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## AROUND HOME

A morality play unfolds at the bagel shop

*by Nancy Shohet West*

Because I was about to teach a Sunday School class on conscience, I picked up a collection of Aesop's Fables last month to see if I could find a tale that would help illustrate the point. Aesop made my research easy: each tale in the collection ended with a single boldface sentence summing up the moral.

But usually, of course, it's not that easy. That same weekend, a real-life anecdote unfolding in front of me proved itself elusive of a concluding message, much as I would have liked to find one.

My 11-year-old son and I went to Brueggers Bagels for a late breakfast. While we stood in line, another customer started making a commotion that caught our attention. In fact, it quickly caught everyone's attention. "I am so offended!" she exclaimed. "I am just so offended!" She repeated these same phrases two or three more times.

I suppose it's a sign of the times that when you hear someone emoting in public too loudly and a little too passionately and can't tell to whom they are speaking, you assume that they are either mentally ill or talking into a phone clipped somewhere to their body. And I suppose it's also a sign of the times that you then look them over quickly to try to determine whether they might be carrying any weaponry. I glanced behind us to reassure myself that we were closer to the back door than she was.

But once she stopped repeating, "I am so offended!," everyone in the store learned what had happened. She had waited in line for what felt to her like an inordinately long time to order a bagel sandwich and six additional bagels to go. Once her \$7 order was finally filled, she had set her bags down on a table and then went into the restroom. When she came out, the table was bare. "I cannot believe someone would steal my bagels!" she ranted on.

The Brueggers staff reassured her that they would immediately refill her order at no charge, but this didn't appease her as she said she had no time to wait for another order. Instead, she stormed out of the store, still exclaiming over her bad luck.

When Tim and I sat down to eat, he wanted my take on the situation. It would have been a convenient time for a straightforward moral to emerge, like in the Aesop's text, but none did. The simplest response would have been that the woman was right to be outraged. As Tim knows, it's wrong to steal food, and the invisible and apparently long-gone thief was the clear-cut villain in the story.

But the customer wasn't winning anyone's sympathy with her histrionics. And this is sort of a disturbing-but-true lesson: losing your dignity can make people far less likely to sympathize with you.

I shared with Tim my initial suspicion that it was unintentional. This was Bedford Center, not the kind of area where people steal in public places. At the Whole Foods in the same plaza, women leave their purses in their grocery carts while they wander down the aisles. But as we ate our breakfast and minutes passed, no one returned to apologize for picking up the wrong paper sack.

So I talked to Tim about how there are two sides or more to every story. Maybe it was an accident and the person who took the bagels hadn't realized it yet. Or maybe the person who took them truly needed the bagels. Not terribly likely in this neighborhood, but always possible. As the woman herself said when she was ranting, it was a \$7 order. She looked like someone who would have written a check for five times that amount to aid a hunger-related cause.

To some extent, there was also a teaching moment in the way the other customers reacted nervously, ready to make a quick escape if necessary. It's unfortunate, but it's nothing to be ashamed of. Being wary of strangers

who over-emote in crowded places is really not such a bad lesson in this day and age.

And too, there was a point to be made about how people would have sympathized with the woman more if she hadn't acted so odd. Keeping your dignity under duress, though challenging, is a good skill to develop.

Plus there was the quick and obliging response from the store's employees, offering to replace her order: a teaching moment about kindness and customer service.

So in the end, I couldn't extract one crystal-clear moral. Unlike in Aesop's fables, you don't always know how to spin situations for your children. So you look for an array of learning experiences in the scenario, offer them to your child as a collection of possibilities, and hope that somewhere along the way, something useful is learned.



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