



RECLAIMING CHARITY



Chuck Trunks

Introduction

More than a decade ago, the corporate worshippers of the god of profit convinced us we needed a phone and a dating app, charging \$39.99 per month, to access love. Unbelievably, instead of turning our backs on yet another for-profit business model shamelessly crafted to cash in on what comes naturally to most people, we embraced it like mindless lemmings, including me. I've long since deleted my dating profiles, dismissing the faceless algorithms standing between me and my future mate. However, there's a new middleman to contend with, one who's just as opportunistic and exploitative as the dating app matchmakers. He's on your TV, and he's asking for \$19 a month, only 63 cents a day!

I'm the type of person who quickly identifies recurring patterns, often asking things like, "Why am I seeing so many single people with dogs?" "Why is America's infrastructure crumbling before my eyes?" "Why isn't there safe and reliable public transportation?" "Why is employment required for basic healthcare?" and "Why are the bulk of commercials asking for monthly donations?" Whether these commercials are supporting disabled veterans, dementia patients, abused animals, sick children, or civil liberties, they're all recycling the same manipulative script, shocking imagery, and suggested dollar amounts to prod already-financially strapped viewers into handing over what little remains of their paychecks after paying rent and buying groceries.

I used to give easily: dropping cash in the Salvation Army's red kettle at Christmastime, mailing a check to NPR during one of its fundraising drives, or pledging a dollar amount to the Leukemia & Lymphoma Society in support of a friend's marathon effort. Those days are long gone—replaced, at least in my case, by constant scrutiny and demand for third-party-approved budgetary and financial transparency before I give any so-called nonprofit organization a handout. You may dismiss my opinions on the grounds that I believe the world is run by an evil empire obsessed with power and control, but you'd be hard-pressed to explain

away the near-weekly headlines touting scandal and corruption within institutions, organizations, and foundations created to help the less fortunate—not profit off them.

I don't have access to their accounting records, but I'm sure these commercials bring in a lot of money. How else can we account for seeing the same St. Jude Children's Research Hospital commercial three times during a half-hour TV show? How can we not conclude it's a feeding frenzy for \$19 a month when the same type of pandering ads are aired by Easter Seals, ACLU, ASPCA, Shriners Hospitals for Children, No Kid Hungry, Humane Society of the United States, American Cancer Society, Habitat for Humanity, Alzheimer's Association, Save the Children, Wounded Warrior Project, Make-A-Wish Foundation, UNICEF USA, Feeding America, Covenant House, American Red Cross, March of Dimes, etc.?

I'm not suggesting that charitable organizations as a whole are intentionally deceitful; I'm merely pointing out there's reasonable doubt they're immune to reckless behavior with other people's money—money they didn't earn. You'd think "reasonable doubt" would inspire those asking for donations to be more forthcoming about their operating expenses—and incite donors to demand them. Instead, a mutual apathy ensues, where the askers believe they're above reproach and the givers convince themselves their monthly donations aren't paying for the ubiquitous commercials and C-suite salaries. It may sound pessimistic, but I don't believe it's possible to change these organizations—not even through boycott or Congressional oversight. That's why I wrote this short story; it's a rationale for walking away from institutionalized benevolence and reclaiming charity for ourselves.

Reclaiming Charity tells the story of two people seeking personal redemption through charitable contribution. One goes about it in the way the TV ads dictate;

the other blazes his own trail. Two different methods. Two different outcomes. You decide which path feels right to you.

Harriet & Walter

Harriet plopped down on the couch with an audible sigh. It had been another tiring day at the DMV where she toiled at the elevated desk behind window number five for the past 11 years. Now it was time for her to relax in front of the TV for a couple of hours before calling it a night. As she fumbled for the remote, Max, one of two Labradors she acquired since her second marriage ended in divorce six years ago, jumped on the couch and settled in beside her. The black retriever had been with Harriet two years longer than Lucy, a long-haired yellow retriever that understood her place in the pecking order. Alerted by the sound of the TV, Lucy trotted into the living room and hopped into the adjacent recliner. She adjusted herself and lay down, making sure she could keep both eyes on Harriet and Max.

Harriet scrolled through the TV listings until she found what she was searching for: an episode of NBC's *Dateline* on the True Crime Network. She had seen so many episodes of the popular show that she no longer hoped for one she hadn't seen at least two or three times before. Seeing that she had five minutes before the program started, she quickly remedied the situation by opening her phone, which rarely left her right hand. For the umpteenth time that day, she checked to see if anyone liked her latest photos of Max and Lucy on Facebook and Instagram—then went to her online dating accounts, Bumble and Hinge, to see if she had received any new messages from men willing to comply with her “must love dogs” decree.

Harriet is 62 years old, single, and lives alone with her two dogs and nine-year-old cat, Mr. Jangles, on the first floor of an aging apartment building. She doesn't have any children of her own, but she was a part-time stepmother in each of her

failed marriages. Despite her bitterness toward men in general, Harriet still “puts herself out there” on dating sites, but her heart isn’t in it anymore; she does it just so she can tell her equally sour coworkers that she hasn’t given up the dream of finding Mr. Right. It’s a lie she perpetuates to keep them from asking too many questions or discovering she’s become a full-time fur-baby mommy. Deep down, somewhere between her heart and soul, Harriet feels empty, knowing there’s more to life than issuing registration tags and organizing her life around three pets. More than anything, she yearns to make a difference in the world—even if it’s in the smallest of ways.

Unbeknownst to Harriet, her neighbor on the third floor was settling into a similar evening. Walter, a 64-year-old retired facilities manager, entered the living room from the kitchen and eased himself into his recliner—one of the few pieces of furniture he retained after having sold his house three years earlier. At the time, he wanted to make a fresh start, meet new people, make friends, and maybe even find a woman to share his life with. Sadly, none of his desires had yet materialized, filling him with regret for having retired early and selling his peaceful home of 21 years. It wasn’t entirely his fault; the world had changed in ways he never would’ve imagined.

Walter is a widower with two grown children who’ve elected not to expand their families beyond their spouses, claiming it was too expensive and leaving him without any grandchildren to spoil or spend time with. And with his son and daughter living so far away and holding down demanding jobs, he rarely sees them. He opted for early retirement, thinking that having more spare time would improve his relationship with Dawn and Walt Jr. However, that wasn’t the case. Instead, he ended up working as an unpaid maintenance manager on his own property, repairing things like broken sprinkler heads, a crumbling brick retaining

wall separating the front yard from the driveway, and a sagging length of backyard fencing threatening to spill over into his neighbor's yard.

With Gladys having passed away eight years earlier and his kids too wrapped up in their own lives to come visit him, Walter opted for the ease of apartment living, thinking there was more to life than mowing the same lawn over and over again and serving as a live-in caretaker on land he already owned, yet the county made him pay taxes on it every six months. When friends and family voiced their dismay at him for choosing to sell his home and rent an apartment, he simply told them, "It doesn't matter whether you own a home or not; we're all renters in America." What surprised him the most was how unfriendly his new neighbors were. When they weren't glued to their phones, they were focused on their dogs or listening to something via their earbuds—anything to avoid acknowledging others, making eye contact, or even saying hello. To Walter, it was both sad and ironic that he experienced more interaction with people while cutting his grass than he did walking around his new community for more than an hour each day.

Walter picked up the remote and turned on the TV. He set it back down without having to select a channel; it was already tuned to what he wanted to watch. As a scholarly type, Walter intrinsically knew that television was a waste of precious time—that he should be reading his latest Bill O'Reilly book instead of consuming back-to-back reruns of *Frasier* on Cozi TV—but he loved the pace and hilarity of the show. In many ways, he related to the iconic sitcom's main character, who struggled with his place in the world and in finding the perfect mate. Seeing that he had five minutes before the program started, he quickly remedied the situation by muting the volume so he could hear himself think. Like his neighbor, Harriet, two floors beneath him, Walter yearned to make an impact on the world in whatever way he could. He, too, felt lonely and empty inside.

“Only \$19 a Month!”

Midway through the two-hour episode of *Dateline*, where a respected doctor allegedly killed his wife between surgeries, Harriet got up from the couch to pull her favorite indulgence from the freezer—a Klondike bar. She knew, of course, her dogs would be upset if she didn’t come back with something for them as well, so she gathered two Zesty Paws Bedtime Treats from a ceramic container that used to hold flour and returned to the couch. She smiled as she watched Max and Lucy devour the Fig Newton-sized biscuits in one slobbery bite, knowing the ingested chamomile and melatonin would lower their anxiety and help them sleep better. Just then, Harriet was startled by the sound of rustling papers on the dining room table. “There you are,” she cooed. “You wanted to be with the rest of the family, didn’t you?” Mr. Jangles looked at Harriet with cool indifference and promptly situated himself between a stack of unopened junk mail and an unfinished jigsaw puzzle of bull dogs wearing oversized sunglasses at the beach.

Like everyone in America with a functioning brainstem, Harriet noticed that commercial breaks were longer and more frequent, eating up to 45 minutes of a two-hour broadcast like *Dateline*. Typically, she’d spend the commercial breaks scrolling and texting on her phone, but a Klondike bar is impossible to eat with only one hand. So, Harriet was stuck watching ad after ad, created by manipulative marketers who believed the viewing audience was no smarter than a seventh-grader. The commercials were both relentless and shameless: pitching prescription medication, extended car warranties, personal injury lawsuits, or hitting viewers up for monthly donations. Although Harriet felt she had seen the Shriners Hospitals for Children commercials at least 50,000 times, she couldn’t help being drawn to the plight of the families with children suffering from such debilitating diseases.

She went back to the kitchen to discard the ice cream wrapper and wash her hands. To her surprise, neither dog followed her. She looked at her reflection in

the window above the sink as she soaped up, recalling the days when her hair was longer and her body slender. Now her hair was more gray than blonde, and her figure was spreading out like an inflatable raft. She dried her hands on a dish towel and returned to the couch only to find Mr. Jangles had taken her spot. “Oh, no, you don’t,” she admonished while shooing him away. “I’m not letting you get away with it *this* time!” Mr. Jangles yawned at her waving hand and moved to the top of the couch as if he preferred to be there in the first place.

Harriet couldn’t have timed her return to the living room any worse, as another round of commercials was just beginning. Once again, she felt moved by the Shriners Hospitals for Children ad, where wheelchair-bound Kaleb and his best pal Alec, another wheelchair-bound spokesperson, pitched the benefits of donating \$19 a month. She loved their personal stories and wanted, if it were possible, to adopt them both, especially little Kaleb, whose squeaky voice and munchkin-sized body made him appear almost animatronic. Harriet wasn’t sure why she felt compelled to donate on that particular night; it wasn’t like she hadn’t seen the commercial before—in fact, she had seen the very same commercial three times already that evening! “Don’t look at me like that,” she said to Lucy, whose ears perked up at the sudden mention of her name. “It’s only \$19 a month. That’s about the same amount for one lunch at KFC. I think our budget can handle that.”

And with that, Harriet picked up her phone and navigated to the Shriners website. It didn’t take long for her to commit her monthly donation. She even received a confirmation email before the last commercial ended, where washed-up celebrities, Ice-T and Danica Patrick, reduced themselves to hawking extended car warranties from a company in litigation with the Better Business Bureau. She absently stroked Max’s sleeping form and continued watching *Dateline*. At this point in the program, grainy footage from inside a police interrogation room showed the beleaguered surgeon answering a detective’s question while shaking his head and gesturing wildly with his arms. The next round of commercials sent

Harriet straight to her phone. In the darkened room, her eyes reflected the device's bluish glow. There were no messages, comments, or likes. But that was okay with her; she just committed \$19 a month to ease the suffering of children she'd never meet.

Although he'd seen the episode of *Frasier* at least five or six times over the years, Walter laughed out loud at the moment when Frasier realizes he's booked a hotel room with his new girlfriend in Hawaii next door to his ex-wife, Lilith, and *her* new significant other. Walter preferred watching reruns from top-shelf sitcoms like *Seinfeld* and *The Office*, but second-tier reruns of *Frasier*, *Cheers*, and *The King of Queens* kept him laughing, too. He was a man who'd consume anything he believed would help him better understand the world, ranging from silly television shows to documentaries about the universe to fine art and classic literature. Besides enjoying obvious TV punchlines seen coming a mile away, Walter had another secret his family and friends would find hard to believe given his longstanding penchant for diet and exercise. Every now and then, he liked to eat a big bowl of the worst kind of kid's cereal right before going to bed.

Walter reached down and pulled the lever on the side of his recliner, disengaging the leg rest mechanism, allowing him to stand up. While en route to the kitchen for the cereal, he detoured to use the bathroom. As he washed his hands in the basin, he looked in the mirror, liking what he saw. For a senior citizen with thinning hair, age spots, and deteriorating eyesight, the five-foot-ten sexagenarian looked decent for his age, requiring no medication to maintain the same fortuitous health he's enjoyed since childhood and the same weight of 175 pounds since college. Even his hazel eyes still had the same sparkle. Walter assumed it was because he was never the type to give up or lose hope for better things to come.

He returned to the recliner and sat down holding an oversized bowl of Lucky Charms doused in low-fat milk. Although the top of the box touted “New Larger Size,” Walter figured he’d only get two servings out of it. “Damn shrinkflation,” he muttered. Since he needed one hand to hold the bowl and the other to shovel the sugary concoction into his gullet, he wasn’t in a position to mute the TV during a commercial break. Instead, he had to endure listening to the same commercials that Harriet was being subjected to: has-been celebrities endorsing predatory insurance products; retired athletes trading their fading popularity to promote prescription medication for a sponsorship fee; suit-wearing personal injury lawyers urging viewers to file a claim in front of an obviously fake law library; and a litany of requests for \$19 a month.

Walter had long since accepted the idiotic and deceptive practices of television advertisements as an unavoidable abomination—the price one pays for pilfering high-definition sub-channels for free using a \$14 HD antenna. But what bothered him the most was the array of highly manipulative ads asking for monthly donations of \$19 from charity organizations like Save the Children, Wounded Warrior Project, ASPCA, ACLU, Planned Parenthood, and, of course, St. Jude Children’s Research Hospital and Shriners Hospitals for Children. With the number of scandals involving the misappropriation of donated funds, Walter couldn’t wrap his head around why people would give away their hard-earned money to supposed non-profits that feel no obligation to disclose the salaries of top management or account for their spending. He was astonished that people would still choose to believe that their money was being used to buy medical supplies for suffering children rather than a corporate offsite at The Venetian Hotel in Las Vegas for a “strategy meeting.”

Like Harriet, Walter had a soft spot in his heart for innocent children. In fact, he felt all the recipients of the charitable organizations were worthy of such representation and support; however, he couldn’t stomach uploading his credit card number or sending cash to a faceless and nameless middleman who may or

may not do right with his contributions. Was he supposed to believe that these middlemen were as incorruptible as he is—in a world where corporations can buy lawmakers, where one in five children in America lives in food-insecure households, and where nearly a million Americans are homeless due to the affordability crisis? He just couldn't do it—at least not in the way the pandering ads were telling him to do it.

Walter set his empty cereal bowl on the end table beside his recliner without a shred of guilt for having consumed at least a half-cup of processed sugar. He wasn't concerned about the needless 700 calories stretching his stomach at 10 o'clock at night; he knew he'd walk it off in the morning. Satisfied, Walter eased back in his favorite chair and propped his feet up to watch another episode of *Frasier*. This time, a relationship expert sets Frasier up on a series of hilarious blind date blunders. Walter loved this particular episode because he could relate to it completely. He settled into his recliner, still feeling lonely and irrelevant, but he had an idea where he could be charitable *and* meet the benefitting children.

Walter had a plan.

Sugar Beets

The next morning, Walter set out for his usual walk. It was late enough to avoid most of the unfriendly dog walkers, but early enough to see children playing outside before the summer heat climbed above 80 degrees on its way to over 100. He was grateful for the sounds of nature: wind blowing through the trees, unseen birds singing, squirrels scurrying across dry leaves, and children shouting and squealing while in perpetual motion. As he walked through the apartment complex toward the adjacent neighborhood, Walter filled his lungs with sweet-smelling air, knowing that the appreciated ambience was unusual. Typically, the pleasing sounds of nature were drowned out by the head-splitting explosions of thundering car engines, lawn mowers, string trimmers, leaf blowers, chainsaws,

circular saws, and, of course, barking dogs—lots and lots of barking dogs. Even the air was different. No longer was Walter breathing in the heavy aroma of rotting sugar beets from the nearby sugar factory; instead, he detected the scent of linden, locust, and lilac blossoms.

Walter couldn't believe his luck when he saw three Hispanic children coming toward him on the opposite side of the parking lot. He recognized them immediately as the offspring of a young couple in the apartment building across from his. Their apartment was on the ground floor, allowing Walter to see into their patio from his third-floor balcony. First-floor patios weren't fenced in; they opened up and blended into a greenbelt that ran behind each of the apartment buildings. Sometimes, if he was in the mood, Walter would offer a friendly wave from his balcony at the parents while they were barbequing or hanging wet laundry on folding clothes racks. From what he could tell, they only had one car, which the wife used almost exclusively, while her husband drove a company van emblazoned with "TDS: No Gimmicks. No Gotchas," from a local internet provider.

To Walter's keen eye, all three children appeared to be under 10 years of age. The oldest-looking, a tall, sinewy girl with long black hair pulled back into a loose ponytail, was riding a pink and white bicycle that was much too small for her lanky frame. Behind her, her younger sister and brother pushed rusty, leg-propelled scooters, doing their best to keep up. Walter guessed that the younger girl, who was a smaller replica of her older sister, was seven years old and that the curly-dark-haired boy next to her was around five or six. All three wore brightly colored t-shirts over shorts and sneakers while only the middle sibling carried a backpack. Like all the other times he'd seen them, they were laughing and shouting to one another in Spanish. As they approached, the older girl looked at Walter, prompting him to wave at the passing trio. The two girls smiled at Walter as they passed, but their little brother attempted to steer his scooter with one hand

while waving back with the other. Bad idea. He went down immediately, landing on top of his two-wheeled vehicle in a heart-stopping heap.

Before he could reach the sprawled-out child, who hadn't made a sound since hitting the pavement, Walter watched his two sisters respond within seconds, letting their bike and scooter drop underneath them to rush the scene and assess the damage as if they had had EMT training. Remarkably, aside from a skinned knee and a bruised elbow, he wasn't seriously injured. What struck Walter the most was how the two girls consoled their little brother in such a loving and compassionate manner, rubbing his injuries and saying what had to be soothing words in Spanish.

"Oh, my god. Is he alright?" asked Walter as he removed his sunglasses to get a better look at the boy.

"He's okay," replied the older sister in perfect English.

Walter watched the two girls help their brother stand up. He wasn't crying, but he had tears in his eyes, both of which were looking at his downed scooter. At that point, Walter sprang into action. "Let me have a look at your scooter," he said. "I know a lot about bikes and stuff, so let's see if there's any damage." Walter recognized the brand and knew their scooters were basically indestructible. Still, he put on a little show in front of the kids to make them feel confident that the scooter was safe to ride. "Looks rock solid to me," he said, positioning the battered scooter upright and presenting it to the relieved kid. When he took possession of it, Walter asked, "Is your name, Hermano?"

"No!" laughed the younger girl. "His name is Miguel." She, too, spoke in perfect English.

“Well, I kept hearing you and your sister saying, ‘Hermano, Hermano,’” explained Walter.

“Hermano means brother in Spanish,” explained the older sister before picking up her bike.

Walter stepped back to allow the kids enough space to mount their rides and continue the trek, presumably to their apartment. “Oh, okay,” he replied. “But Hermano sounds like a cool name, too.”

The two girls laughed at that and looked at their brother, who was already pushing his scooter.

“Next time somebody waves at you while you’re riding your scooter, Miguel, keep both hands on the handlebar and just smile or say, ‘Hi!’” cautioned Walter. He wasn’t sure if Miguel understood him or not, but he knew the girls did.

Walter watched and listened to the children ride away from him in the parking lot. He could still hear them laughing and shouting in Spanish even after they disappeared behind the apartment clubhouse. “What are the odds?” he asked himself, thinking that it was incredible that he’d encounter *and* interact with the very same kids he was planning to be charitable to. Walter crossed over an irrigation canal using the footbridge at the rear of the apartment complex and walked toward the eerily quiet elementary school. The schoolyard was empty, of course, due to the summer break. Having walked this particular route routinely during much of the school year, he thought about what the kids at play would always do at recess: moving under their own energy, shouting with excitement, and touching one another—behaviors adults sadly stopped doing somewhere in their 20s.

Even if school were in session with the kids playing outside, he wouldn't have been able to hear them anyway. The city's landscape crew was in full force at the adjacent park, cutting grass on top of insanely loud tractors that looked big enough to work the nearby farms. Walter continued walking along the service road separating the elementary school from the park. At the end of it, he crossed a busy road and entered a neighborhood subdivision called Sherwood Forest. Although he was less than a half-mile from his apartment complex, Walter felt far removed from the earlier sounds of nature and his chance encounter with his neighbor's children. Besides the distant shrill of the monstrous mowing machines, his thoughts were further scattered by the suburban sounds of pneumatic nail guns, idling diesel engines, a miter saw, a gas-powered generator, and, of course, barking dogs—lots and lots of barking dogs. Walter let out a heavy sigh, and after breathing back in, he immediately recognized the unpleasant and noxious odor of rotting sugar beets.

Welcome to Costco

Walter groaned irritably as he drove his old truck into the parking lot. By the sour look on his face, one would think he just pulled into the DMV without an appointment or a CVS to pick up a prescription on a Friday before a three-day national holiday. Instead, he was at a perpetually busy Costco, looking for a parking spot. The frenetic hub of near-constant activity reminded Walter of a beehive after striking it with a broom. He parked 200 yards away in front of a Bed Bath & Beyond and joined the swell of late-morning shoppers angling toward the big-box entrance with their membership cards already plucked from wallets and purses.

Knowing that he planned to limit his spending to around \$230, Walter opted for a standard shopping cart over a flatbed cart. Since the cost of living had skyrocketed after the pandemic, he was well aware that just one of Costco's regular shopping carts could easily hold \$400 worth of merchandise. Like the

obedient sheep in front of him, he joined the queue to scan his membership card while enduring the scrutiny of an unsmiling employee blandly repeating, “Welcome to Costco.” Walter gritted his teeth and tightened his grip on the cart’s push bar. He held his breath and pushed the wheeled basket past the entrance monitor, fighting the urge to make a loud farm animal noise—preferably that of a sheep. Even if he had the guts to yell “Baa” or “Moo,” Walter figured no one would appreciate his wicked sense of humor or the appropriateness of the reference.

After a series of lefts and rights toward the snack aisle, Walter found himself surrounded by camping equipment and patio furniture. “God, they’re so obvious,” he huffed. “They’re always rearranging the merchandise so their customers will spend more time in the store, which, of course, exposes the weak-minded to more impulse buying. Have they no shame?” Walter prided himself on his acute awareness of any and all manipulative and self-serving gimmicks employed by greed-centric corporations to entice, distract, and swindle their own patrons. He wasn’t surprised by what he was experiencing in Costco; after all, 70% of the shareholder-owned company is controlled by private equity firms like BlackRock and Vanguard, whom Walter likened to mob bosses of legalized crime.

Once he found the snack section, Walter had to hand it to Costco’s corporate merchandising team. They repositioned it between tables of folded kids’ clothing and the wine area. “Well played, corporate overlords,” he mumbled under his breath. “After mom gathers the necessary snacks, she can impulsively pick up play clothes for the kids and a box of wine for her.” Walter imagined Mom yelling at the kids later that afternoon to take the ruckus outside while she steadied her frazzled nerves with a couple of glasses of Kirkland’s signature Pinot Grigio. The health-conscious 64-year-old didn’t need wine to calm his nerves; he needed a few deep breaths to center himself. The absence of sunlight, a fire marshal, and social discourse inside Costco’s cavernous warehouse tended to

drain Walter of his life energy within minutes. He pulled his cart to the side and reminded himself that he was here on a mission of charity.

It didn't take long for Walter to fill his cart with fruit bars, banana chips, applesauce pouches, beef sticks, peanut butter pretzels, granola bites, trail mix, popcorn, juice boxes, and protein shakes. After determining a rough estimate of the total cost of the basket's contents, he figured he was still below his limit of \$230. But instead of adding cereal and Kraft Mac & Cheese in bulk, Walter had a better idea. He pushed his loaded cart back to where the snack aisle used to be, remembering that sporting goods merchandise was usually paired with camping gear—unless Costco's corporate merchandising team figured out a way to make more money moving items like golf clubs, baseball gloves, and bicycles into the big walk-in refrigerator. Luckily, Walter's first hunch was right, finding exactly what he was looking for on a shelf beside an array of skateboards, roller skates, and scooters. The package of protective knee and elbow pads cost more than he anticipated, but he added it to his cart anyway, thinking they were too perfect of an addition to pass up.

Walter didn't argue with the self-checkout monitor who redirected him toward the cashier lines, saying, "Sorry, these registers are for members with 15 or fewer items." Despite having only 13 items in his cart, he knew better than to go toe-to-toe with an imperious Costco employee who had a disturbing habit of fingering the RF gun clipped to his belt. While he waited to get checked out, Walter looked past the anxious people lined up in front of him, surveying the scene unfolding in Costco's hectic food court, where reasonably priced hotdogs and pizza slices garnered a standing-room-only crowd. He liked hotdogs and pizza, but he wanted no part of what looked like organized chaos one outburst away from disintegrating into an outright melee. Those lucky enough to score a table sat and ate beside their carts of paid merchandise, looking like they had walled themselves off from possible discourse with their fellow shoppers. Others stood

and ate their food off counters surrounding the ordering kiosks. In Walter's mind, all that was missing was a trough and a scratching post.

11 minutes later, Walter steered his basket away from the checkout and into an even longer line. This one required him to present his receipt to the exit monitor standing at the threshold between the warehouse and the semi-enclosed cart lobby. Nothing gave Walter the warm and fuzzies more than having to scan his membership card at the front entrance and again at the cash register, followed by having to wait for someone to reconcile his purchases against the receipt. If the exit monitor was satisfied with his or her findings, they'd whip out their Costco-issued highlighter and put a blue stripe down the middle of the receipt. Walter likened Costco's assertion that no store members can be trusted to TSA's mandate that all passengers are potential terrorists until after they've been verified, screened, and humiliated.

After 40 minutes inside Costco's windowless version of a town center, the early-afternoon sunlight temporarily blinded Walter, who lumbered into the parking lot, pushing \$248-worth of charity. Although his eyesight quickly readjusted, he didn't need to see what was going on in the parking lot—he could feel it. It didn't matter when he came to Costco; the parking lot vibe was always the same: filled to capacity and anxious. If he were to describe it to a prospective member, he could visualize himself sounding like Rod Serling of *The Twilight Zone* TV series and saying, "Imagine going to a grocery store where every shopper acts like it's the day before Thanksgiving. Tensions are high. Panic is in the air. Competition is palpable. But that's not all," he'd continue. "Now imagine informing those same customers that a Category 5 hurricane was due to strike later that day, resulting in widespread ruin, long-term power outages, and uninhabitable conditions. You don't have to ask where such a store is located. You can find it in *The Twilight Zone*."

After loading everything into his truck, Walter set out to return his basket to the nearest cart corral. It never ceased to bother him that people would opt to leave

their used carts scattered about instead of simply returning them to make life slightly more dignified for the minimum wage earner who was tasked with retrieving them and restocking the cart lobby at the front entrance. As Walter serpentine toward the nearest corral, he observed two carts occupying parking spaces, one propped against a sign, and two more left straddling a curb. At the corral, he pushed his cart into the stack before walking back to his truck. Suddenly, and with great ferocity, a German Shepphard went berserk and started barking wildly at Walter from behind a partially rolled-up and slobber-coated car window. Operating on instinct alone, he recoiled against the passenger door of the SUV opposite the car with the blood-thirsty hellhound. He slid along its smooth surface until he was out of harm's way, reminding himself, once again, that he had come here on a mission of charity.

“Hi, I’m Walter”

Walter peeked over the railing of the balcony and saw that the entire Hispanic family was home. Dad was cooking something on the grill; Mom was watering a row of potted herbs; and the kids were playing a game that involved running back and forth between the patio and a trio of newly planted samplings in the middle of the greenbelt. It had only been since yesterday that he had encountered the three children and been to Costco. So, he knew time was of the essence; he had to make his move that evening before he lost his nerve. Buying the stuff was the easy part; giving it to the family without insulting them was the hard part. But Walter had a plan for that, too: he'd have to lie.

Walter planned to knock on their door at 7:30—a time he figured wouldn't interrupt their dinner or the chores that followed. He loaded the bed of his truck with the Costco merchandise and made sure to place the package of protective pads on the center console. Lucky for him, he found an open visitor parking spot, which was near the family's front entrance. He grabbed the pads and stepped out of his truck, feeling his heart pumping in his throat. He never did anything like

this before, but Walter wanted to make a point; plus, above all else, he wanted to “walk the talk”—especially since he planned to tell this story, maybe even write about it, to anyone who’d listen. Basically, he wanted to not only stress the necessity of giving to those who are less fortunate but also the importance of doing it in a way that fosters fellowship and a sense of community. In other words, offer charity in a way not promoted by the plethora of donation-seeking television ads: do it directly and close to home.

After a deep breath, Walter knocked on the door, causing their TV to lower almost immediately. Suddenly, he was filled with dread, second-guessing why he was even attempting this experiment in the first place. He imagined the mother saying on the other side of the door, “Go away. We don’t want any,” in a thick Spanish accent. He could see the father thinking he’s some kind of weirdo too interested in his kids, picturing him muttering, “Who the hell comes over uninvited on a random Thursday evening?” If he did, Walter would have to agree with Miguel’s father. Why, indeed, *was* he barging in on them unannounced in the middle of their favorite show on Telemundo? But just before Walter turned to hightail it back to his truck, the door opened.

Walter lowered his gaze at the figure standing in the gap between the door and door jamb. He recognized her as the older sister. The barefooted girl wore a pair of shorts and a long-sleeved t-shirt with a yellow smiley face on the front. Her dark brown hair was no longer held back in a ponytail; instead, it fell on either side of her face, framing a curious expression.

“Hi, there,” he said. “My name is Walter. I’d like to talk to your mom or dad.”

She stepped back into the hushed apartment, leaving the door ajar. Walter also stepped back and listened to the muffled exchanges, which were mostly in Spanish. His ears perked up when he heard the girl refer to him as “the man from yesterday.” He was relieved to know she remembered him, bolstering his resolve

to stick to the plan. She returned to the door with her younger sister and mother. Whereas the girls appeared intrigued by the interruption, their mother's expression could only be described as wary mixed with skepticism. She, too, stood in bare feet and wore a long green calico dress printed with orange and white flowers.

"This is for Miguel," he said, extending the package of knee and elbow pads to the girls' mother. He wasn't sure if she could understand him, but he continued anyway. "It was sort of my fault that your son fell yesterday. He was waving back at me when he lost control of his scooter."

While the oldest daughter translated what Walter had said, the younger girl, who was wearing pajama pants and a tank top, snatched the package from his hand and disappeared inside the apartment. After listening to her oldest child, the mother looked at him with a sympathetic expression. "It's no problem," she said. "You live here, too, yes?"

"I do," he replied, gesturing toward the building behind theirs. "My name is Walter."

She brushed her shoulder-length hair from her face, looking no more than 28 or 29 years of age. Her expression changed to one of recognition. "Ahh, yes, top floor?"

"Yes," replied Walter, thinking this initial exchange was going way better than expected.

"My name is Isabella, and this is Victoria," she said while placing her hand on her oldest daughter's neck. "I'm sorry my English is not very good."

Victoria smiled at Walter and looked down at her feet, which were rocking back and forth on the doorway's metal threshold.

Before Walter could respond, the door was pulled open from inside. Now the whole family was in the doorway, looking at him. Without missing a beat, Isabella introduced the rest of her family. "This is Rafael," she said, nodding toward her husband. "And this is Mia and Miguel."

Walter extended his hand toward Rafael, who shook it without hesitation. "I'm Walter," he said for the third time in the last two minutes.

Before they could get better acquainted, Miguel came out from behind his father wearing all four protective pads, prompting Walter to again explain why he bought them for his son. However, he didn't get the chance. Victoria, sensing that her father wouldn't understand him, launched into a Spanish rendition explaining why her brother was wearing safety gear. Meanwhile, Walter, Isabella, and Mia watched Miguel repeatedly fall to his knees and elbows on the grass in front of the building. It was hard for everyone not to laugh at the boy's antics, which were hilarious.

Walter looked at Mia and asked jokingly, "Did you help Hermano put those on?"

"Yes," she laughed, before joining her brother on the lawn. Apparently, she thought her brother's protective gear was an invitation to push him back down each time he tried to stand up.

Walter laughed at the roughhousing duo alongside their parents and older sister. It reminded him of a previous life he led 40 years earlier. But once Miguel started whining, Isabella said something in Spanish, making the kids stop. He watched Mia help her brother up, recalling how sweet and nurturing she was after he fell off his scooter. And just like that, the levity was over—the moment had run its

course. The whole family looked at Walter, expecting him to say a few parting words about the importance of scooter safety and shove off. However, unbeknownst to the tight-knit family, he was far from finished. It was time for him to lie.

“Wait, There’s More”

Walter inhaled deeply, preparing himself for part two of his plan. He stepped back, allowing the two younger children to dash into the apartment, where, presumably, they’d continue to antagonize each other in between fits of giggling. He scanned the faces of Rafael, Isabella, and Victoria. They, too, looked ready to say thank you and call it a night with Walter. “Do you know Costco?” he asked, gesturing in the direction of the nearby shopping Mecca. “It’s where I bought the pads for Miguel.” All three nodded knowingly, prompting him to continue.

As he spoke, Walter maintained eye contact with the parents without excluding Victoria, who, at this point, was his little interpreter. He kept his explanation simple and to the point. “When I was at the checkout, the cashier informed me that I had around \$200 in store credits that were to expire *that* day. I had no idea since I’ve only been a member of the store for a little over a year. Anyway, I used the credit to buy the pads and some snacks I thought your kids might like. Think of it as a belated welcome-to-the-neighborhood gift.”

Rafael and Isabella nodded at Walter before turning their attention to Victoria. She began speaking in rapid-fire Spanish, interjecting the words “cashier,” “pads,” and “snacks”—recognizable pronunciations for Walter, giving him the impression that Victoria was nailing the interpretation. When she was finished, both parents smiled at him. The 31- or 32-year-old, wearing dark jeans and a blue TDS work shirt, scratched the scruff on his chin and said, “It’s okay. You keep it. Thank you.” Isabella added, “Yes, you keep it. Thank you.”

Walter knew this moment was inevitable. He'd offer the load of snacks, and they, in turn, would, of course, politely decline, forcing him to casually insist they accept. He had prepared and practiced a whole follow-up speech where he'd convince them that it wasn't a hardship for him—that his own grandkids lived out of state and that he was just being neighborly. But given the language barrier and the appreciative looks in Rafael's and Isabella's eyes, Walter opted for an abrupt change of plan. He pointed to his truck and said, "I brought it with me." Before the parents could respond, he looked at Victoria and asked, "Would you help me carry some of it?" And with that, he began walking toward the visitor parking area.

He hadn't reached his truck before he heard the telltale patter of bare feet scampering behind him. He glanced over his shoulder and saw that Victoria had, indeed, followed him. Walter quickly opened the tailgate and grabbed the nearest snack item. Seeing that she was dutifully waiting on the sidewalk, he transferred the glossy box of applesauce pouches to her extended arms. "I can carry more," she said.

"Do you like bananas?" he asked. When she nodded, he added, "Then you're going to love these banana chips." He put the box on top of the first box and said, "Are you sure that's not too heavy?"

"I got it," she replied.

He watched her turn and head toward her parents. Rafael was looking at his wife, who appeared to be summoning her other two children. Walter hopped into the bed of the truck to gather the boxes that were out of reach and began stacking them on the open tailgate for easier access. As he was climbing down, he saw Mia and Miguel scuttling toward him with smiles on their faces. Apparently, they had decided to share the protective gear; she was wearing the elbow pads while he

kept the knee pads on. Walter assumed they were instructed to help with the off-loading.

“Here you go, Miguel,” groaned Walter as he pretended to struggle with the biggest of all the boxes. Ironically, it was the lightest since it contained bags of flavored popcorn. He handed it to the boy, saying, “You get to carry the biggest one.” Miguel wrapped both arms around it and waddled toward the apartment, hugging the tall, rectangular box like an oversized prize he’d won at a carnival game.

Walter looked at Mia, who was patiently waiting beside his truck. “Think you can handle carrying two things?” he asked. She smiled and held out her arms. “I hope you like peanut butter pretzels and fruit bars because you have a whole summer’s worth here.” He stacked the two boxes on her arms and helped her negotiate the curb between the parking lot and the sidewalk. “Take your time,” he called after her.

After each of the kids made two trips to Walter’s truck, all the snacks had been successfully transferred to the apartment without incident or too many words. Everyone appeared to have simply accepted the good deed as a gesture that both the receiver and giver could revel in. “This was perfect,” he whispered to himself as he closed the tailgate and strode toward the family of five standing in front of their wide-open door. He made it a point not to look inside their apartment as he approached, cognizant of their privacy and not wanting to come off like a snoop. But something inside their place caught his eye—something that took him back 25 or so years when he worked as a business analyst for a biotech company headquartered in Los Angeles.

Walter looked at Rafael and asked, “Are you from Puerto Rico?”

“Yes,” he replied emphatically, smiling at his wife.

“I couldn’t help but notice the Puerto Rican flag inside your place,” Walter explained while drawing an imaginary rectangle with his hands and pointing to the interior of the apartment. He looked at Victoria and continued. “25 years ago, I lived and worked in Puerto Rico for two years. It was such a wonderful experience. I’m sorry to say, since then, I’ve forgotten all my Spanish.”

Over the next several minutes, the three adults spoke excitedly through a precocious nine-year-old, discovering that Walter had lived in Humacao while working in Juncos and that Rafael and Isabella were from Bayamón. They shared their favorite places in Puerto Rico, Walter’s being Condado Beach in San Juan, while the young couple preferred Flamenco Beach on the nearby island of Culebra. There was talk of shrimp-topped mofongo, rum-laden piña coladas, whistling coqui frogs, fiery-red Flamboyán trees, El Yunque National Forest, and even the bioluminescence bays in Fajardo and Vieques. There was no doubt about it: common ground had been established between lonely old Walter and the young family from *La Isla del Encanto*.

Conclusion

Walter sat on an aluminum lawn chair, watching Victoria, Mia, and Miguel kick a junior-sized soccer ball on the grass behind their apartment. Beside him, Rafael was cooking chicken and pork skewers on an old-school charcoal grill. The simple act of the children playing outside without a phone or computer screen in sight brought Walter back to his own childhood, where boredom stood no chance against an active imagination. Back then, growing up in 1970s suburban Philadelphia, life was simpler for young Walter—and much more innocent than what kids face today. He drank water from garden hoses, rode his bicycle without a helmet, built forts in the woods, and let the street lamps tell him when it was time to go home. Walter respected the way in which Rafael and Isabella were raising their kids—no small feat in a world full of dubious marketing campaigns competing with parents for the minds, hearts, and souls of their children.

With Victoria and Mia keeping the ball away from Miguel, it was only a matter of time before the boy started whining out of frustration. Isabella came out to the patio carrying two cans of Medalla Light. She gave one to her husband and the other to Walter. It was ice-cold—exactly how he liked it. “Don’t tease your brother,” she said to the girls, who immediately set out to make up a new game to satisfy Miguel. Isabella looked at Walter with an expression that said, “How was that?” Walter lifted his can of beer and replied, “Muy buena, Isabella. Your English is getting better and better.” Over the past six weeks, two to three times a week, Walter had been helping the couple with the many challenges that come from having to learn a second language in a society that touts “sink or swim” while hoarding all the life preservers.

It wasn’t like Walter was conducting ESL classes for his new friends; he was explaining what certain words meant on things like utility bills, credit card statements, pay stubs, insurance policies, and school memos, as well as notifications from the apartment complex. For the first time in a long while, he felt useful, trusted even. Rafael told him that he had worked in Boston for about six months before landing the job with TDS in Boise, Idaho. It took another six months to move his family from Puerto Rico. Early on in their friendship, Rafael needed Victoria to help explain what he did for TDS. She told Walter that he and his work crew were responsible for digging trenches, installing underground conduit, and running fiber optic cables for high-speed internet. Having seen similar work crews in some of the surrounding older neighborhoods, Walter knew that the work was dirty and back-breaking, requiring incredibly noisy horizontal directional drills, vacuum trucks, and trenchers—not to mention pickaxes and shovels.

Isabella, on the other hand, worked inside, splitting her hours between housekeeping for the nearby Courtyard by Marriott and preparing food as part of the kitchen staff at a local Mexican restaurant. She, along with her husband, had asked if he’d check in on the kids from time to time while they were at work. He

agreed, adding that the children were welcome to come to his place anytime, especially if they had to work overtime or there was an emergency. For Walter, it all felt surreal, finding purpose and meaning from something as simple as a budding new friendship. “No wonder the government conspires with corporations to keep people isolated and feeling lonely,” he murmured to himself. “They don’t want their slaves turning newfound fellowship, community, and like-mindedness into challenges against the self-serving status quo.”

Walter awoke from his thoughts about his new Puerto Rican friends when Rafael announced the skewers were done, signaling Isabella to tell everyone to come inside to eat. Earlier that evening, he had brought over a big garden salad and a pot of Kraft Mac & Cheese, knowing the kids simply couldn’t resist the stuff, including him. It was the second time Walter shared dinner with the Colón family. As he looked around the table in the cramped dining room, appreciating the people who had accepted his generosity and, eventually, his friendship, he realized how incredibly lucky he was to have chosen such a special family. Logically, he understood that future attempts at his style of charity would likely be less fruitful, at least statistically. But that wouldn’t stop him.

After a spirited game of UNO, which Victoria won, Walter picked up his empty salad bowl and cooking pot and said goodnight. He stepped onto the patio and slid the glass door shut behind him, smiling and waving to the kids one last time. He felt an unseasonable chill in the night air and looked up at the sky. It was darker than usual, with the moon and stars hidden behind thickening storm clouds. He began walking across the shadowy greenbelt, hoping his new sneakers wouldn’t encounter any dog waste while en route to his apartment. While stepping gingerly on the grass, Walter noticed an erratic light source emanating from the apartment on the ground floor of his building.

Inside, he saw a woman about his age sitting on a couch, flanked by two dogs: one on the couch beside her, the other in a recliner. She was watching TV in near

darkness on a Saturday night, which explained the erratic nature of the light source that caught his eye in the first place. Walter recognized her as one of the crabby dog walkers, who didn't care if anyone heard her carrying on full conversations with what she believed were her canine children. On closer inspection, she was hunched over her phone, her face bluish from both the TV and phone screens. What Walter couldn't see was that she was wearing a gray Shriners Hospitals for Children's t-shirt that read, "This T-Shirt Saves Lives," or that she was checking her social media and dating profiles for any new likes, comments, or messages. He also didn't see the sleepy black cat on the dining room table that didn't care either way.

The End

About the Author

Chuck Trunks is a writer and artist who grew up in suburban Philadelphia. After earning a Bachelor of Science degree in Biology from North Carolina State University, Chuck had a successful 19-year career in positions ranging from genetic engineer to software developer to business analyst at Amgen, Inc. in Thousand Oaks, California. During his tenure in the biotech industry, he traveled extensively throughout the United States, Europe, and the Caribbean. For inspiration, he bicycles, runs, and reads whatever he can get his hands on.

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