

A treasure in earthen vessels

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"We hold a treasure in earthen vessels." 2 Cor 4:7

I have seen this epiphany before, earlier this year, but know I can never predict when it will occur. It is a privileged moment, and I feel both blessed and like an intruder to glimpse it.

A woman and small son boarded the bus and sat in the front seat facing the aisle. When I say small, I mean both mother and child. She was about 4 feet tall, sturdy, her broad face suggesting Central American Indian features, possibly from Mexico. Her blue polo shirt with emblem, creased black slacks and crepe-sole black shoes identified her as an employee of one of the large hotels in Midtown. Even her diminutive stature seems a characteristic shared by her cohort, riding the buses at shift change times or walking to and from work from the apartments in the neighborhood. Her son was 3 or 4 years old, tucked in close to her, his legs straight out from the seat.

They chatted in Spanish, her remarks in a low whisper, his voice high and sweet, naming things he pointed to on the bus. Then it happened. He looked up at her and smiled, leaned his head against her arm, content and safe, a son and his mother together on the bus.

I see people, try to deduce something of their stories by their appearance. It is risky and I am often mistaken, seeing my own layered perceptions and assumptions instead of the reality of another person's life. But one thing is unmistakable, astonishingly beautiful, that exchange of love in a relationship that is life's most precious gift. I had just seen this and felt blessed and reassured that grace still rules the universe.

My earlier epiphany was similar to this one. A woman had picked up her daughter at the school across the street from where I work. They stopped on the sidewalk so the mother could kneel to tie her daughter's shoe. The girl reached out to steady herself with a hand on her mother's shoulder. It was a gesture, like the shoe-tying itself, that spoke of an intimacy no amount of money can buy, no mortal can claim or expect automatically. It was pure gift, part of the flow of these two lives bound together for a time, a mother's protective love, a child's trust, love fortifying itself against an uncertain future when little girls grow up and find their own way and little boys grow up and leave their mothers.

The hard realities of race and poverty impact these lives. Nativist sentiment against immigration sees only newcomers taking jobs, not parents trying to keep their sons out of gangs. Racial prejudice will try to contain gifted people in certain sectors of employment, parts of town, closing off contact as though it were a contagion.

It is too bad so much beauty is so well hidden, so invisible, like treasure in earthen vessels. If we could see all the epiphanies, they would blind us with the glory of so many lives and so much love.

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