

The Emotional Story of the Take-Away Box

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A few weeks ago I was travelling into central London by public transport. Changing between the national rail and the underground at London Bridge station, I was joined with my fellow commuters in the disappointment of having to walk down a stationary escalator. It was during this slow, stuttered descent that I almost subconsciously caught in the corner of my senses a young woman eating some fast food in a take-away card box. The pungent aroma lingered throughout the stairway and settled onto the platform where we awaited the next west-bound Jubilee line service.



The vandalized sign in question

While standing at the spot where I always stand – knowing that the doors I enter will be the same ones from which I will leave to walk immediately into the exit from the platform at Bond Street station – I noticed that this young woman was jovially talking with another lady and a gentleman. Evidently feeling too warm, mid-conversation she put down her take-away box onto the relief 'London Bridge' sign and proceeded to remove her outermost layer of clothing. What had been up until that moment a passive observance now transformed in my heart into a searing indignation with respect to the discarded take-away box: The young woman, having packed her clothing into her bag, resumed her conversation while neglecting to pick up her take-away box.

At first I felt anger.

“How could she abandon her box, there?” I asked myself. “That’s just flagrant littering.”

Then I began to sadly empathize with the box.

“I’m being abandoned,” I imagined the box thinking to itself. “My service has been ungratefully ignored. I will not even have the honor of being discarded appropriately.”

Then I paused to check myself.

What if the young woman had simply forgotten to pick it up? Maybe she had initially intended to do so, but was distracted by the conversation and it had slipped her mind. Perhaps she was still going to pick it up in a moment, once the train would arrive, and she simply wanted to keep her hands free until then.

Subsequently, the train could be heard approaching through the tunnel, and the young woman gravitated with her friends towards the edge of the platform. Without the box.

I froze in a moment of uncertainty. What was the appropriate thing to do? Should I pick up the box and throw it away myself? Should I leave it there for the station cleaning staff to remove? Should I return it to the lady? "Excuse me, you've forgotten your lunch," I could reason with the woman.

"Oh dear," I could imagine her replying. "I'm so sorry – I forgot!"

But then I countered myself with another theory.

"What??? That's not my problem," she could have rebuffed. "Piss off!"

Hmm. I'd like to get on the train and I couldn't afford to wait for the next one to arrive. A confrontation with this woman would lead to an uncomfortable 5 minutes in the train carriage between the 5 stops of my journey.

In confused hesitation, and with the doors of the train now open and about to close in a few seconds, I gave up the emotional burden and resigned myself to lose on this occasion. I left the box on the platform and, grieving, I got on the train.

"Why didn't I do anything?" I was now asking myself. "I should be more spontaneous. I should follow my conscience, follow my gut feelings. Who cares what other people think."

I began to reflect on the religious life I'm striving to live and how I need more disciplined spiritual training so that when moments like this occur again in the future, I will be ready to respond immediately with divine clarity and principled wisdom. I was still feeling down from admitting defeat, and also from admitting my weaknesses. But while my tail was still hanging between my legs, I suddenly realized that this episode wasn't all a disaster. The battle may have been lost, but I could still win the war.

After all, I reasoned with myself, I did have an emotional reaction to what the woman did. How many hundreds of other commuters would have had the same viewpoint as I did? How many would have done anything about it? How many commuters pay no attention to the littering of others, even when they witness it? The fact that I did react indicated to me that I am still a very sensitive person. Living in a hard city like London required some degree of self-protective desensitization. Yet I'm still deeply moved such heartless acts as this.

I resolved, on that short tube journey, to retain my sensitivity. This is my strength. This is my gift. This is my weapon. I will sharpen my sensitivity and train with it so that in future I will respond with conviction. Even if I upset a few people in doing so, maybe those people need upsetting to become aware of their own desensitized state.

Thank you, poor take-away box. You helped me awaken to myself in a moment of deep religious tension on the underground.