



# The LIMITS

# of GIVING

A chance meeting in a Bondi cafe holds lessons for how much we can – and should – help people in need.

BY *David Leser*

IT WAS her reply that told me straight away all was not well. I'd just walked into my local cafe and she was sitting in the far corner with her backpack and plastic shopping bag taking up half the long bench. It was the only space left to park myself.

"Do you mind if I sit here?" I asked.

"Not if you don't mind looking at my miserable face," she said, shifting her belongings to the floor.

She was young, tanned and, yes, a little woe-begone. "No, you've got a lovely face," I said brightly. "Is everything all right?"

"Not really," she said, "but it's a long story."

It's at this point, of course, you either say – especially because it's Bondi – "Damn it, I've left the spring pea and mint soup at the Health Emporium down the road" and decamp to another cafe; or you smile tightly, order your coffee and scrambled eggs, and then quickly return to the book you've been trying to finish all week – which in my case happens to be Nicholas Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn's *Half the Sky: Turning Oppression into Opportunity for Women Worldwide*. I take the second option, order and turn the page:

"While the main motivation for joining this global movement is to help others," the authors

write, "the result is often to help oneself. As Sir John Templeton said, 'Self-improvement comes mainly from trying to help others.'"

Only last night I had been thinking about various expressions of self-improvement after seeing a little Syrian girl on YouTube caked in blood and dust, stricken to the point of muteness by the loss of her family. If I could have plucked her straight from my Facebook newsfeed into my living room I would have done so.

But right now Aleppo is a long way from Bondi Road and there's a woman in my peripheral vision – roughly the same age as the elder of my two daughters – who's been staring at the menu for 20 minutes as I've been wolfing down my breakfast and reading about changing the world.

Don't get involved, I tell myself, as I hear myself say: "Would you like a coffee?"

"No, thank you," she replies.

"Are you sure?" I say, and in retrospect, this is probably my point of no return.

"Actually, if you don't mind, I would love one," she responds.

I'll call her Angela. She's from Yorkshire and she's been in Australia on a two-year working holiday. Her first job was as a fashion buyer for department store. Her second and third jobs

were on NSW farms. Right now she's out of work but hoping to go to Bali to study yoga.

"So where are you staying?" I ask her.

"I was in North Bondi until three days ago but I had to get out."

"Where did you move to?"

"Well, that's part of the problem," she says. "Nowhere. I've actually been hanging out at Westfield because of the free WiFi, trying to contact people in Sydney, hoping to find somewhere to stay."

"Any luck?"

"No."

"Where have you been sleeping then?"

Long pause.

"I haven't been."

"So what have you been doing at night?"

"Well, if you want to know the truth ... wandering the streets, going down to the beach."

"Do you have any money?"

"No."

"So you haven't slept for three nights? When was the last time you ate something?"

"About three days ago."

As we know, life is often a series of choices, and when it comes to what brought Angela to this moment, none of her choices look too good. When it comes to my own choices – especially in terms of giving – this is how they sometimes present themselves: Will my dollar be more effective helping Médecins Sans Frontières reach the children of Aleppo or will I have a greater impact sponsoring a child through World Vision in earthquake-devastated Nepal? (Why not both?) Should I give to the Rural Fire Service this year or revert to CanTeen's support for young people living with cancer? How about House With No Steps vs The Smith Family? And do I opt for Indigenous health on my doorstep or widen my circle of compassion to rural education for girls in India?

There's good charity and there's bad. There's duplication, overlap and under-utilisation of resources. There's considered and ill-considered giving. There are also different motivations for giving. You want your name on a building? Fair enough. You want to encourage others to give by your own example? Good on you. You'd love to see a particular industry – or individual artist – flourish? That's great. But right now I'm just trying to work out what to do about Angela.

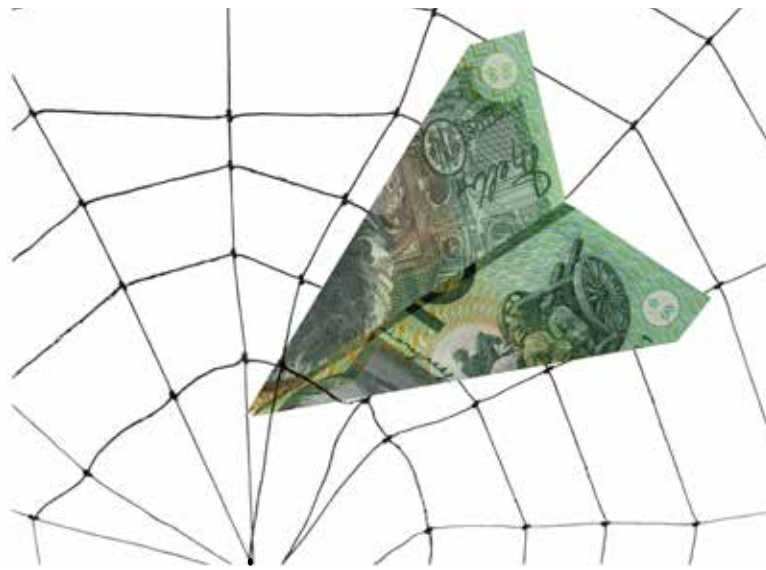
"Would you like some breakfast?" I ask

"Are you sure that's all right?" she replies.

"Yes, I'm sure."

Angela eats ravenously while I consider my options. As I see it, the first one is to pay for her breakfast, wish her good luck and say goodbye. The second is to drive her to the Salvation Army or the British consulate because, let's face it, this is their job, not mine. The third option is to offer her a shower and a bed and then consider a new set of options.

Seven hours later, I am waking Angela for dinner and for the next few hours we are surveying the ruins of her Yorkshire life: a father she hasn't seen for 15 years, except for that time she tracked him down to his local pub and watched him – from the back of the bar – drink his way into oblivion. A mother whose last words to her before she changed the locks on the front door were: "I love you, but I don't like you." A stepfather full of cold reproof. A beloved grandmother with only months to live. An aunt who is caring for the grandmother but with no time for her wayward niece. A younger brother and sister with little interest in their older sibling. Friends who've fallen by the wayside.



"You know what the common denominator in all this is?" I tell her.

"What do you mean?"

"It's you. Perhaps you've been burning a few bridges."

"You don't understand my family," she says.

"No, I don't," I reply, "so why don't we call them and I'll explain to them that you're in trouble and you need money to get home."

Angela refuses. She can't take another rejection from her mother. She just needs to find a job here in Sydney and everything will be okay.

"When does your visa run out?" I ask.

"In 10 days," she replies.

*Ten days? Are you crazy?*

But Angela doesn't appear to be crazy. She's broke and lost and captive to her own poor choices, plus she's proud to a fault. And she's a young woman starved of solid advice.

"Except for my grandmother, I've never really had an adult in my life that I can talk to," she tells me. "I don't know my father and I can't talk to my mother or stepfather. I just think if I'd had some guidance I wouldn't have got into this mess."

I go to bed and take guidance from an old Talmudic expression which says that if you save one life, you save the world. I also refer over the next few days to Australian ethicist Peter Singer's website, The Life You Can Save, where a panel of experts recommend which charities to support on the basis of biggest bang for buck. Their preferred organisations include The Fred Hollows Foundation, Fistula Foundation, Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition, Oxfam and Iodine Global Network.

Nowhere on the website does it indicate that it would be useful to pay for a Yorkshire backpacker to have her airline ticket reissued, nor to add on five nights accommodation in a Bondi hostel, plus living expenses for Sydney and enough money to see her through the first wintry days back in England.

Because for the same amount that I end up spending on Angela, the website's Charity Impact Calculator tells me, I could pay for 62 screenings for diabetic retinopathy and eye disease, 42 interventions to save or improve sight and three full cataract operations. Or, if I chose to support the Fistula Foundation, I could have 40 women transported to hospital, 20 anaesthetists provided for fistula surgeries, plus nursing care delivered to another 12 patients.

But these people are not in my line of sight, and even though I know I'm ignoring one of the highest forms of giving – which is to make a person self-sufficient – I decide to give Angela a very sizeable fish to eat rather than a fishing line to catch it with.

*"If you get the chance to impact somebody and you really feel this is a moment where you can help another soul ... then that's a beautiful thing to grab with both hands."*

"Promise me three things," I tell her, as I hand over a wad of cash the evening before her departure. "The first is that you get on that plane tomorrow."

"I promise," she says.

"The second is that you go back to Yorkshire and begin rebuilding bridges. And perhaps change the way you're viewing your family."

"I'll try," she says.

"And thirdly, promise me you will never allow yourself to get into this predicament again."

"I promise."

OVER THE next few days I tell a few friends about my experience – not because I want to be seen as the good guy, but because there are real issues here about the best way to respond to people in distress.

One friend urges me to check with the department store to make sure Angela actually worked there as a fashion buyer. Another asks me how I knew if Angela actually got on the plane or not. A third wants to know why she was sitting in the cafe in the first place if she had no money. A fourth asks if I slept with her.

The questions keep coming in equal proportion to my doubts. Did I squander my money on a hopeless cause? (Not sure.) Did Angela take me for a ride? (Don't think so, but possible.) Would my altruism have been better served elsewhere? (Almost certainly.) Was my motivation in helping to do good for its own sake or to be *seen* to be doing good? (The former, I promise you.) And what is a proper ethical response to the good fortune of being Australian? (Try that test at home.)

As NSW Telstra Business Woman of the Year in 2012 and Philanthropy Australia's leading philanthropist in 2016, Audette Exel knows a thing or two about effective giving. Her Sydney-based Adara Group consists of two corporate advisory businesses whose sole purpose is to support people living in poverty in Uganda and Nepal.

"It's very easy to overthink giving," Exel tells me. "We see this movement of the private sector into the non-profit sector and the push for impact and it's easy to forget that the heart of giving is compassion. So if you get the chance to touch the life of even one person you're giving yourself a much bigger gift than you're giving them."

But what if I was duped? What if Angela was never a fashion buyer? What if she had money stashed somewhere else?

"Do you think she duped you?" Exel asks me.

No.

"So why would you let your inner cynic tell you that was a possibility? I think other people need our money more than we do. I'm not saying don't be thoughtful about giving ... I'm just saying if you have moments in your life where you get the chance to impact somebody and you really feel this is a moment where you can help another soul, another fellow traveller, then that's a beautiful thing to grab with both hands.

"And filling yourself with existential angst about whether it was the right call is the last thing you need." ■

*Postscript: A few days after she returned to England, Angela sent me an email asking to borrow money. Her family wanted little to do with her and until she found a job she was destitute, she wrote. "I'm sorry," I replied, "I've given you all I can afford. You cannot rely on me any further." In this instance, I had reached the limits of my "self-improvement".*