

Gay and Transgender Issues in the Workplace

Seatbelt Extenders for the Selfish

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It always makes me sad when I see an obese person on an airplane need to ask for a seatbelt extender and look self-conscious. Some passengers look away, trying to spare the person any more embarrassment than he or she seems to be feeling already. I try instead to make eye contact, nod, and smile as warmly as I can.

Do you think there are seatbelt extenders for the selfish? If the manifestation of our egos got on a plane, do you think the self-obsessed would want us to look away as they asked for extra help to fit safely into their seat? Would eye contact, a nod, and a warm smile comfort them?

A local friend recently told me about a Haitian-born girl in a nearby elementary school whose classmates avoid her because she smells so bad. Her teacher learned that her family couldn't afford soap. They had to choose between rice and Ivory. This is not in the slums of India, but rather in a shiny U.S. city of economic success.

Because my world is heavily populated with gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people, I'm more keenly aware of my own community's giving habits. It's always made me very proud to reflect on the angels of mercy who responded with such courage during the worst of the AIDS epidemic. I feel badly that today's gay and lesbian youth have little or no awareness of that period of our history. Knowing more about the heroic sacrifices made by older gay people might make a difference in the self-esteem of our youth, and in their attitudes about giving back to the community.

This is the season for giving, but I'm one of those people who hate asking others for money. I'd rather grab the restaurant bill than wait for others to share the expense. But lately I have been asking other people for money to support the really important work of the Stonewall National Museum & Archives. It's a project that Ray and I have poured ourselves into because the museum is not just finding and saving stories of our community's survival and success, but is also telling them to today's and tomorrow's gay and straight youths. I don't equate Stonewall with the unwashed local schoolgirl, but this process of extending my hand for help has often underscored for me the contrast between need and greed.

There's a powerful scene in Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* in which Scrooge watches from his window as ghosts of the rich try to throw coins of assistance to a starving mother and child. This one paragraph has impacted my life more than anything else Dickens wrote.

The air was filled with phantoms, wandering hither and thither in restless haste, and moaning as they went. Every one of them wore chains like Marley's Ghost; some few (they might be guilty governments) were linked together; none were free. Many had been personally known to Scrooge in their lives. He had been quite familiar with one old ghost, in a white waistcoat, with a monstrous iron safe attached to its ankle, who cried piteously at being unable to assist a wretched woman with

an infant, whom it saw below, upon a door-step. The misery with them all was, clearly, that they sought to interfere, for good, in human matters, and had lost the power forever.

Ray and I live like princes, never wanting for a thing. Oh, we don't have servants, or own a jet, a yacht, any priceless masterpieces, or a castle, but we have everything we want and need, which makes us rich. As such, we feel a responsibility to share our good fortune with those in need. Sometimes it's in little ways, like giving a dollar each time we're approached by a homeless person at a stoplight, or contributing to the food bank each time we check out at the grocery store. We support food programs for kids with HIV in Tanzania, and the repair of poor children's teeth in Peru. We give to nearly every non-profit that works on behalf of our community, though lately we've been cutting back on the size of our gifts to groups that have huge corporate sponsorships. We also feel the responsibility to leave our wealth to the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender community rather than to the Church that condemns us, to a relative whose life has nothing to do with ours, or to a pet. Currently, our estate goes to Stonewall.

As I age, I've become more conscious of the arbitrariness of things we humans have created in our search for purpose, such as country and state borders, calendar months and days, and the value we assign things. I wonder more and more about why we kill each other in the name of what I think of as imaginary people in the sky? Why do we call the Bible the "Good Book" or the Pope the "Holy Father"? But mostly, I've become aware of the injustice of the way our human family lives. It's embarrassing to think that we spend as much as we do on jewelry, dogs, referendums, political campaigns, perfumes, amusements, and fine food when a little schoolgirl in the United States smells because her family can't afford soap.

Who, do you imagine, will be the people and the causes we will want to throw coins at when we are phantoms in misery? Will gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people wish they had spent more on educating our youths than on expensive rings and trips to New York for Broadway shows? Will our selfishness cause any of us to need seatbelt extenders for our egos when we board the plane for our next adventure? And how will we feel if the friendless, Haitian-born youngster is sitting next to us?