

Battle scars

By [Ryan Dueck](#)

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It was probably one of those Internet memes that flits about the ether, and gradually enters the aggregate stream of quotes and pop inspiration that we collectively contribute to and maintain. This one, however, had the ring of truth to it. I don't know the source, but it was something to this effect:

Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a battle you know nothing about.

These words are nowhere more obviously true than at places like the soup kitchen. Here, the battles are written all over each face that makes its way past me in line.

The young girl who's so obviously high that she can barely focus her attention long enough to receive her meal, and mostly stares vacantly past me, half a grin on her beautiful bruised face ...

The middle-aged guy whose clothes are tattered and dirty, and comes back for seconds before he's even done his plate, a piece of bread hanging out of his mouth as he gestures toward what he wants where on his plate ...

The guy whose knuckles are all cut up and has a gash on the side of his forehead ...

The young man with track marks up and down his arms who asks me for six packages of salt ...

The man who shyly looks ahead at what's for lunch today ... "Oh, shepherd's pie! I love shepherd's pie ... This was my favorite meal when I was a boy growing up in Winnipeg ... "

The older lady with a thick British accent who asks for an extra scoop—no, make it *two!* I'm real hungry today—and who's dressed as if it's the middle of winter, rather than pushing thirty degrees Celsius ...

The row upon row of broken down people, many of whom simply stare straight ahead or keep their heads down while they eat ...

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I always try to find someone to sit with for lunch when I help out at the soup kitchen. I'm usually surplus to requirements anyway, and I tend to just hover irritatingly about the kitchen waiting for someone in our church to give me a job to do. I think it's easier for them if I just get out of the way and go talk to someone. So I try to find someone who's on their own, someone who looks lonely, someone who might enjoy a bit of conversation. It's not usually very hard.

Today, I found an older man named Norm. He talked to me for a while about a ninja warrior program he watched on TV. He wanted to be like them, he said. They were so disciplined, so strong. He had been lifting weights at the YMCA, he said. He went there after he dropped his wife off at Boston Pizza. They had been married for 38 years, he told me. But she was sick and couldn't move very well any more. She liked to go to Boston Pizza because there were some people there who would talk to her, and she could just sit there and hang out for the morning.

Norm asks me if I am married. "Yeah," I say. "Twenty years this year."

"Naw, you don't look old enough to be married 20 years!" The voice comes from the other side of me. I look over and there's a young indigenous woman smiling at me. "Sorry, man, I like to eavesdrop sometimes." "You can eavesdrop whenever you want, if you're going to say stuff like that," I say, grinning. "You just made my day."

She smiles back, and says, "Yeah, I'm married, too." "Cool," I say. "How long?" "I dunno ... a year? Two? She looks at her husband, but he doesn't seem anxious to shed much light on matters. "I have a daughter, too," she says, "but she don't live with me." My heart sinks a little. "Why not?" "Aw, these people, they said all kinds of stuff ... said that me and my husband were doin' crystal meth ... But we're good. We're good." I look at her husband beside her. He barely looks up, nodding slightly.

Norm starts talking to me again. He's telling me about how he got married at the LDS temple ... But before I know it the girl beside me is leaning over, waving a cracked iPhone at me. "Look," she says. "This is my baby girl." I look at the picture. The girl is probably ten months old. "Has she ever lived with you?" I ask. She just

shakes her head. “When do you think you might see her again?” She shrugs, and looks away.

Norm’s talking about how much he used to be able to dead lift. But there’s another guy across the table who’s been listening in. He’s maybe 35, but his teeth are mostly gone, and he has the look of a man who life has kicked around a bit. And he wants to tell me about *his* daughter. “My girl’s 13,” he says. “She lives with her mom ... I don’t see her as often as I want to ... Goin’ into grade eight this year ... We gave her the name Keiya Sky ... We figured no one else would have that name.” “It’s a nice name,” I say. I bite my lip, thinking about my own daughter, roughly the same age.

The young girl beside me has her phone in front of me again. “Here’s another picture,” she says. “Isn’t she adorable?” “Yes,” I say. “She sure is.”

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Norm’s on his way out now, but he smile and shakes my hand before he goes. “It was nice to meet you, Ryan!” The girl beside me is standing up, too. “It was nice to meet you,” I say, desperately trying to make eye contact with her. “Yeah, man, you too,” she says. But she doesn’t look at me. The dad in his thirties sticks around a bit longer. We talk about the places he’s been, the things he’s done. I look at the scars on his arms. I think about the 13-year-old girl who this man rarely sees ... About the little baby that the young woman beside me has never lived in the same house with ... About Norm lifting weights during the breaks he gets from caring for his sick wife ...

Not all scars are visible. Obviously.

We have our narratives about why some of us are on the right side of things and others are on the wrong side—why some are serving food at the soup kitchen and some are waiting in line. We made good choices, they made bad ones. We worked hard, they didn’t. We persevered, they gave up. We’re resourceful, they’re not. These narratives are quick and easy, and they keep the categories clear. We earned what we have. They didn’t.

But the truth is that the reason I’m wearing clean clothes and passing out salt and pepper and napkins, and they’re sitting at tables staring blankly ahead—the reason

they carry so many more scars than I do—has at least as much to do with the social context I was born into, the opportunities that were presented to me, the dead ends that others helped steer me away from, the love and acceptance that was part of my story from my earliest years. We don't all start from the same place. We don't all fight the same battles. Obviously.

Most of us have earned far less than we are pleased to imagine we have. We would do well to recognize and acknowledge this in the stories we tell.

And we would do even better to be kind.

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