

CHAPTER THREE

The Street Sweeper

I have always tried to keep my life in perspective with my ego under control. That effort has been helped enormously by a wife and three kids who have never taken me too seriously and who have always held above me an imaginary oxygen mask ready to drop down whenever I needed a whiff of reality. The first time I came home looking sharp in the new battle dress camouflage fatigues the Army adopted in the 1980s, my daughter Annemarie, then about twelve, merely looked up from watching television and announced, "Mom, the GI Joe doll is home."

Over time, others have helped me keep my ego down. After I retired, I was invited to give a speech to a large luncheon event in Boston. There were about two thousand guests and you needed two tickets, one to get into the room, and the second for the waitress to verify that you had paid for lunch. I was escorted to the round head table by the event's chairman. As the waitress placed salads before each guest, she asked for meal tickets. She passed by me without giving me a salad. When it was time for the next course she passed me by again. That was when the chairman realized what was going wrong. Mortified, he said to the waitress, "Young lady, this is General Colin Powell, former Chairman of the

Joint Chiefs of Staff, our honored guest and keynote speaker." Her simple, no-nonsense response was "He ain't got no ticket, huh?"

The chairman produced a ticket for me. I was getting hungry.

I love when people do their job. Doing your job well, with someone watching, without inflating your self-importance or showing off, is not easy.

Some years ago, there was a human interest segment about a street sweeper on the evening news. I think he worked in Philadelphia. He was a black gentleman and swept streets the old-fashioned way, with one of those wide, stiff bristle brooms and a wheeled garbage can. He had a wife and several children and lived in a modest home. It was a loving family, and he had high ambitions for his children. He enjoyed his job very much and felt he was providing a worthwhile service to his community. He had only one professional ambition in life and that was to get promoted to drive one of those mechanized street sweepers with big round brushes.

He finally achieved his ambition and was promoted to driving a street sweeping machine. His wife and children were proud of him. The television piece closed with him driving down the street; a huge smile was on his face. He knew who he was and what he was.

I run that video piece through my mind every few months as a reality check. Here is a man happy in his work, providing an essential service for his community, providing for his family, who love and respect him. Have I been more successful in what is truly important in life than he has been? No, we have both been fortunate. He has touched all the important bases in the game of life. When we are ultimately judged, despite my titles and medals, he may have a few points on me, and on a lot of others I know.

CHAPTER FIVE

Kindness Works

Many years ago I was the warden—the senior lay person—of a small suburban Episcopal church in northern Virginia. During that time our bishop assigned to our parish an elderly priest to serve as an assistant pastor. The priest was in some kind of personal distress and needed a parish home. I never knew the nature of his problem. Whatever it was, we were pleased to take him in. We welcomed him into the church family, treated him as one of us, and ministered to him, just as we ministered to each other. Nobody asked about his problem or pried into his life.

He was with us for a year. On his last Sunday he was assigned to give the sermon. I listened to it in my usual proper Episcopalian position, right rear of the church. I'm sure it was a good sermon, but one sentence hit me with special force and has remained with me for four decades. At the end of the sermon, the priest looked over the congregation and with a smile on his face quietly concluded: "Always show more kindness than seems necessary, because the person receiving it needs it more than you will ever know."

He was talking about himself, of course. The lesson was clear: Don't just show kindness in passing or to be courteous. Show it in

depth, show it with passion, and expect nothing in return. Kindness is not just about being nice; it's about recognizing another human being who deserves care and respect.

Much later, when I was Secretary of State, I slipped away one day from my beautiful office suite and vigilant security agents and snuck down to the garage. The garage is run by contract employees, most of them immigrants and minorities making only a few dollars above minimum wage.

The garage is too small for all the employees' cars. The challenge every morning is to pack them all in. The attendants' system is to stack cars one behind the other, so densely packed that there's no room to maneuver. Since number three can't get out until number one and two have left, the evening rush hour is chaos if the lead cars don't exit the garage on time. Inevitably a lot of impatient people have to stand around waiting their turn.

The attendants had never seen a Secretary wandering around the garage before; they thought I was lost. (That may have been true by then, but I'd never admit it.) They asked if I needed help getting back "home."

"No," I answered. "I just want to look around and chat with you." They were surprised, but pleased. I asked about the job, where they were from, were there problems with carbon monoxide, and similar small talk. They assured me everything was fine, and we all relaxed and chatted away.

After a while I asked a question that had puzzled me: "When the cars come in every morning, how do you decide who ends up first to get out, and who ends up second and third?"

They gave each other knowing looks and little smiles. "Mr. Secretary," one of them said, "it kinda goes like this. When you drive in, if you lower the window, look out, smile, and you know our name, or you say 'Good morning, how are you?' or something like that, you're number one to get out. But if you just look straight

ahead and don't show you even see us or that we are doing something for you, well, you are likely to be one of the last to get out."

I thanked them, smiled, and made my way back to where I had abandoned my now distraught bodyguard.

At my next staff meeting, I shared this story with my senior leaders. "You can never err by treating everyone in the building with respect, thoughtfulness, and a kind word," I told them. "Every one of our employees is an essential employee. Every one of them wants to be viewed that way. And if you treat them that way, they will view you that way. They will not let you down or let you fail. They will accomplish whatever you have put in front of them."

It ain't brain surgery. Every person in an organization has value and wants that value to be recognized. Every human being needs appreciation and reinforcement. The person who came to clean my office each night was no less a person than the President, a general, or a cabinet member. They deserved and got from me a thank-you, a kind word, an inquiry that let him or her know their value. I wanted them to know they weren't just janitors. I couldn't do my job without them, and the department relied on them. There are no trivial jobs in any successful organization. But there are all too many trivial leaders who don't understand this oh so simple and easy to apply principle.

Taking care of employees is perhaps the best form of kindness. When young soldiers go to basic training they meet a drill sergeant, who seems to be their worst nightmare. He shouts at them relentlessly, he intimidates them, he makes them miserable. They are terrified. But all that changes. Their fear and initial hatred turn into something else by the end of basic training. The sergeant has been with them every step of the way: teaching, cajoling, enforcing, bringing out of them strength and confidence they didn't know they had. At the end, all they want is for their performance

to please him. When they graduate, they leave with an emotional bond and a remembrance they will never forget. Ask any veteran the name of his drill sergeant and he will know it. My ROTC summer camp drill sergeant almost fifty-five years ago was Staff Sergeant (SSG) Artis Westberry.

Being kind doesn't mean being soft or a wuss. Kindness is not a sign of weakness. It is a sign of confidence. If you have developed a reputation for kindness and consideration, then even the most unpleasant decisions will go down easier because everyone will understand why you are doing what you are doing. They will realize that your decision must be necessary, and is not arbitrary or without empathy.

As the old saying puts it, "To the world, you may be one person, but to one person you may be the world."