

Re:Focus

simple ideas to help you thrive

by Simon Sinek

visit startwithwhy.com

The giving mindset

I am fascinated by airports. There are few, if any, other places you can visit where such a diverse cross section of society comes together in the same place. Young and old, yuppies, hippies, stoners, rednecks -- they all roam the airport in a sort of social Noah's Ark where at least two of everything is represented.

It is from this diverse pool of the general public that our airline seatmates are plucked. When we're travelling alone, we don't have a say in choosing our seatmate. It's just a luck of the draw. At times, that friend-for-the-flight lottery can be quite unnerving. We've all sat on the plane watching the menagerie of personalities getting on board, hoping the one we like the look of will sit next to us. Crestfallen as they pass us for a seat two rows behind, we pray that the excessively obese, sweaty gentleman pushing his way down the aisle will not be our five-hour companion, if for no other reason than because we hope to use both armrests and be able to get up to go to the bathroom at least once during the flight.

Sometimes we may be the object of enticement or derision to the person who got to our row before we did. This was the case of my seatmate this week. A middle-aged woman with short salt-and-pepper hair and tortoiseshell glasses sat in the aisle seat next to mine reading her book pretending I didn't exist as I stood next to her lifting my case into the overhead compartment. I think she was hoping I wouldn't be sitting next to her because most people look up and politely ask "are you sitting here?" so they can move aside to let me in. She didn't even look up, let alone speak to me. I actually had to say "excuse me" to her so she could let me in. She was visibly unimpressed.

I smiled knowing that this one person would have a significant influence over my flight experience. She didn't smile back. Instead, acting like someone had just asked her to prepare for a root canal, she begrudgingly angled her legs to one side so I could squeeze past. I think people who act like this are kind of funny, so it rarely if ever bothers me when I interact with them in life. All that grimacing and sighing they do to make sure I know how much I am inconveniencing them must be quite stressful (comedic for me, but stressful for them). With each snort and groan, it's clear they never figured out it's a lot less stressful to just be nice or accommodating for someone else every now and then.

Given the experience I just had getting to my seat, I knew what this flight was going to be like. I'd be putting on my headphones, and, for the duration of the trip, we'd ignore each other except when forced to interact. In any other circumstance, there would be no reason to talk about her, let alone write an entire column about her. But something happened early on in the flight that I didn't expect. It wasn't so much what she did but how I reacted to what she did that surprised me. This taught me a simple but valuable little lesson.

Once we were at cruising altitude, the flight attendant came down the aisle to ask us if we wanted an omelet or cereal for breakfast. I chose the cereal and so did my seatmate. A few minutes later, the flight attendant returned to say that there was only one cereal left and asked if one of us would mind having the omelet instead. I was about to turn to my seatmate and say, "You have the cereal, I don't mind having the omelet," when, before the words even left my mouth she piped up, "I'll have the cereal." I actually felt myself getting angry. General politeness dictates at least turning to the other person and offering or asking.

We all know the proverb "the more you give, the more you get." And we all intellectually know that being a giver is a good thing. But in an instant, I understood what that idea means more clearly than ever before. It's not the act of giving that matters; it's having a mindset of giving that matters. Is it nice to give to others? Of course. But what engenders rapport with other human animals is when they perceive us as having that giving mindset. This woman I was sitting next to was a taker. She totally lacked the giving mindset, and, as a result, I really dislike her. I was expecting to ignore her and enjoy my flight, but now I can't help myself looking over at her and giving her looks of pity. I'm actually writing this piece with her sitting next to me, and I've made no attempt to angle the screen. I actually hope she's reading over my shoulder.

If others perceive we have a giving mindset, they are more likely to get what they want in the first place. The net result to this lady was the same. She would have got the cereal had I offered it to her or if she had just taken it. The difference is, in an instant, I don't like her, don't trust her and don't want to help her. All she had to do was to turn to me and say, "Would you mind if I had the cereal," demonstrating a giving mindset simply by showing concern for my wants or needs, and I'd be lifting her case out of the overhead when we land without her even asking. Now, well, I may or may not. And if I do, it will be more for me, to reinforce that I'm still a giver or as a way to be snarky with her (nothing is worse than when someone we don't like does something nice for us. I'd be that guy to her).

In either circumstance, even though the act of taking her case down would be

one of giving, it wouldn't be motivated by that giving mindset. The act would not be a true act of generosity or kindness. And the reason it wouldn't be is not because of me or her but because of how we interacted.

At various times, we all forget that we're forced to share more than a row on an airplane with a stranger. We're forced to share highways, subway cars, sidewalks, offices, schools, neighborhoods, cities, and countries with them, too. We all forget that our own happiness is not solely based on how we live our lives; it's very much influenced by how others live theirs also. How we're treated impacts how we feel, daily. Even if for selfish reasons we want to go about our business, do our own thing and live our happy lives, then it matters that we do so with a giving mindset. Next time we walk through a door, let's all commit to holding open that extra three seconds longer so the person walking behind doesn't have to catch the door we let go of. If we are the ones who happily step to the side as we walk toward someone on the sidewalk, instead of expecting them to move, we'll all get to where we're going a little faster. None of us will miss our flights or our meetings or whatever else we're rushing off to if we let that one person trying to merge into our lane during rush hour just slip in. And the next time the airline runs out of cereal, just turn to the person you're sitting next to and say, "You have it." After all, we don't know who that person is and if they can help us with something we want or need later. Who cares if we get exactly what we want if we can take some comfort in that we helped someone else get exactly what they wanted.