

City scene: Everyday kindness

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [May 15, 2007](#) issue

Sometimes life in a big city can feel impersonal, almost inhuman. On the streets the taxis vie for pole position at the stoplights and cut one another off to get to a fare. On the sidewalks people beg for money, holding signs that say things like “Homeless. Hungry. Help.”

But sometimes the city feels so grace-filled it almost makes me weep. I often ride the bus from the church where I work on North Michigan Avenue in Chicago to the offices of the Century on South Michigan. The bus takes twice as long as a cab, but it costs much less and almost always yields something interesting.

The other day I got on the No. 151 bus and started to read. At the next stop I watched as an elderly white woman boarded the bus and wasn’t sure about how to use her transit card. She inserted it upside down, then backward. While the other passengers became increasingly distressed by the delay, the driver, a very pleasant African-American woman, patiently explained how to use the card. “Here, honey, let me do it for you,” she said, leaning out of her seat, one hand on the wheel. The woman finally walked toward a seat but then turned back. “Are you sure it took only one fare from my card?” she asked the driver. “I heard it beep twice.” “Yes, I’m sure,” the driver answered. “But I heard it beep twice: it took two fares.” “No, honey: it only took one fare. It always beeps twice.” “How do you know?” the woman demanded. “Here, let me show you. Come on up here and look at the indicator. There it is, your one fare.” By this time the stoplight had cycled from red to green twice. Finally we were under way.

At the stop after that a man in a motorized chair pulled the cord. He was frail, and one could see the tubes from the oxygen tank that was helping him breathe. “I’m on my way to the V.A. hospital and I’m going to need some help,” he announced. Again the driver responded graciously. She helped him negotiate his motorized chair to the door, told him how to position the chair for the mechanical lift, asked him to adjust the position an inch or two, and then activated the lift. The process took a long time. You could sense the tension and impatience of the people on the bus. The stoplight cycled a few more times and motorists honked. The driver, unfazed, remained

infinitely patient. She was a note of grace on that busy urban thoroughfare. As I got off the bus, I thanked her for her kindness. "Just doing my job," she said. "You have a blessed day now, honey."