

A Gift

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I liked operating the exit barricades. Drivers were detained at the entrance gates and I was afraid of potential conflict. But at the exit gates there was little aggression since drivers were allowed to exit without waiting. I didn't have to talk with many people at the exit gates either and we only occasionally let in vehicles with strike passes that were allowed to skip the entrance line up. About two weeks into the strike, I was at the exit barricades and feeling particularly dejected. I had spent the weekend reading misinformed and venomous strike comments on the internet and it was also the day of the big undergrad rally. It was in this rather low spirit that I approached a red car that drove in through the exit lanes. I was about halfway to the car when I realized that it contained a very angry young male driver, but not wanting to seem afraid, I continued walking. Once there, he rolled down the window and demanded that I move the barricade. I asked if he had a strike pass and he repeated his demand. Though he was seething with anger, he did not yell. I apologized but told him that that he was going to have to get into the entrance line. He replied that I had no right to blockade the entrance to York and he would move the barricades himself if he had to. I said that I understood his frustration.

“Do you really?” he asked.

I stopped. Did I? It was something that we all told ourselves and others, but did we really? I told him that my TAs had also gone on strike during my undergrad and that I had also been frustrated at the time (though to be fair, this previous strike was much shorter but at the time it was comparable). He was still angry but something changed when I stopped to truly consider if I understood him.

This was a turning point. Our confrontation turned into a conversation. I explained to him that though I didn't like the thought of undergrads protesting against us, I respected their right to do so since I had a similar right to legally withdraw my labour. I then told him that if he had learned about the issues from multiple sources and still wanted to protest against CUPE, that I would support him. The driver then admitted that he actually agreed with our demands, but not the means by

which we sought them. At this point I thought, “Hey, this is starting to go pretty well” when the police arrived, informed the driver that he was going the wrong way down the street and asked to see his license, insurance, and registration. Thinking that perhaps the spell was broken, I awkwardly said goodbye and stepped back to the barricade. The police kept him far longer than he ever would have waited in line, then presented him with *two* tickets, one for going the wrong way down the street and the other for expired insurance. I returned to the driver, thinking that any goodwill between us had gone up in smoke, but was pleasantly surprised when he seemed quite calm and we let him through the gate.

About five minutes later, his red car pulled up again. I thought that perhaps he had actually looked at the fine on the tickets and had returned in anger. Instead he exited his car with eight coffees and started to hand them out on the picket line, where he was received with great warmth. He and I spoke a bit further and, while we still disagreed with each other about the means the union was employing, we parted with a hug.

This is a pivotal moment that I take from the strike. Until then I had written off malicious comments as being made by self-absorbed assholes - simplistic distinctions that we sometimes make for our own sanity. But despite the fact that we still couldn’t come to an agreement, or perhaps because of it, this encounter encouraged me to view every author of every angry comment as a real person and not a caricature. It also reminded me that anger is sometimes born from fear or insecurity, and that the simple act of being understood can do much to diffuse this aggression. Many of my other views have also since changed. I have lost faith in my employer and my university. I have lost a faith in my government that I wasn’t even aware I held in the first place. I struggle to embrace the means that solidarity seems to demand. Yet while I now doubt the ability of faceless groups to reach each other across such divides, I have found an unexpected faith in the capacity of individuals to do this, even when fundamental differences exist. For this gift, I thank you.