



mindset

BY KAREN STEWART, MA

we need each other

Several months ago David and I went camping at Price National Campground outside of Boone, North Carolina. Located on the Blue Ridge Parkway, it is a favorite spot, with a small pristine lake and plenty of wonderful hiking trails. After a day kayaking on the New River we returned to our campsite to build a fire. We had purchased wood and had some paper and kindling but at the last minute we realized that we had forgotten to bring matches.

Somehow it was my job to go to a neighboring campsite and ask for help. I had two choices. One choice was a large group of people, taking up several campsites and the other was a quiet site like ours. I chose the quiet site. It was dusk so it was not easy to see the camper but as I walked up I realized the small pickup truck had a confederate flag emblem on the tailgate.

The confederate flag evokes a visceral response. I was born and raised in Texas and have always called the south my home but that flag is the symbol of slavery and it evokes shame and horror about that terrible past and its ongoing effects. Seeing the flag on the pickup truck sent a small wave of trepidation through me as my stereotypes about the person flared up.

Just as I saw the flag, a man called out hello. I could only see his silhouette. He was small and slender with a thin ponytail. I was somehow sure he was younger than me. He was alone, cooking some sausage over his campfire, no tablecloth, no camp chairs, nothing much in the way of comfort.

He walked over and with some embarrassment I told him that we had forgotten matches and asked if he had any to spare. He was eager to help, said he had used a lighter and while the one he had used was empty, he felt sure he had another in his truck. While he looked around I offered to ask another camper, but he was insistent that he could find another lighter. He did and said several times that I could keep it, but I said no I would return it.

We got our fire going. While we forgot matches, we did not forget chocolate, so I picked up several pieces to take back to him as a thank you for the use of the lighter. When I walked up to him, thanked him and handed him the lighter, I laughed with some embarrassment about remembering chocolate but not matches.

He was so gracious, I could tell he was smiling with surprise and he said "Why you are wonderful" and gave me a hug. I said "well you are wonderful as well" hugged him back, repeated the thank you and we parted.

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Qi is a Chinese term for the life force within us. At times one can feel this energy as a palpable force. I have been fortunate to have that experience and as I walked away from his campsite, I felt that powerful life force coursing through my body. It continued for a time and for weeks afterward when I thought about the experience I would feel it again. I really did not know what to make of it. The experience was so brief and simple I was surprised at the effect it had on me.

Several weeks later I finally recognized what was going on. We met at a point of need—I needed a source of fire and he liked feeling useful and appreciated—we both needed the kindness of a stranger.

I doubt our paths would cross normally, though now I think of him when someone with a similar build and manner helps me at Home Depot. In this time when our country is so polarized I am grateful to have had this brief interaction. Would I have received the same welcome if I were a person of color? I will never know but the lesson is the same.

We in fact all really need each other. If we are going to solve the enormous economic, environmental, and social problems that we face, we are going to have to work together. We are going to have to be fully present to each other, help each other out, not just in the dusk, but in the clear light of day. We are all more alike than different if only we can get past our fears and defenses. We all want the same things: good jobs, sufficient income, safe and affordable housing, nurturing food, health care, good education for our children, and a way to grow old with dignity. These things are achievable in this country of wealth and plenty if only we set our sights on what is truly important and work together to achieve it.

As we move through the holiday season and into the New Year, my hope is that we will work together for the good of all. ❧

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