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Streetwise meets innocent on a subway train

by Peg Ekerdt

Spiritual Reflections

Advent 2013

The New York Times publishes a weekly column they call "Metropolitan Diary." People contribute vignettes about events that make up daily life in New York City. On a recent trip to the Big Apple, I had my own moment of grace.

The event occurred on the subway where, as my friend Barbara says, one always gets \$2.50 worth of entertainment. On this particular day, I descended into the bowels of the subway system in central Manhattan and hurried to catch the approaching train. I entered the doors simultaneously with a young man who made eye contact with me, stepped aside and graciously allowed me to enter first. I sat down to my immediate left and the young man went right, joining five friends who had entered ahead of us both. Standing together, these six were an impressive sight. They all wore jean shorts that fell below their knees, Hanes underwear peeking above the waistbands. Some had caps on backward and some wore sunglasses. All bore tattoos. Some wore muscle T-shirts, some were bare-chested and, yes, there was a reason for this minimal attire. Their physiques were beautifully sculpted and muscled with waistlines that would be the envy of anyone intent on fitness. The young man who entered the train with me was clearly the leader of the group in appearance and in demeanor.

The entrance of this group of young men was not lost on two little girls who sat with their mother opposite me on the train. They eyed the group of young men with curious silence that lasted about one minute, and then the oldest little girl hopped off her seat, walked up to the leader of the group, and announced, "You are strong." I looked, as did everyone else within hearing distance, to see how this seemingly streetwise young man would take the comment. He leaned down to eye level with the little girl and said, "Yes, I am."

Affirmed, she continued. "What are these?" she asked, as she pointed to his tattoos. He bent down again and explained the artwork on his arms. That exchange took a few minutes and when the little girl was satisfied with this new information, she looked up at him and said, "I want to be strong, too."

"Eat your fruits and vegetables," he told her. The smiles were starting to emerge on the faces of the passengers on the train and try as they might, the gang of guys with this young man could not hide their own smiles.

Not to be left out, the younger of the two little girls hopped off her seat and, with the innocence of a puzzled 3-year-old, marched up to the group leader and asked, "Why you don't have a shirt on?" By now the entire car was laughing and engaged, waiting for what would come next. To be frank, I did not hear his response, but the young man bent down and answered patiently, taking time with each little girl in a gentle way that belied his physical appearance.

The train was approaching the young family's stop, but the oldest child had time for one more statement. Pumping her arm into the traditional Popeye pose, she said to her new friend, "See, I am strong, too." He smiled as he felt her little arm muscle and agreed that she was indeed strong.

The little girls took their leave as their mother thanked the young man for his kindness and patience. They took joy with them as the doors of the train closed and the six young men resumed their tough street demeanor. A few stops later, we exited the train together at the Columbia University stop; the young men headed in the direction of the Harlem train, and I headed to dinner with friends. As we parted ways, the tough facade melted again for a brief moment as one of them looked at me with a soft smile and said, "Bye."

For a few minutes on that train, we had become a little community, led and guided by the innocence of a child and encouraged by the kindness of a young man. The words that went through my head in that moment were these: "... with a little child to guide them."

I went in search of the origin of this phrase and found it in the Second Sunday of Advent's Isaiah 11. Imagine my sense of wonder when I found this: "Not by appearance shall he judge, not by hearsay shall he decide, but he shall judge the poor with justice ... then the wolf shall be a guest of the lamb, and the calf and the young lion shall browse together, with a little child to guide them."

In this Advent season, may we have the open hearts of children to see the presence of God in our very midst.

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[Peg Ekerdt is a pastoral associate at Visitation Church in Kansas City, Mo. This article first appeared in *Celebration*, NCR's worship resource.]

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