

The Dance of Relationship

“Those who danced were thought to be quite insane by those who could not hear the music.”

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It was my evening to work with Patricia, a resident at a local homeless shelter, on budgeting matters. The week before, her budget showed she had only \$105 to get through the week. That meager amount had to cover food for her and two children, laundry, an installment on her outstanding traffic tickets, school supplies, personal items, and the small savings she was expected to set aside for her eventual move out of our interim shelter into her own apartment.

Immediately her face told me things had not gone well. Tell me about it. A pause. “Well, I ran out of money on Thursday.” Long pause. “I got really depressed, so a friend and I went to Chili’s.” I did the math in my head—maybe \$20? I asked how much damage. “\$32.”

\$32! Nearly a third of her budget. She read my expression. “We had burgers, fries, dessert—and we left a nice tip.” Silence. She was devastated. I was devastated. What an awful decision—especially when we had agreed the week before exactly how the \$105 would have to be stretched to make it through the week.

Her words kept coming back to me. “I got really depressed.” I imagined her and her friend walking into Chili’s. Being greeted with a welcoming smile and words. Would you prefer a booth or a table? How about over here? My name is so and so, and I’m going to take care of you. What can I bring you? How would you like that? Is everything the way you wanted it?

It was easy to imagine how Patricia and her friend were feeling at this point: important, respected, like they really mattered. Sure, the food smelled good and they were probably hungry by now, but I thought back to what she said. “I got really depressed.” Not “really hungry.” Depressed.

It came to me then. The real answer to the server’s question, “What can I bring you?” was “Would you bring me some respect?” Chili’s didn’t know it, but what they were selling that night was someone who would, for a little while, be devoted to Patricia’s needs and respect her—restore her self-respect.

And for that feeling of being served—respected, valued, important—she paid nearly a third of her weekly income and put her more substantive needs at risk.

An extreme case, but not unique. Being served is one of the innate needs we carry around inside. Fine dining, upscale shopping, spas, stadium suites, valets, limos—all testify to a deep desire to be served. Money may not buy you love, but it will pay to get you served. “Serve” derives from “servant,” which originally referred to someone who has given up his or her rights. We are served when someone subordinates his or her needs and defers to ours. Patricia paid Chili’s one third of her weekly budget for the honor of being served.

But I was also struck by her last remark. “We left a nice tip.” Patricia reciprocated. Relationship is both about being served and serving. It is a dance where both sides give up their own rights in order to honor the other.

So much of what we hear lately about the success of community banks, the re-focus on branches, and the importance of the customer experience is acknowledgement that all too often we stopped the dance of relationship—prioritizing our rights over those of the customer. And sure enough, they reciprocated.