

Designer mittens: Mine for the giving

by [Debra Bendis](#) in the [April 3, 2013](#) issue



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She was sitting on the cement sidewalk along Michigan Avenue on a February day. She must have been numb with cold. I could imagine that cold settling in as she sat, and I shuddered. “Here,” I said, bending down to greet her with a gift card. “This is worth \$3 at Dunkin Donuts. Get something hot.” She didn’t say thank you. Instead, she looked up at my cherished fur-lined leather mittens and said, “Those mittens look warm.”

I said, “Yes, they are” and resisted a sudden urge to thrust them deep into my pockets. The encounter troubled me all morning. I’d left her with a voucher for a bowl of soup that would last a few minutes, but her thin knit gloves would let the cold in all day and all night. By lunchtime, I’d made up my mind to do something. I’d walk by the same corner, and if the woman was still there, I’d go get her a pair of mittens.

When I saw her still begging at the corner, I walked to a drugstore. But nothing on the shelves was any warmer than what she was wearing. OK, I thought, determined not to give up once I’d begun, I’ll try another store. But that store had nothing useful either—the cold snap had cleared out the glove and mitten section. One more store, I thought, and I’ll have to give up. Again, there wasn’t much to choose from. Then at the bottom of the display, I discovered a pair of snazzy, double-thick knit mittens with bold white and black diagonal stripes and a knitted cuff that went halfway to the elbow.

I jumped when I read the price. No wonder the mittens were still there; they were expensive, even at this discount store. Then I saw the reason: the tag said Kate Spade. It was the first time I'd seen this designer's work outside of a glossy magazine. My street acquaintance, I reasoned, didn't need the Kate Spade label in order to appreciate the mittens, and I didn't need to pay the Kate Spade price. But as I foraged among the remaining pairs of mittens it became clear that either I would invest in Kate Spade mittens or give up on my idea of helping the woman on the sidewalk. I bought the mittens.

When returned to the woman, I said, "I've found some mittens. Will these help?" She looked not at me but at the mittens. Her eyes were bright as she reached for them. I think she said thank you.

In the larger picture, not much had changed. I glowed from the woman's grateful response to my good deed, but in the meantime I was ignoring two other homeless women standing nearby. On the way back to work, I passed up a few more asking for help. That night my husband kidded me about the eventual destination of those mittens. Maybe, he teased, you'll see the Kate Spade mittens lined up next to other designer items at a flea market. Or maybe she'll greet you tomorrow with, "That scarf looks warm" or "That looks like a warm coat." What did I plan for an encore?

What had I accomplished with my gesture? Wouldn't my money be better spent on an organization that feeds or houses or trains some of the city's homeless? Wasn't I encouraging begging? Wouldn't it have been better to direct the woman to one of the organizations that would serve her needs with practical wisdom and insight?

I wonder how Christ managed to greet so many and share his wisdom and healing powers with so many people. I'm convinced that this son of God/son of man must have had a deep and ready sense of humor. When he healed ten lepers and nine of them ran off without thanking him, what could he do? He must have smiled and shaken his head. My one gesture hardly equates to Christ's interactions with multitudes. But I don't want the realization of my limitations to restrain me from acting when I can. Giving the mittens away exercised my charitable muscles—and maybe brought some joy and blessing to a place that sees little of it. And I saw in my street neighbor's bright eyes a glimpse of the holy joy that Christ must have stirred up.

The next day I walked by the woman again. I didn't stop, didn't even break stride. But I did look at her hands—there were no mittens. I hope they were in her pocket,

but it doesn't really matter. They were mine for the giving.