

Of Course We Don't Deserve It!

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The Palestinian-American poet Naomi Shihab Nye writes that as she was wandering the Albuquerque Airport terminal passing the time during a four hour flight departure delay, she heard an announcement on the loudspeaker: "If anyone in the vicinity of Gate 4-A understands any Arabic, please come to the gate immediately."

She writes: "Well – one pauses these days. Gate 4-A was my own gate."

Even so, she returned to her gate, only to see, as she continues, "crumpled on the floor, wailing loudly... an older woman in full traditional Palestinian embroidered dress, just like my grandma wore."

The airline official at the gate was at a complete loss; it turned out that as soon as the flight delay had been announced, the woman had collapsed and started her wailing.

Well, the poet knelt down, put her arm around the woman and spoke to her in her less than perfect – but good enough – Arabic. The woman became quiet immediately. As it happened, she had misunderstood the original announcement, had believed the flight to be not just delayed, but cancelled; and she needed to be in El Paso the very next day for important medical treatment.

Nye got the phone number of the woman's son in El Paso, talked with him, told him she would stay with her mother on the flight. "Then," she says, "we called her other sons just for fun. Then we called my dad and he and she spoke for a while in Arabic and found out of course they had ten shared friends." As the time passed, Shihab Nye called Palestinian poet friends of hers and let the woman chat with them too. And they talked about her life. And they laughed. Then (here is the rest of the story in Naomi Shihab Nye's own words):

She had pulled a sack of homemade mamool cookies – little powdered sugar crumbly mounds stuffed with dates and nuts – out of her bag – and was offering them to all the women at the gate. To my amazement, not a single woman declined one. It was like a sacrament. The traveler from Argentina, the mom from California, the lovely woman from Laredo – we were all covered with the same powdered sugar. And smiling. There is no better cookie. And then the airline broke out the free beverages from huge coolers and two little girls from our flight ran around serving us all apple juice and they were covered with powdered sugar too... And I looked around that gate of late and weary ones and thought, this is the world I want to live in. The shared world. Not a single person in this gate – once the crying of confusion stopped – seemed apprehensive about any other person. They took the cookies. I wanted to hug all those other women too. This can still happen anywhere. Not everything is lost.

(from www.gratefulness.org/readings/nye_gate.htm)

What a wonderful story. All the more wonderful because it is true.

What is the story about? To begin with it is simply about the sort of world we would like to live in, as Naomi Shihab Nye herself said. What kind of world is that? A world in which people share with one another with absolutely no concern – no concern whatsoever – about the

color of skin or the language spoken or the religion practiced or not practiced. Share simply because we are waiting for the same flight, enduring the same challenge, living on the same planet.

Do we deserve such a world? This is quite simply the wrong question. For we don't "deserve" the stars at night or the rising or setting sun or the golden leaves of autumn or the gentle snows of winter or the green shoots of spring or the wildflowers of summer. We don't deserve the look of compassion and concern and sometimes even love in the eyes of our neighbor. We don't deserve the bounty (if bounty we have) on the Thanksgiving table.

What, after all, could we possibly have done or do to deserve any of that – much less all of it? Emerson or Thoreau or someone said as much and said it better. Of course I couldn't find the passage... so I'll just say it another way. The riches and abundance of the world around us, from the golden leaves to golden friends are beyond any price we could pay, any work we could do to earn them.

What then? Let us simply be grateful. Grateful to the universe, to God, to the mystery... use whatever words you like... or simply *be grateful* for all we didn't and couldn't make or earn.

This is of course a lesson of particular relevance as we approach Thanksgiving. Yet not only because Thanksgiving is about gratitude. Also because of echoes back to the earliest history of European settlement on this land. For of course one of our problems here on the continent we now call North America is that too many of those of European descent believe implicitly (rarely would it be spoken so baldly) that we somehow deserved the bounty of this continent, that we deserved, as it were, to inherit it all from those who had already been here for centuries, actually millennia before us, that we deserved it. Why? Because we were stronger or smarter or had the better religion. Whereas, as much as anything it was to begin with mostly unforeseen and unforeseeable tragedy and bad luck of the worst sort that 150 years following first contact in 1492 the native population of these American continents – which had been about 75 million, speaking some 2,000 distinct languages, an unimaginably rich tapestry of cultures... – was only 10% the size it had been. Disease had taken the rest. And then... wars and lying treaties continued the devastation.

No... we don't *deserve* this land. At best, over five hundred years after first encounter, unable to turn back the clock of tragedy and violence and double-dealing... we hold the land in trust, in trust on behalf of all those gone by... in trust for all those yet to come, we hope generation upon generation... and in trust also for our sisters and brothers the other creatures with whom we share the land: the land... including this very land on which our Meeting House is built, built with oak and pine that had been standing amidst the Wompanoag for six hundred years before being turned into the posts and beams which shelter us each Sunday.

Yes, we hold this land in trust. It is not ours.

So let us simply be humbly grateful for the bounties we discover to be around us, undeserved – bounties of nature, bounties of friendship and love, bounties of the spirit.

Let us simply, to begin with, be humbly grateful for it all.

And then... (one more "and then") if we begin with gratitude for whatever undeserved abundance of the blessings of grain and goodness, whatever undeserved blessings of beauty, whatever blessings of love come our way, then our lives and gifts will overflow into the lives of others – and we might, just might live into a future less blemished and scarred with violence and greed than the past.

All because we surely do know, know in our bones, with Naomi Shihab Nye, that this *is* the world in which we want to live: the shared world.

Think again of her story. And perhaps for a moment contrast in your mind's eye the picture she evokes at Gate 4-A that day, a picture of laughing conviviality, passing around homemade cookies and juice, telling stories, getting to know one another, a kind of spontaneous make-shift Thanksgiving when you think about it... contrast all of this with the usual scene at an airline gate or train station: the same hundred people, but each in his or her own world of a book or a laptop or a cell phone. Not bad folks, and probably friendly enough if you asked someone the time or shared the sports section of the paper, but neither the fullness of life that arises with the realization that in the end life's abundance is meant not to be hoarded or privatized but to be shared.

Oh of course we need our savings accounts and our own place to live, and we do indeed earn our income and some measure of praise and recognition through hard and good work. "Deserving" and "undeserving" are fair measures for some dimensions of our lives. No question about it. But this is only one part of life's reality, and not the most important part at that.

The deeper reality, the spiritual and moral truth, is that in the end not a bit of it is ours, it is all to be shared – our material blessings, our kindness and compassion, our justice-making and peace-making, our work for sustainable life on earth – all to be shared, to be passed around like homemade sugar cookies during a four hour delay.

Because though appearances may too often suggest otherwise, actually... we are all on the same flight, our circles of community as wide as the world. As Naomi Shihab Nye wrote:

And I looked around that gate of late and weary ones and thought, this is the world I want to live in. The shared world. Not a single person in this gate – once the crying of confusion stopped – seemed apprehensive about any other person. They took the cookies. I wanted to hug all those other women too. This can still happen anywhere. Not everything is lost.

So may it be.