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The Day of Compassion

I often ask myself what I'm doing to make the world a better place. This question keeps me from losing my way in life—a life I've dedicated to counseling cancer patients. The question reminds me of my goals and dreams. It prevents me from becoming indifferent. Many people say that the government or their employer or young people or parents or someone else should do something. Instead, I ask: *What have I done to change the world?*

For this reason, the assignment presented me with a challenge. For a long time, I could not come up with a plan to do something more than what I normally do for others. I never pass by a person or an animal in need, and I've been involved in many social assistance projects in my homeland, Russia. What special thing could I do on the Day of Compassion, and how could I use insights from social psychology for the greater good?

I was returning home from the store, thinking about the assignment, when I saw him. It was not the first time I saw this man—he had first appeared in our district in the early summer. He was always dressed in the same shabby clothes, and his hair and beard were long and ragged. He was a homeless drifter who smelled bad and was very dirty. I grimaced with disgust as usual.

For reasons I don't understand, it has always been hard for me to empathize with such people. Maybe it's because I have had to climb out of a low position in life myself and managed to maintain dignity. Somehow, I've always thought that homeless people should make a greater effort to improve their situation, and that they're to blame for their own sad plight (unlike people in developing nations, sick people, or animals, for example). Psychologically speaking, I'm someone with a strong internal locus of control.

In other words, I've tended to see myself as a small frail woman who struggles with a difficult life, and to see the homeless man as a large robust fellow who doesn't make an effort to change. Consequently, I've found it hard to sympathize with him. On the Day of Compassion, however, my views shifted, and a strange and fascinating picture emerged. I saw the man standing in the middle of a broad street. His shoulders were proudly straightened, and the sun caressed him with its warmth. He drank soda in small sips. His smiling face radiated happiness and kindness to a degree that's rare even among my prosperous friends!

Happy Birthday, Whenever It Was

At that moment, I suddenly realized what I wanted to do on the Day of Compassion. I wanted to take my most deep-rooted prejudice and smash it to smithereens! Because it's wrong. Because I have no right to judge this man. Because I do not know about his life, his needs, or his character. And because he's beautiful, even if not in a conventional way.

The next day, I went shopping for items that a homeless man might want: hygiene items for washing, shaving, and brushing his teeth; a towel; and a set of comfortable clothes (except for shoes, because it's impossible to guess a person's shoe size by eye). I packed these items in a beautiful gift bag and put inside a card that said "Happy Birthday, whenever it was" (С Днём Рождения, когда бы он ни был!).



The most difficult part was figuring out how to give him the bag. I didn't want to put him in an awkward or humiliating position, so I decided to leave the bag in a place where he would find it. My husband and I often walked past the area where I knew the man slept at night—a sidewalk alcove with a low brick wall separating it from pedestrians. I left the gift in the alcove, and my husband and I parked our car across the street and waited for the man to return. We were like spies on a secret mission...



After two hours, the man finally showed up. He looked around for a long time and eyed the package from a distance. I had deliberately packed the contents so he could see that the bag was safe, and eventually he began looking through the items. When he pulled out the card, his hands were shaking. He cried. And smiled. And I cried and smiled, too. Then he repacked the bag and walked off in the direction of a nearby river. I haven't seen the man since then, but I'm sure he's alright.

How Social Psychology Has Helped Me Become More Compassionate

What has social psychology given me? The topics discussed in this course have taught me how to spot errors and biases in social judgment (e.g., attribution errors, prejudices, stereotypes, etc.). I find it difficult to refer to specific lectures or readings, because the entire course has influenced me. I now understand that it's wrong to project my opinions and experiences onto other people. We are all different, and we all deserve respect and compassion.

I like that I can think more broadly now, and I believe that the best way to make the world a better place is to live each day as a small Day of Compassion. You just need to do a few small things for those who are nearby. And for myself—for a person who is normally compassionate—I have added a new task: change my own stereotypes and attitudes.