

times of testing, 'and how does that make you feel?' (extract), Joshua Fletcher (2024)

Summary

Sometimes the work you can't see is the work that mattered most.

But impact doesn't always report back.

The seeds we plant go on having lives of their own, out of sight, in rooms we'll never enter. And sometimes when we do hear stories of the difference we've made - well, how hard it hits shows how much we care.

Lidl, September 2015

I had ambled over to the supermarket after discovering that my cupboards were bare. I was almost broke. There had been seven client no-shows that week and I was questioning whether counselling was for me. It didn't feel like I was making any progress with any of my clients lately, and I was annoyed at myself for borrowing so much money from the government to pay for this career. Altruism and empathy are for losers. I felt like I was failing my clients, and this sense of despair was exacerbated by the screaming feral children who were blocking the aisle and preventing me from buying my cans of budget vegetable soup.

I loaded my trolley with basic, easy-to-cook food like pasta, soups, vegetables, bread and an unnerving amount of cheese. It felt like everything I'd eaten over the last few months was either beige or yellow and the sight of the trolley depressed me. The Four Tops started playing through the supermarket speakers: 'Loco in Acapulco'. It's a song I love, but in that moment it made me feel sad, lonely and disconnected. I quickly threw some semi-skimmed into the trolley and made my way to the till before I ended up bursting into tears in the middle of Lidl.

The cashier started scanning my items at anxiety-inducing speed. I tried to pack everything away at a pace to match, but some things fell out of the bags and some dropped on the floor and the cashier glared. I collected myself and packed the rest of my things into my shopping bags. Under the cashier's stern and unwavering gaze, I removed my bank card to pay for the groceries.

Card declined.

Cont.

The stony face of the cashier did not soften. The line of people behind me seemed to hum with annoyance. I tried again.

Card declined.

I shifted my hands to my pocket to pick out another card. In doing so, I clipped my shopping bag and the contents spilled out and clattered to the floor. It sounded like there was a groan from the queue, but mostly I think the chorus was in my mind. The lead feeling in my chest intensified, my tear ducts quivered, and now my arms felt heavy as well as my legs. I was about to cry in front of everyone in Lidl. I don't believe in adhering to emotional conservatism, but I'm not immune to embarrassment.

I also don't believe in divine intervention because I don't consider solipsism to be realistic or healthy. I am no more special or worthy of God's personal attention than the next person. But today, on this overcast afternoon in Salford, a guardian angel decided to visit me in a time of need. A stocky man, ornamented with facial piercings, had finished packing his shopping on the next till and noticed me hesitating over my fallen cheese.

Declan: Hey! Here... you... is your name Josh?

I was kneeling next to my shopping on the floor quickly wiping away a tear that had sneaked down my cheek.

Josh: Yeah. That's me.

I didn't recognise him.

Declan: you all right, there? Card not working? It's a bastard when that happens.

He swayed over with admirable confidence. He winked at the cashier, pulled out his credit card, then pressed it into the card reader. It was followed by a beep as the transaction went through.

Declan: This contactless stuff is dangerous. You can make all sorts of impulsive purchases.

Cont.

I was stunned.

Josh: I... I... thank you. I think there's an ATM around the corner. I'll pay you back in cash. Sorry my card wasn't working. Why did you do that?

Declan: Don't worry about it, lad. Pack your cheese away.

He folded his wallet and put it back into his shorts.

Declan: You're Josh. The man who helped my sister. She was all sorts of messed up, man. Couldn't leave the house and stuff. Was scared she'd have my nieces and nephews taken off her. You really helped her, man. We, as a family, appreciate it. She's doing all right now. Not quite where she wants to be, but all right. A lot better than where she was.

Josh: I...

Declan: It's on me. It's not much. Take it as a tip and as a thank you. From us.

He walked out without looking back.

I finally gathered my shopping and headed for home. There were tears streaming down my face as I left Lidl, but they weren't sad tears. My love for my job is not paper-thin – it almost defines me – but in a difficult period of my life, this man reminded me that I love my job even when in the clutches of doubt. (p210 – 211)