



THE cold glass jar felt good in my pudgy seven-year-old hands. It had once been filled with hard candies wrapped in brightly colored cellophane, a gift from one of my dad's clients. Sitting on our back deck on a Colorado summer afternoon, I wondered what I should fill the jar with now that all the candy was gone.

Then I remembered the homeless people I had seen on our recent trip to New York City. They were sitting on the sidewalk, something I knew my mom would have considered fun, but my grandmother would never have allowed. They had paper coffee cups and poorly written signs on cardboard. Sometimes they smelled.

I had a sinking feeling that they had something to do with me.

Remembering this feeling, I put on my pink plastic shoes and took a walk around the block, knocking on doors and holding the jar in my hands. As each friendly neighbor's face smiled down at me, I'd say, "I'm collecting change for homeless people. Even a penny will help."

They'd come back with quarters and sometimes even a dollar or two. "Aren't you sweet?" they'd say. I would nod and shake the jar so I could hear the metal clanging against the glass. It was the sound of my conscience being soothed, if only temporarily — a sound I would crave in a complicated way for the rest of my life.

I BELIEVE that we each have an innate sense of connectedness with the rest of humanity. After all, our first



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taste of life is in a totally dependent state, connected to our mothers by a cord made of arteries and veins. Even after this cord is cut, we rely on sympathetic adults to hear our cries and try to appease us.

Of course as we grow, we are faced with Darwinian challenges. Our brothers and sisters, if we have any, do not always have our needs in mind. My older brother insisted that he went after the Easter candy so mercilessly because he wanted me to understand what the “real world” was like. He also followed me out of the room whenever I walked away from a fight, insisting that I learn to argue and hold my own.

The seeds of separation and competition planted in childhood are fertilized — sometimes to freak-show, bioengineered proportions — by adolescence, but even then they rarely overcome our innate understanding that we are interdependent with other human beings.

I have noticed that many of my generation who grew up as I did, with trampolines in the yard, fathers who wore suits, and college guidebooks in the house, often have an inflated sense of responsibility for others. We were raised on a steady diet of Earth Day and Oprah empowerment. I don’t know where I first read the phrase “save the world,” but I felt sure it had been written with me in mind: a daughter of privilege, a possessor of deep feelings, a unique snowflake of a person with gifts that could help the less fortunate. Thanks to birth control and hippies who had delayed starting families until they were good and ready, my peers and I were some of the most-wanted children in history, and we knew it. We were pumped full of the idea of

our own goodness just waiting to be unleashed on the world. And then we were left clueless about where to direct it.

I spent much of my childhood trying to help others. If I wasn’t circulating through the neighborhood asking for change, I was writing letters to local fast-food restaurants insisting that they stop using styrofoam, which I’d learned in school was bad for the environment. I proudly gave an antidrug speech in which I vowed not only to “just say no” myself, but to help my peers say no, too. I volunteered in the soup kitchen. I called bingo games at the local nursing home. I did the cystic-fibrosis walk every year. And for a moment, these activities would soothe my conscience, like the drop of a coin in my glass jar.

I swore to myself that my compulsive volunteerism was motivated by more than a desire to be nominated to Key Club or to pad my college applications, but I wasn’t sure. Though I wanted badly to “help others,” I could never quite interpret the source of this ache. Was it about me, or the “others,” or both? It didn’t seem as if the nursing-home residents even liked it when I called bingo, because they couldn’t hear the letters; my voice was too high-pitched. The soup kitchen would have been fine without me; I probably ate more soup than I ladled. And, in the most depressing and obvious symbol of my ineffectiveness, the jar filled with coins “for the homeless” lay in the dirt beneath my playhouse. I had buried it there — along with my guilt — after realizing I didn’t know any homeless people in Colorado Springs.

This was the curse of my specialness, of my manufactured conviction that I, the privileged child, must “save the world.” My

lessons in altruism hadn't left me with any authentic way to do good, just generic certificates of appreciation (printed in bulk) and college-application fodder. I had no clear path to my own salvation, only a sense of righteousness and yearning, a deep feeling of interconnectedness, and the jar filled with coins.

WHEN it came time to leave home, I went to college in New York City, where I'd first seen homeless people. As a student at Barnard in Morningside Heights (otherwise known as South Harlem) I found plenty of new ways to channel my save-the-world angst. I was living much closer to people who had grown up without healthy cereals and soccer leagues. I didn't waste any time signing up to volunteer at a housing-project preschool.

Though my stomach hurt the first few times I walked down the hill to the towering rust red buildings of the Grant Houses project, the kids — Malcolm and Ayana and James — immediately confirmed that they were glad I was there. They touched my hair and asked me questions like: "Did you have to be smart to get into that school?" *Sort of.* "Are you married?" *No.* "Where your momma live?" *Colorado.*

When the Columbine High School shootings were in the news, the kids heard the word *Colorado* and remembered that I was from there. "Didn't you say your momma lived in that place? It must be real dangerous."

I almost laughed out loud at the absurdity of a bunch of five-year-olds from Harlem telling me that my tree-filled home state was dangerous, but something kept my mouth shut. At Barnard I was not the daughter of privilege, as I'd been made to feel back home. I was middle-class and not very well educated compared to the Dante-quoting products of private schools who sat beside me in lectures. College challenged my spuriously simple notions of good works and charity. In the echoing lecture halls I learned about imperialism and globalization, Machiavelli and Freud. After reading Rousseau's *The Social Contract*, I was unsure what "saving the world" really meant. "One man thinks himself the master of others," Rousseau writes, "but remains more of a slave than they." Suddenly a little round-faced black girl who lived with her welfare-collecting single mom in a roach-filled apartment in the projects telling me that *I* had grown up in a dangerous place was not something to laugh at. The problem wasn't that I didn't know any homeless people, but that I didn't know if they were the ones who needed my help in the first place.

Rousseau also believed that people are born good. It wasn't just that I was a "bleeding-heart liberal" or a "guilty white American." I had natural instincts — to help, to feel connected — that could potentially be harnessed into a sound political system. My angst, writ large, was grounds for a more just world. If only these ideas would live beyond my dog-eared, underlined copy of *The Social Contract*.

I began to analyze the story I'd been told about a world waiting for me, the special child, to wash away all its inequalities. The evils of Western certainty in Joseph Conrad's novel *Heart of Darkness* hit all too close to my postcolonial home. My fear of being an ignorant American blowhard imposing

my values and views on others suddenly outweighed my fear of being apathetic or self-focused. When I studied abroad in South Africa, living with an African family in a sand-colored township, I discovered that I had more to learn than to teach. I wrote poetry about finally shedding my guilt. I understood, after long nights of drinking "hooch" and smoking blunts with the neighborhood Xhosa boys, that my guilt did nothing but bore them. They preferred that I dance.

THREE years later a PBS documentarian chose me to interview former U.S. Attorney General Janet Reno for a new film on female leadership. I called my mom and asked what I should wear. "Thank God we bought you that suit right before you left for college," she said.

I reached into my closet and touched the billowy black pantsuit, the most expensive item of clothing I owned. I remembered buying it at the Castle Rock outlet mall, my mom at my side insisting that I needed one suit before moving to New York City. At the time I'd been confused by her urgency — why was this such a big deal? — but later I understood it was her way of "packing my lunch" one last time. A graduate of Colorado State University, she worried that she hadn't given me the social acumen necessary for life at an Ivy League school. She had bought me a suit because she'd felt guilty for not supplying a legacy of wealth and intellectualism.

"You promise to call me tomorrow right after the interview and tell me all about it?" she asked, excitement in her voice.

"Of course. As soon as I'm done hanging out with Janet, I'll give you a call," I said and laughed.

"Have your people call my people," she said, giggling like a girl. We were drunk on my specialness.

That was September 10, 2001.

I woke up the next morning in the crook of my boyfriend's arm, both of us wedged into my twin bed. The phone was ringing. It was the producer: the interview was off. A plane had crashed into the World Trade Center. In my groggy state, I could barely put the pieces together, but his urgency was unmistakable even to a college student who'd just woken up.

I spent the rest of that morning watching the giant television in the dorm lounge with a sea of crying and open-mouthed students. The residence-hall cafeterias urged us to eat, whether we had a meal plan or not. Those who longed for comfort foods gorged on bagels and grilled cheese sandwiches and peach cobbler.

I attended an emergency meeting for all the resident assistants in my building (I was one) and listened to instructions: "Find the students on your floors. Make sure they are OK. Ask them if they have friends or family in the towers. If they do, let us know. We consider them vulnerable."

I found all the residents on my floors. Some were instant-messaging frantically with high-school friends about who was missing. Some were sitting on their beds, staring at the wall. Some were trying unsuccessfully to get through to their parents and let them know they were safe. Everyone seemed vulnerable.

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