

# NO CART LEFT BEHIND

KATHRYN REESE

UTAH VALLEY UNIVERSITY

*During an encounter with a shopping cart I become painfully aware of my own prejudice and privilege. Self-awareness is a fundamental quality of authentic leadership. Environments of equality, inclusion, and diversity truly have to be created from the inside out.*

**I**t was as if the shopping cart knew my name. It was posing in a patch of grass, empty except for a coupon catalog. Five blocks away it would be back in its motherland if I had the gumption to get it there. I think only the birds in the trees could have told me exactly why the cart had been dumped like a sex-addicted boyfriend or discarded like stale tortilla chips. I walked twenty self-righteous steps past the absurd piece of furniture and turned around. My shoulder angels this time were Curiosity and Ego. For years, I have wondered what it would be like to push a shopping cart down the street. I suppose privilege had helped me avoid the opportunity until then.

The cart was much louder than I anticipated. Every time I pushed past a crack in the sidewalk it sounded like Tweety Bird was having a seizure in her cage. The rattling jiggled all the tissues in my wrists and I was sure joggers could hear me—or rather my basket on wheels—from blocks away over their heavy breathing and workout playlists. Even though my embarrassment felt louder than the noise, I didn't move to the seamless street.

Self-awareness is the best leadership quality I know. I thought my nervousness was amusing. “What is it about this shopping cart that makes

me question my gracefulness and my sense of belonging?” I said a friendly good morning to someone who’d just parked their car and offered them a side smile with eye contact. Holding in a stampede of disclaimers, I found the source of my insecurity; I realized I didn’t want him to think of me the same way I had thought of everyone I’d ever seen pushing a shopping cart beyond the grocery store. Still my next instinct was to disguise my quest like someone who raises their hand but gets shy and pretends they were scratching their head instead. I felt seen. Brené Brown calls this “validation”; I call it microwaving my character. All prejudice was heating, spinning, and splattering inside me.

As a middle child I have always been passionate about justice. If my mom asked me to move some shoes in the living room, I’d tell her, “That isn’t my mess! It isn’t fair if I have to clean it.” In that same way, I felt entitled to leave the shopping cart behind; I believed for a few sickening seconds that I deserved to ignore it. But the world is sprinkled with chaos and when I meditate, I hear mother earth asking all of us to be tidy. The more I learn about poverty, racism, supply chains, genocide, rape culture, racial profiling, subliminal messages, and global warming, the more I am convinced this is *our* mess. We cannot trace the mayhem back to one source; we have tried. So instead of arguing about who is responsible, I have learned to be generous.

I’m not sure if the shopping cart was a symbol of world peace, but I am sure it was a worthy companion. When I made it to Smith’s Grocery I didn’t abandon my metal basket in the edge of the parking lot; I strolled with it past the automatic doors and shoved it into the cozy tessellation of other carts, swiping the handle with a sanitation wipe before walking away.

It is endlessly funny to me that the next 200 shoppers to use that cart will have no idea “where it’s been.”

The truth is I don’t know where you’ve been either. But if I can be generous about helping a shopping cart get where it needs to go, then, like any compassionate leader, I can do the same with people.