doing good in small, everyday-but-still-important ways. At the grocery store, as you're cruising the aisle with your list, notice the tall woman reaching for a box of pasta that the shorter shopper can't get to. Or when you're killing time before your flight at an airport restaurant and hear, "Hey, you dropped your purse," and see a teen in a Steely Dan T-shirt pointing to the floor under a table where a flustered mother with a 6-year-old is about to leave in a hurry for her departure gate. People do things like that, and it's hopeful.

Pay attention when the delivery truck driver in front of you doesn't move when the light changes to green so that the guy walking with a cane has enough time to get to the sidewalk. And pay attention when you're at the Museum of Natural History and a group of sixth-graders is stopping for lunch and you hear one of them say to the teacher, "I forgot my sandwich," and the teacher gives the kid hers. Notice that.

We are inundated with reports of the arrogance of the powerful, with stories about meanness and small-mindedness of the rich, with accounts of efforts to make money by hurting people through layoffs or funding cuts or voter suppression or the removal of environmental protections or by using high-cost lawyers to manipulate the law and the courts.

But all around us is hope in the form of people doing good.

The powerful we will always have to deal with; but, through the action of the Holy Spirit and through the action of free will, we are surrounded by people being generous and compassionate. By keeping our eyes open, we can see people being helpful and kind and welcoming and loving and lovely.

And, truth be told, if we really pay attention, we'll see how we ourselves do good — and like it.

Look around, and you'll find hope just about anywhere. Like in a bagel shop.