



WHAT STRANGERS HAVE IN COMMON (You Can't Make this Stuff Up!)

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July 6, 2022

The most amazing thing happened on July 4, 2022. My husband and I had just returned from a trip to England, and we had a surplus of British pounds. Instead of losing more money to the bank for the re-exchange, I reached out to my neighborhood Google Group to see if anyone wanted them for no fee.

I received five responses! The first caller told me her daughter was going to graduate school in London, and they would take all we had. Transaction complete. But because she was a neighbor I did not know, I asked her about herself. She said she and her husband live with her parents on a nearby street. She told me she was out of town caring for her father-in-law, who had just undergone spinal surgery.

Hours later, a fourth neighbor called about the currency. When I told her the pounds were already gone, she said she was disappointed because her granddaughter was going to London for graduate school, and she and her husband, who just had spinal surgery, would have liked to have given her the cash as a gift.

I was confused. I was sure this must be the same family. They live on the same small street. And, it was a granddaughter going to graduate school in London.

Caller no. 4 told me that her husband, a doctor, was heartbroken when their granddaughter, an outstanding student, changed her major from Pre-Med to Art History, for which she had discovered a passion. His wife described him as “old school,” lamenting the choice of a seemingly less reliable, less prestigious, less financially rewarding career.

I just had to share my own experience (with my slightly older children) discovering that what is considered to be prestigious education, jobs, and careers has changed dramatically since I was in school. Now, students with outstanding academic degrees and pedigrees cannot find jobs suited to their education and training. A college or advanced degree no longer elevates a career-seeker. It is considered a baseline. The “old school” saw credentials as the best measure of a college graduate’s “worth.”

Too many people adhere to an “old school” vision of responsibility and follow a well-worn path toward traditional professional careers. After all, it worked for their parents, right? When our oldest daughter changed her major from business to art history, my husband and I were delighted. Drive and passion are the best ingredients for prestige, income, satisfaction, and personal “success,” however anyone chooses to define it.

The doctor’s wife spoke to me after her husband got off the phone. (He was really interested and engaged for a guy just a few days post-spinal surgery!) She told me he had been bed-ridden for four months prior to last week’s surgery, was despondent about his chronic pain and the granddaughter who is his pride and joy, and was not talking very much. She reported that our conversation made him “so happy” to hear another’s views on how his granddaughter’s decision is a modern pathway to prestige, financial rewards, and distinction, as well as happiness and work/life balance. She told me that sharing my experience was very uplifting and a restorative influence.



How did all of this conversation with unknown neighbors occur? Really, I could have concluded the transaction with caller no. 1, simply told caller no. 4 that the currency was already taken, and ended it there. However, the intended uses (offered, not asked for) of the British pounds piqued my interest, so I simply started to ask questions and engage my neighbors. These grandparents had moved away from their home of 30 years to help care for their grandchildren. The grandmother confided that in the years she has lived in our neighborhood, she has made no new friends. Well, now she has one!

This is what I learned about the two families:

1. They have a granddaughter and daughter, respectively, going to graduate school in London;
2. The families live two houses away from one another on the same street;
3. Both grandfathers are currently recovering from spinal surgery;
4. The young women are attending the SAME small, highly selective, graduate school in the same subject area;
5. Both of the young women graduated from colleges in the same U.S. city, only one year apart;
6. Both of them are coming home in about two weeks;
7. None of these people had ever encountered each other.

My husband thought I was either making this up or at least confused. He was wrong. I think that the amazing events of this past July 4 demonstrate that we should probably make more of an effort to get to know our neighbors just a little bit better. We have a lot more in common than we know. And, sometimes we have a surprising ability to contribute a viewpoint that might help someone else expand their views on an issue and brighten their outlook. What a spectacular day that was! I didn't watch the fireworks; I had already enjoyed the thrill and sparkle earlier with my new friends.