

The Cast of Ordinary Times

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By Lucia A. Silecchia

A beloved cashier at my local supermarket passed away last month. The outpouring of sympathy and affection on our community listserv came quickly as the neighborhood remembered her kindness, her interest in our lives, and her impressive ability to remember our names.

As a new year unfolds, she is on my mind a great deal as I have thought about how many people like her fill my life. So often, in the cast of characters who gladden my days, I direct most of my attention to those who have the leading roles: my family, my dearest friends and my closest colleagues.

Yet, every now and then, something happens that makes me realize how rich my life is because of all those people who play what seem to be minor supporting roles – and play them so well. They are the people whose presence I often fail to notice – and whose absence would leave an indescribable void.

This cast includes the conductor on the train I take so often, who asks about my day and worries when he hasn't seen me for a while; the desk clerk in my building who is the first to say "welcome home" when my day is done; the usher at my parish church who always asked about my parents if he didn't see them on a Sunday morning; and the unknown toddler who to my delight and her parents' embarrassed pride offered me a stuffed giraffe during the sign of peace at a Sunday Mass.

Also in the cast are the nurse at a hospital who, while caring for my mother, saw my own fatigue, and found me a drink and a sandwich; the longtime cafeteria worker at Catholic University who greets me with the warmest of embraces whenever I have an emergency craving for French fries; the long ago college professor whose annual Christmas cards were a cherished link to the past; and the patient worker at the bakery who sorts through a pile of nearly identical fresh baked rolls to find me the one she deems best.

This supporting cast also includes the red capped porters at Union Station who kindly held my dad's luggage on his final trip to Washington so that he and I could go, unencumbered, to have breakfast at McDonald's for what we both knew would be the last time. Also numbered in the cast are the stranger on line behind me at the coffee shop on a dreary day who tells me she likes my shoes; a neighbor who always shoveled the snow from my parents' walkway as they grew older; and a kindly nun in Rome who once gave me a ticket to spend the Easter Vigil with Saint John Paul II.

The credits should also include the stranger on a subway who saw my eyes tear up when I was listening to a sad song through my headphones and, concerned, asked if I was ok; a neighbor who handed me a bright fistful of daisies when I admired her garden; a friend whose texts remind me that she'll be praying for me on days that she knows will hold special challenges; and students from classes long ago who drop me a line to say they got a new job, welcomed a child, celebrated a marriage, or used something I taught them.

The cast also includes many who inspire my faith -- the elderly woman who lights candles in church every morning and closes her eyes to speak to God with a steady confidence and the teenage girl who, thinking no one was watching, made a silent sign of the cross before embarking on a task that frightened her.

And, the cast includes a cashier at my local supermarket who knew my name.

I have never been a fan of New Year's resolutions. I have made too many, and broken too many. But, if I were to make resolutions this year – and 2021 seems as good a year for a fresh start as ever there was! – they might be these:

First, I want to notice with greater appreciation and gratitude all of those who play these important roles in my life. They are roles that seem so minor and mundane until I contemplate what life would be like without them. It is an old cliché of the theater that “there are no small roles.” I am slowly coming to realize that this is true of life as well. There is no role played by anyone in my life that is too small to be a great, irreplaceable blessing.

Second, I want to be more aware of the fact that I am also part of the supporting cast in the lives of many others. The strangers I meet and the fleeting encounters that fill my day are also chances to give to others a great, irreplaceable blessing like the ones I receive in abundance. This year may be the year I search a bit more and pray a bit more for the script so I can play that supporting role for others as best as I can.

As a New Year dawns, I do not know how the drama of 2021 will unfold and what scenes will play out in the months ahead. But I know that this new year begins with gratitude for the entire cast of my ordinary times.

Happy New Year! Wishing you health, happiness and holiness.

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