

Casseroles and Conversations

Category: Stories

written by Warren Holleman | November 22, 2019



An airport conversation takes a turn...

2017 was a heartbreaking year for our family.

To start things off, my wife's parents—both of them!—were diagnosed with terminal illnesses. We spent the next few months immersed in the painful, complex process of transitioning them to home hospice care and beginning to face and grieve the prospect of their deaths.

In the midst of this, Hurricane Harvey began heading towards Houston, our hometown. My wife, Marsha, drove to her parents' ranch, south of the city, intending to bring them back to our home, on higher ground. But the heavy rains arrived a day earlier than expected, trapping Marsha and her parents for three terrifying days and nights in their flooded house.

Then there was Flavio. He was this absolutely beautiful young soul who'd immigrated to Houston in 1994, at sixteen. He came alone, after a journey across Africa by foot, and then across the Atlantic as a stowaway on a ship. A judge granted him political asylum and placed him in a Catholic Worker house of hospitality where Marsha, a family physician, ran a free medical clinic. When Marsha realized that Flavio was so young and alone, she began inviting him to our home. He bonded with our children and, in time, adopted us as his American family. Having lived with us off and on for about ten years, he moved back to Africa. On May 6, 2017, I received a frantic phone call from Flavio's brother. That morning, he said, Flavio had felt chest pain, lay down on the sofa and never got up again. He'd died of a heart attack. We'd known that he had high blood pressure, but we'd thought it was being controlled by medication. Flavio died at age 38—before his life had really begun.

Amid all this, our daughter, who struggles with chronic asthma, began a new

internship in Portland, Oregon. We'd hoped that the change of climate might be good for her health. Instead, the opposite happened. In terms of wildfires and air quality, September 2017 turned out to be one of the worst periods in the state's history. Locals began calling the month "Smoketember," and our daughter struggled just to breathe.

Throughout that autumn, because of all the bad things that had happened, my wife and I were on high alert. Something told us: *We need to get out to Oregon and spend Thanksgiving with our daughter.* But we were also juggling the situation with Marsha's parents; this would be their last Thanksgiving. Plus, we had a son in Houston. So Marsha stayed in Texas to host a feast for her family, and I bought a ticket to Portland and flew out early on Thanksgiving morning.

I had a two-hour layover in Phoenix. As I got off the airplane there, I found myself worrying about two things that really should not have mattered: casseroles and conversations.

You see, later that day my daughter and I would be attending a five-hour Thanksgiving feast hosted by a dear friend who'd helped her get settled in Portland. I knew my friend had spent days preparing this feast, and I worried that she'd be offended if I didn't eat everything she put on the table. I started figuring out a plan for how to save room in my stomach for all those casseroles.

My other worry involved the twenty or more strangers I'd be sharing those five hours with. I'm a bit of an introvert, so I needed to reserve emotional space for all those conversations.

Looking back, what I was really worried about was my daughter, but I chose to focus on the more immediate, solvable problems.

I formulated a plan and—in my own anxious, middle-aged way—I sprang into action. I trudged over to an airport convenience store and purchased a salad, a bottle of water and a magazine. I figured that reading a magazine would be a good way to protect my emotional space.

From there, I headed to the food court. To my pleasant surprise, it was completely empty—a nice perk of traveling on a holiday morning.

I was sitting there blissfully enjoying my salad and my solitude when, all of a sudden, the chair across from me moved. I looked up and saw a woman, maybe ten years younger than me. She held a Miller Lite in one hand and chicken fingers in the other.

"May I join you?" she said. Before I could answer, she sat down.

Immediately she started peppering me with questions: "Where are you going?" "Why are you going there?" "Don't you miss your daughter, living so far away?"

This stranger told me that she used to live in Oregon: "I just *know* that you're gonna love it!" She talked about how the people there are *so friendly* and how it had been a *great place* to raise her son. She told me how *wonderful* it was that I was going to spend Thanksgiving with my daughter. In fact, she said it three times.

Through it all, she was congenial, convivial and, as far as I was concerned, totally annoying. *What's wrong with this woman? Why won't she leave me alone? Can't she see that there are dozens of empty tables in this food court, and I just want to read my magazine? What does she want from me?*

I didn't really want to find out, so I stood up and said, "I need to go catch my flight." Which wasn't true: I had another hour.

I felt that I should at least ask her something, so I said, "And where are you going this Thanksgiving morning?"

Inwardly I cringed, fearing that she'd give a long-winded answer, but she didn't.

She simply said: "Las Vegas."

So I dashed off my parting words to her: "Well, I hope you get very, very lucky!"

I started to walk away, but I couldn't, because her eyes wouldn't let me go. She gave me this quizzical—perhaps even somewhat offended—look, as if to say: *Why did you say that?*

So I offered an explanation that I didn't really think necessary: "You know. Las Vegas, gambling. Have fun! Get lucky!"

For some strange reason, she had to think about that for a second, and then she said, "Oh, I see. But I'm not going there to gamble."

I dashed off another lighthearted comment: "There's so many things to do in Las Vegas. Music shows. Magic shows. Comedy..."

Another pause, then: "I'm not going to the shows."

Now she had me. It was my turn to be curious.

"So if it's not the gambling or the shows, what takes you to Las Vegas?"

This stranger who had been so loquacious, so friendly, so familiar... Suddenly, she was struck dumb. Her face tightened, and her lips started quivering. She kept stuttering the same syllable.

"Muh."

"Muh."

"Muh."

Finally, she enunciated mechanically: "Me-mor-i-al."

My mind went to work: *Memorial Park? Memorial City Mall? The Lincoln Memorial?* Finally something clicked. "Oh, do you mean—are you going to a memorial service?"

"Yes."

"Ah! Is it for one of your grandparents?"

"No."

I slowed down a bit: "Your father?"

She shook her head, and I slowed down some more: "Your mother?"

Her mind went somewhere else, then it came back and said two words I'll never forget:

"My son."

I did not see that coming. I felt like crawling into a hole.

"I'm sorry! I'm so sorry. I'm sorry! I'm so, so sorry." I just kept saying this, over and over. And I did feel sorry. For her loss. But also for being such a jerk.

When I finally shut up, she explained: "He was at that country-music festival. They're having a me...me...me-mor-i-al. For the families. Later. This afternoon."

Instantly I knew that she meant the Harvest music festival shooting, which had happened just weeks earlier, on October 1. Fifty-eight people were murdered—the deadliest mass shooting in modern US history.

I reached across the table and took her hand.

"I don't have to leave just yet," I said. "I can stay a few more minutes."

With her other hand, she started patting my arm and saying words that mirrored my earlier mantra.

"I'm all right," she said. "I'm all right. I'm all right."

I knew she wasn't, but she was lying for me. So I could go catch my plane. So I could go spend Thanksgiving with my daughter.

I thought about this stranger all the way to Oregon. I've continued to think about her just about every day since.

As you can imagine, when I arrived in Portland, I gave my daughter the biggest hug ever. And I kept hugging her through the duration of the trip, and on every visit since.

But what was most amazing, for me, is what happened at that five-hour feast with those twenty-plus strangers.

I felt grateful for every casserole and every conversation.