

The Person Behind the Poll

What I Learned at the Airport



THE FREEMAN

6 HOURS AGO



3



1



Show more



Allen Mendenhall

Hartsfield-Jackson, the busiest airport in the world: some 106 million souls passed through it last year, more people in 12 months than live in most nations. Even in the mornings I can believe every figure of it, though at that hour, on that occasion, it was more nearly a cathedral, hushed and vast and echoing with wheeled luggage.

I was there as I so often am, a man of frequent flight, my Delta devotion recorded in the cool glow of an iPhone screen that announces my loyalty status as *Diamond*, a grade with no weight, no facets, nothing to hold but a password.

Near me sat three: a grandmother, her daughter, and the daughter's daughter, a small girl of perhaps four or five with the round, unguarded face of youth that hasn't yet learned to conceal anything.

They were having breakfast, the three of them, and there was a softness to it, a privileged golden ordinariness—talk of school, of a book, of a stuffed animal—the small currency of family, spent freely because there was, that morning, an abundance of it.

Then it was time. The mother and the little girl rose. There were hugs, the ordinary kind between people who will see each other again, except that the grandmother's embrace of the child went on a beat too long, and her smile, when she pulled back, fixed as if for a photograph: bright, deliberate, held.

She waved until they were gone. She kept waving after there was nothing left to wave at.

Then she sat down, quite near me, and the smile simply left her face, as though it had only ever been borrowed, and she put her face into her hands and wept.

I confess that an airport, full as it is of strangers, does not often move me. An undifferentiated crowd is a kind of fog; I pass through it, and it asks nothing of me. But a single woman, weeping into her hands at six in the morning, is not fog, but a fact.

I did the arithmetic we are all taught to do now, the ungenerous math of demographics and polling—statistically, a Black woman of her age was unlikely to share my political views—and then found, to my relief, that none of it weighed anything at all against the plain sight of her grief.

So, I went to her and said nothing, because there was nothing that needed saying, and I put my hand on her shoulder. She did not look up. She only patted my hand, once, the way you reassure someone else's sorrow even in the middle of your own.

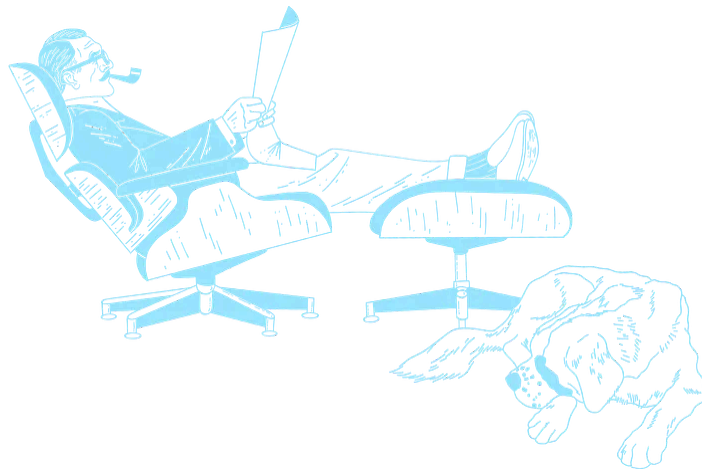
Then I let go, and she let me go, and that was the whole of it.

Adam Smith, before he ever wrote of markets or the invisible hand that moves them, wrote first of sympathy: of how we come to feel, in our own breast, something of the

sorrow written on a stranger's face, without transaction, without any accounting of what we are owed or what we believe.

He called it the original passion, the thing prior to interest, prior to ideology, prior even to acquaintance. It asks no biography, only that we *look*.

In an airport at dawn, among 10,000 strangers bound for 10,000 elsewhere, I looked and for one unspoken moment, so did she. Smith might have called that the truest economy in the building, the only exchange that morning in which nothing was bought, and nothing, in the end, was lost.



Allen Mendenhall is a Senior Advisor for the Free Enterprise Initiative and a Research Fellow in the Thomas A. Roe Institute for Economic Policy Studies at the Heritage Foundation. A lawyer with a Ph.D. in English from Auburn University, he has taught at multiple colleges and universities across Alabama and is the author or editor of nine books. Learn more at AllenMendenhall.com.

Subscribe to The Freeman

Launched a year ago

Markets, liberty, culture. We are anti-anti-anti-Communist.

Upgrade to paid

By subscribing, you agree Substack's [Terms of Use](#), and acknowledge its [Information Collection Notice](#) and [Privacy Policy](#).



3 Likes

Discussion about this post

Comments

Restacks



Write a comment...



Michael Val Hietter 5h

I remember seeing a verse in an old devotional booklet: A trouble shared is but half a trouble / B joy that's shared is a joy that's doubled.

I've been on both ends and sides of that equation, and based on my experience, your interaction eased that lady's pain even if for just a moment. It's one of the unique human things we can still this age of technology and social disintegration.

♡ LIKE 💬 REPLY

