

2011

Starbucks-Colored Glasses (from Just Moms: Conveying Justice in an Unjust World)

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Starbucks-colored Glasses

Lisa Graham McMinn

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SARAH, my middle school daughter, finished her hot chocolate as I licked the last bit of foam from my mocha. We returned the white mugs to the counter and started our walk home. Glen Ellyn, the suburb next door, sits less than a mile from our house in Wheaton and is one of the wealthiest suburbs of Chicago.

In 1996, it also held the nearest Starbucks.

Wheaton ranks high on the affluent scale, too, and Mark and I found raising our daughters in Chicago's wealthy western suburbs a challenge. Our neighborhood, like most others, displayed well-landscaped front yards conspicuously absent of garden gnomes, plastic lawn chairs, and kiddie pools. It sounded like everyone our children knew went to the Bahamas

or France for vacation and drove BMWs when they weren't driving decked-out minivans. Maids cleaned houses and landscape services kept lawns cut, fertilized, and weed-free. We wondered how we would teach mindfulness and care for marginalized people when we didn't see or rub shoulders with anyone in our neighborhood who seemed disadvantaged.

None of that was on our mind when we originally relocated our family to Wheaton, where Mark had accepted a teaching position at Wheaton College. We wanted our three elementary and middle school daughters to fit in. So we took them shopping for new clothes, got them new haircuts, ended our geeky family bike rides and, well, started taking them on coffee dates to Starbucks.

I would be a hip mother, not a hick who embarrassed them.

Two men in business suits headed out of the Starbucks at the same time Sarah and I did, carrying their coffee to go. They politely opened the door for us, nodded, and smiled as we walked out. We passed an older, disheveled woman sitting on a bench outside of Starbucks, hunched over a graying canvas bag stuffed (presumably) with her few personal belongings. It surprised me a fair bit to see her sitting there—grossly out of place on the otherwise tidy and quaint storefront sidewalk. I didn't meet her gaze, but in case she was looking at me I tossed a nod and a smile her direction as Sarah and I began our walk home.

Sarah's eyes were on me, as daughters' eyes are often on their mothers, wondering how I would respond to the unusual sight of an apparently homeless woman in Glen Ellyn. I felt a nudging to turn around and speak to the woman, but shrugged it off. I didn't know what I'd say anyway.

But then I heard one of the business-suit-clad men berating the woman for being dirty and lazy. Why didn't she get a

job? Didn't she care that she was hurting Starbucks's business by keeping customers away with her presence? Go to a shelter. Take a bath for Christ's sake.

The man's sharp, belittling tone got our attention. We stopped to offer a watchful eye, fearful now for the woman. She kept her eyes downcast as the tirade continued. I said to Sarah, "We should go back." She nodded, likely as unsure of what "going back" would entail as I. The men moved on, though I'd like to hope they saw us returning and felt jolted into some remorse.

The woman stood now, getting ready to move on, fearful perhaps that the men would return with police officers, or that we, emboldened by the men, had come to offer more of the same.

"I'm sorry that happened to you," I said. "He shouldn't have talked to you that way."

She looked up and met my gaze, and looked over at Sarah. "It's okay, but thank you. That means a lot to me."

We talked for a few minutes. I remember little about the conversation except that her name was Sherry, and that she spent the summers mostly meandering around Glen Ellyn. She said "God bless you" a lot. And also that Starbucks was nice, because most of its employees let her in to use the bathroom.

During our walk home, Sarah wondered if maybe we should invite her to live with us, and I squirmed at the suggestion. We decided to take dinner to her that night, my concession to offering her something more robust. We drove back an hour later with a bagel sandwich, a cheese stick, a couple of Mark's homemade snickerdoodle cookies, and an apple.

She looked in the bag and said, "God bless you. Thank you. Your kindness means so much." She rummaged through the bag and still looking into the bag said, "You're so kind... but...I can't eat bagels and apples....My teeth...." And then I

noticed that she was missing a number of them and felt foolish for not thinking about this earlier. "Your kindness, it means a lot to me," she repeated, perhaps fearing she had offended us.

We returned weekly with sack suppers (replacing bagels and apples with sandwiches and yogurt) throughout the rest of the summer and fall, sometimes finding her and sometimes not. Early on we asked about her family. Sherry had a daughter, but became elusive when talking about her. "It's not good for me to live with her," she said, looking at her feet. "Besides, I like living on the street, especially in the summertime." Once she asked if we'd drive her up to the drug store where she could buy cigarettes: We did. Always we wished her well; she blessed us, telling us how much our kindness meant to her.

As the weather turned we noticed that a community of people had rallied around Sherry. She had a new blanket one week, a sweater another. When we asked what she needed she said, "Warm socks would be nice. Otherwise I have all I need." So we brought her socks, and the next week she said it would be nice to have some sort of organized transportation once the weather got cold. The churches that offered shelter and dinner could be up to seven miles apart and the homeless folk had to walk there themselves. "It's not so hard on the young ones, but my feet aren't so good anymore. A shuttle would be nice," she said.

I wish I had taken on the challenge to look into getting a shuttle, but I let her request go. She asked for something I didn't know how to give—and, perhaps, a role I didn't want to take on. I wanted to believe I had contributed what I could, and that some other more capable soul would take on the shuttling task. One week in October we didn't see her anymore, and while we went back a few more times, we never saw her again. Often I wondered what became of her.

I haven't thought much, recently, about those three months or so, and Sarah and I haven't talked about Sherry for years. Yet Sarah remains a compassionate soul with eyes to see the invisible and marginalized better than I do. She went on to college and then culinary school, majoring in art with a Third-World development minor. Currently Sarah works as the baker for an upscale restaurant and has dreams of eventually being her own boss. She has spent a number of years working in various capacities in food service, an industry notorious for treating workers like expendable parts. Sarah, like most kitchen employees, works full time yet receives no benefits, no paid vacation, and her employer has found a legal way to avoid paying her for overtime.

Over Sarah's years working in the food industry she has seen employers take advantage of the limited options of immigrants, the ignorance of high school dropouts, and the desperation of people caught in cycles of poverty. But she has also witnessed what is possible. In Grand Rapids, Michigan, she worked at Marie Catrib's, a restaurant owned by Marie, an immigrant herself, who experienced the challenges and indignities confronting immigrant workers, and now runs a highly successful business that respects workers, pays them well, and treats them with dignity.

Sarah will not be at her current job for long, although few people quit such positions. The economy and the competitive nature of work in the food industry reinforce the hold that employers have over employees. But Sarah will remember this experience, and when she moves on, she never wants to take her credentials, education, or connections for granted.

Recently, Sarah called to talk through anger and frustration at not receiving the overtime pay she expected after agreeing to work nine-hour days and to give up one of her days off to help out during a crisis. Then, in the midst of her teary

frustration, she spoke words of deep empathy that harkened me back to that tidy street in front of a Glen Ellyn Starbucks. Sarah described how she welcomed the hardness of this experience, wanting the frustration to seep deep into her bones, allowing her the opportunity to show solidarity with others whose desperation, limited options, and relative powerlessness make them easy to exploit.

Sarah has the ability to see through her own personal troubles to bigger social issues about how we, as individuals and a society, treat the invisible living and working among us: bakers at our local restaurants, janitors and maids who clean our places of employment and sometimes our homes, clerks at department and grocery stores, field laborers, dish washers and kitchen hands. These are people who, like the homeless woman outside of Starbucks, deserve to be treated with dignity. People who, like the homeless woman, deserve to be seen. Sarah's willingness to truly see these people and have compassion for them moves me to tears.