

Helpful

We never know when fate can turn a chance encounter into a path to riches and greatness. Or just a life's work. I laughed out loud one day after school long ago at a fellow who was carrying a load of boxes along the sidewalk in the downtown area of my hometown. He was trying to move files and attempted to carry too many at once as he walked along the street in his shirtsleeves on a cold November afternoon. File folders spilled out of the boxes onto the sidewalk. He scurried about on his knees picking them up and then stood and walked away with his arms loaded. Since he was leaving, I felt safe in saying loud enough for him to hear, "What an idiot!" with a heavy accent on the last word as only a teenage snot could make it sound.

That man ignored me, but another gentleman reached out and clamped a firm hand on my shoulder and spun me around to face him.

"You insulted that man," said this large fellow in a black suit under his long grey overcoat.

"He didn't hear me," I offered as an excuse, although we both knew that was untrue.

"Doesn't matter," Mr. Gray Overcoat said as he stared down at me. "You should apologize to him for your words."

"Why?" I asked. "He's already gone."
"Catch up with him," he bellowed, raising his hand to me, "or I'll land a few good punches on you!"

I could see he meant it. His breath was coming hard, his jaw was set and his face red. His powerful large hand continued to grip my shoulder unrelentingly. I was young enough to not be surprised that someone meant to punch my lights out.

At that moment, the man carrying the boxes turned and came back toward us. I had no idea why he did so. He wasn't looking at me, but as he was about to pass I stepped toward him, looked down at the ground and mumbled, "I'm sorry." I felt a set of knuckles begin to grind into my back, so I reluctantly continued, "For calling you a name ... sir."

"Uh" was Mr. Shirtsleeves only answer and he barely slowed down while passing by. He didn't even look at me, but was now carrying the boxes back in the direction he had come from.

"That man is earning his living," said Mr. Overcoat. "He probably has a wife and children and he works to support them, as I'm sure someone supports you. You have no right to laugh at him."

"It was funny," I whined, "when he dropped the boxes."

"I'll tell you what's funny," said the man, "you are. You loaf along the street doing nothing useful and think you can insult someone who has grown up and taken responsibility for himself and others. You should have helped him pick up his files and not laughed at him."

The man carrying the box of files now turned again and came back in our direction. I wondered how he came to get lost carrying boxes on the street in cold weather without a coat on. Wouldn't he have known where he was going before stepping out with only a

shirt on, boxes piled in his arms?

As he came up to us again with the files, Mr. Overcoat raised his voice and called to him, "Here! Over here, sir." Mr. Overcoat turned and opened the back door of a gray late model Oldsmobile sedan parked next to us. "Put them in here," he said to the fellow.

"Oh, are you Mr. Silkworth?" said Shirtsleeves. "I knew you must be out here somewhere!"

"Right here all the while," said Silkworth.

Shirtsleeves' face fell and I could see irritation immediately replace his respectful countenance.

"Then why the hell didn't you help me pick up the files when I dropped them?" he complained.

Silkworth straightened up to his full height. "I thought it better," he began, "to spend my time giving a lesson to this young man who laughed at ..."

"Terrific!" said Shirtsleeves, meaning anything but that. "I'm dragging my ass around out here with your files and you can't even help?"

I've always felt a kinship with anyone who attempts to mentor me, so maybe that's why I mounted a defense for Mr. Silkworth.

"This man was kind enough," I said, "to interrupt his standing around waiting for you to lecture me on being of help!" I managed the little speech with quite an air of authority ... for a kid.

Shirtsleeves threw the file boxes in the back of the Oldsmobile and turned to us.

"I don't think I've ever met two more self satisfied and useless people in my entire

life," he said. With that, he turned and left us.

As a teenager nearing the end of a career in the company of other school boys, I was used to being insulted. But I felt bad for Mr. Silkworth, whose face had reddened again as he stood crestfallen in the street next to his Oldsmobile.

"It just goes to show you," I said.

"Shows me what?" he asked.

"Helpful people like us are seldom appreciated," I said.

The big man remained silent.

"Yes," I opined, "this has been quite a lesson for me."

Mr. Silkworth turned and glanced at me with a doubtful look upon his face.

"Are you being sarcastic?" he asked.

"Maybe," I said. "I think it would be appropriate."

He dug deep into his grey overcoat pocket, pulled out a business card and handed it to me. "Stop by my office when you graduate," he said.

That was the only job interview I've ever had. I've been doing Silkworth and Company's public relations work now for almost twenty years.

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