



Not-So-Instant Karma



Mark O'Brien



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In the past, we'd have said the younger of my two younger brothers, Woody,* is *mentally retarded*. In these enlightened times, we're more likely to say he's *intellectually disadvantaged*, *synaptically challenged*, *cognitively attenuated*, *neuronally insufficient*, *operating at an electroencephalogramitcal deficit*, or something equally nebulous and faux-scientific to virtue-signal our sensitivity and to ensure our compliance with the inviolable laws of political correctness.

All such linguistic nonsense is just euphemistic bet-hedging. We're merely trying not to acknowledge that Woody's *challenges* make him in some ways more perceptive, in many ways more imaginative, and in all ways much more capable of simplifying than we are. An example:

One evening, after a phone conversation with Woody, I wrote these notes to myself:



Anthony Conrad

Tonight Woody told me he and some friends from his group home were going to Europe for a vacation. At first, I disbelieved him. But when he said they were going to “Spain, Germany, and all those other French countries down there” — and that they would also visit Arkansas — I was ashamed of myself for doubting. This is not a matter of geographic facility. It’s a question of imagination. Woody’s is better than mine. That’s why I’m the writer.

Aaron Skogen

Slow and Steady

He’s also more patient, caring, and capable of tending his convictions without doubt than we are. Someone once told me the measure of a practical joker is that he need not witness the payoff of his jokes. Likewise, the measure of a sense of karma is that one need not witness the turning of the wheel to know what’s right, to know what deserves constancy. Another example:

Every visit to the house Woody shares with two roommates (under 24/7 supervision) requires a visit to his bedroom. An avid collector of model airplanes, CDs, stuffed animals, professional wrestling DVDs and posters, radio scanners, and family pictures, Woody’s always eager to share his new prize possessions with anyone willing and able to slow down and simplify enough to appreciate them.

On one such visit, I was looking up at the new planes that hung on nearly invisible fishing line from his ceiling. Puffs of cotton clouds, also suspended on fishing line, floated among them. Interspersed between the planes and the clouds, glow-in-the-dark stars twinkled in the dimming light of early

evening. As I was gazing, Woody said, “What do I do with that?”

I looked down in the direction he was pointing. *That* was a 13-gallon trashcan, filled to the brim with aluminum pull-tabs from soda and beer cans. As I tried to fathom the time and diligence required to amass such a collection, I could only think to ask, “Why did you save all those?”

Woody said, “Frank told me to.”

What Goes Around ...

Frank was a cousin of my mother. He passed away in May of 1997. Woody explained to me that, at one of the traditional Christmas Eve parties Frank and his wife threw every year, tending bar as he always did and sporting his holly bow tie, Frank told Woody if he saved the tabs from aluminum cans, some charitable organization could redeem them and use the funds to help someone. Woody neither forgot nor wavered.

As I stood, awestruck at the enormity of what Woody had accomplished, all I could manage to say was, “I have no idea.”

Shortly thereafter, I received a call from a woman in the organization that manages Woody’s residence. She asked my permission to give Woody’s name to the Shriners of Connecticut. Through some connections he’d made, Woody found a way to donate the tabs to the Shriners, who redeemed them and used the proceeds for their Hospitals for Children. The Shriners were so moved by how many tabs Woody collected, at how long he’d stayed his course, they wanted to write him a letter and send him a plaque.

And so it is that the next time you visit Woody's room, you'll see that plaque proudly displayed on his wall. He was lucky enough to see the wheel turn. But he didn't need to. And he won't need to see it turn again, even though it surely will.

While you're there, you'll also see that trashcan is nearly full again. And if you believe in karma, you'll become one of the many friends and family members who save tabs and send them to Woody from all over the country.

Simple

In the midst of all the world's talk about making a difference, Woody says nothing. He just stays his course.

Instant karma? Woody doesn't need it. In the midst of his ostensible challenges, he's content with imagination, a full heart, a just reward, and continuing his mission.

Frank told him to.

*Woody is a nickname derived from *Hollywood*. My father once put an old pair of tortoise-shell sunglasses in the junk drawer every kitchen is required to have by law. Woody pulled them out one day and put them on. My father

saw him sporting those shades and called him Mister Hollywood. The rest,
as they say

Life

Gifts

Karma

Steadfastness

Simplicity



Written by Mark O'Brien



Trust yourself. Question everything. Settle for nothing. Conform to as little as possible. Write relentlessly. And never quit.
