

Kluwer Mediation Blog

The Lost Smartphone: A Christmas Story

Greg Bond (Bond & Bond Mediation / University of Wildau) · Friday, December 22nd, 2017

I was in a busy urban train on my way home, when I was approached by a woman asking me where the Christmas market was. I answered. Then she asked if she could use my phone, she had to go to a store where she had lost hers. It was 9 pm, I was tired after a long day. I resisted the urge to be suspicious and gave her my phone. She tried calling but could not get through to her own phone. I missed my stop waiting for her trying. The train moved on.

So I saw her smile and I decided to take her to the shop she was looking for, which was in a big mall. She had been at a conference and was catching a train out of Berlin and a plane to Brazil that night and the next morning. Last chance for the phone . . . Today, a smartphone contains so much that we believe to be irreplaceable. This was like an emergency.



We walked past the twinkling lights of the Christmas market. Then she began to run. She was in a hurry. I ran up behind her, towards the mall. Panting a little. Across a busy street on a red light. At the mall, as I expected, the store she thought she had left her phone in was closed, but there was a large transparent shutter and the lights were still on. She banged on the

window, and waved. There was someone inside, quite a distance away, but they just looked at us, made no sign, and then disappeared through a door. Time was passing.

I walked up to a mall security guard, standing in the middle of the inside alleyway, dressed in the customary black. I explained the situation in German. My new acquaintance stood by me, looking concerned, understanding nothing, gesturing to the security guard to underscore my message.

The guy was calm and quick. He called someone on his walkie-talkie, and there was a conversation that achieved nothing. I explained that we had seen someone in the store. We walked round to an outside door, where he used a wall intercom to talk to whoever was inside. He explained that there was a young lady from Brazil, who had to fly back that night . . . And he turned to me and said:

“You know, if she left it there it may well be stolen.” I knew.

What then happened surprised me, because the stores in the mall close at 8 pm, but clearly the shop assistants stay in store working considerably later. I had never realized that. There were three of them, who came out to talk to the security guard, and to have the off-duty cigarette they must have been waiting for for some hours. Yes, one of them remembered a phone being handed in. “What brand?” she asked. She was not sure she could get access to it, as it might be locked away for safekeeping, but she returned to the store and we waited. A further five minutes passed. Then she emerged through the door carrying the Brazilian lady’s smartphone, and presented it to her. That was when I got a hug from my new friend. And I thanked the security guard and the three shop assistants. They nodded and smiled, but did not have much to say. It was all in a day’s work.

My Brazilian friend wanted to say goodbye. I asked her where her hotel was and wanted to be sure she would be able to get her bags and still make her train. The hotel was not far away, but a little awkward to find, as it would involve a train and a tram or a walk to get there. I recommended she take a taxi, to make it easier. But she needed whatever last money she had for a taxi from the hotel to the station. So I took her on the train and on foot to her hostel, and on the street corner we bade farewell. She invited me to Brazil, said I could stay with my family in her house. I am sure I could. “God sent you,” she said. “God bless you.”

God bless me. If only it were so simple. I recently read a story by the US American writer Anthony Doerr in which he describes a disturbing incident where a man parked his car on the writer’s driveway in front of his house and fell asleep in the car. Doerr asks himself if the man needs help or is dangerous, and opts for safety in the light of gun ownership in the States. He calls the police, who wake the man, who is confused but harmless and is allowed to drive away. The police tell Doerr that he did the right thing. The problem, Doerr’s story tells me, is our lack of trust in humanity. And yet it is right to be wary, there are good reasons.

This is a dilemma with which we live. When a stranger asked me if she could borrow my phone, I asked myself first if I should do this, and my instinct was that I should not. Would she run off with it when the train doors opened at the next stop? Would she make an expensive international call? Who was this woman anyway? Because she looked trustworthy, smiled at me, showed her worries, and was smaller than me and decently dressed, I helped her. But what would it have taken for me not to? Not much.

The question here seems to concern where we each locate our own personal borders between trust and suspicion. That this delineation is necessary for getting through everyday life, and occasionally for survival, cannot be disputed, but what kind of society is it where suspicion is great, and trust often not more than the small change?

The city in December is full of people asking others for help. I was in Hamburg recently, and shocked by the number of people begging. Sitting quietly on the street side in front of paper cups. I was in Milan before that, and felt unable to enter any churches, as at the door of each there were beggars. The contrast between this and the wealth and opulence of Milan’s retail centre, with all its fashion and glitter, was simply obscene. In Berlin, where I live, I hardly notice the people asking for money, for help – this has become such a “normal” part of every day. I am sure that things are getting worse, and that there are more people on the streets than there were.

What can I say? It is easy to help a respectable person in need find their phone. What I did turned

out to be a lot of fun. What I do not do troubles me.^[1]


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The graphic features a black background with white text and a circular icon. The icon depicts a group of five stylized human figures, with a magnifying glass positioned over the central figure. The background is accented with horizontal lines in blue and green.

References[+]

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