

MORNING STORIES TRANSCRIPT

A Kindred Spirit: Tess DeCosta, on her own, is bringing the U.S. Postal Service into the 21st century, one customer at a time.

Tony Kahn:

Hi, everybody! This is Tony Kahn, the producer and director of *Morning Stories* from WGBH in Boston. Since the advent of email, I'm guessing that the number of people who have been showing up at their local post office has been going down. In my case, way down. I'm born with that gene that makes you pick the wrong line, no matter what. Especially at post offices. So I generally don't show. But as I learned not long ago, when I did have to go to the mail office to pick up some stamps the role of the post office, to keep people in touch with people has not diminished at all. When I dropped by that place, I was taken care of by a counter clerk. And "taken care of" is really putting it mildly. If I were a stamp, I would have felt that I had been licked by an angel. Her name was Tess DeCosta. She's a third-generation postal worker, and when she asked me if there was anything else that she could do for me after the stamps, I said, "Could you come down to WGBH and let me talk to you for an hour in our studios?" So she did, and here, signed, sealed, and delivered is her story. Today's Morning Story we're calling, *A Kindred Spirit*.

[Sounds of post office customer dealings]

Tess DeCosta:

There's a little old man named Pasquale who comes in. Nothing too spectacular about him; he's just a little man, and I remember the first time I met him. He was over at the other side of the lobby, and I said, "Hi, can I help you?" He said, "Yeah! Carry me!" Because, you know, he probably was feeling rather old, and he had a large package.

Mrs. Cornell - in the summertime she's down at the Cape; we always know when summer's over, because Mrs. Cornell is back. We close at 5:30 and she's there at the dot of 5:28 or 5:29, and always the same thing, " 'Scuse me Dahling, it's very important. I have this cahd that has to get to my niece." So we talk about the weather - nothing too spectacular, but it's a connection.

[In background, female voice: "Can I help you?"]

Lee comes in fairly regularly, always perfectly dressed, long trench coat, little black beret tilted just slightly askew on the side of his head. And we spoke for months and months before I ever found out he was a drummer for Duke Ellington! And many other bands. He just never brought it up before.

Even in just small ways, people stand out. Betty, who came in once – she said, “I was at the Farmers’ Market and I just bought you a pear. I thought you’d like a pear.” Okay.

Sometimes really, people open up. 9-11 of course, this brings to mind, it was, we didn’t have a lot of customers. A few people came in just to have things postmarked and mailed to themselves with the date on it. But some people just had to come in and talk. People would have their hands out and you’d see them struggling. And if I know them well enough, I’ll touch a hand – just a little brief pat. It’s amazing; it can go both ways. I remember when my father died. I’d been a window clerk for only a couple of years in the same place, here in Arlington. And I got a letter from Betty. I had quite a few customers come up to me, just touching my hand, giving me a little piece of candy. “Just thinking about you dear, how’re you doing?” And it’s really special. We are all interconnected. And anytime I get proof of that I appreciate it.

[Background: “I have to xerox this; I’ll be right back.” “ Can I have the key to the red cage?]

I guess, growing up I always felt a little bit like a changeling. I always felt as if something -- I had been dropped off by gypsies. Everyone else was very normal; my brother’s a nice conservative gent, and my mother was a Sunday School teacher. And I said, “Where am I getting this weirdness” but I remember when I was in grade school and high school, I became sort of a “passion junkie.” I started, you know, going to the Hare Krishna temple. I started, you know, going to the Pentacostals, the Christian Scientists, a Catholic Church – just to see that connection. Just to remind me that people so different from you can really make you feel part of something bigger than yourself. And that’s what it is, it’s a kindred spirit, and how we are all in this together.

When my aunt from Nebraska came over, she said, “You remind me of Laura!” Laura was, I believe, a great aunt or a distant cousin. Laura, who was – she ran off and joined the circus. And she was in an act with her husband, “Laura and the Amazing Ingbert.” And they had a motorcycle act. And she would ride around on a motorcycle with a lion in the sidecar! This is a story I heard. I – you know -- they tell me that there were postcards around with her, you know, “doing the wall of death” – with the motorcycle climbing higher and higher up this circular wall. And she had had enough of small-town living (which was what South Boston was back then, I suppose). I guess she was looking for something more.

[Background: “So everything here is true and accurate to the best of your knowledge?”

I remember I had one little old lady came in and she said to me, “Make sure you

do everything that you wanted to when you're young, because when you get older and you can't do it you'll regret it." And she had a little sparkle in her eye, and I looked at her and I said, "So, did you do everything that you wanted to do?" And she said, "Oh yes! Oh yes."

When I took this job I realized that this was the one thing that they could never completely get rid of – the window clerk. There always going to have to be someone out there. I mean I wanna keep this job until I've retired. I'm terrible at job interviews; I'm terrible at anything – pretty much everything else. It really seems to be just the spot for me!

A woman, I remember – it was the dead of winter. And she had a package, it was all bundled up, and she just was obvious just dragging. And she put this package up and she said, "I'm mailing this for someone else." I said, "Okay, well, blah-blah-blah, who's this for?" And she said, "Oh," she said. "My neighbor. I can't – you know, she's just too frail, and she doesn't, she can't really do anything, and so I shovel her walk, and I do her errands for her, and – aach! I don't know. Sometimes she just seems to think that some angel is going to come down and take care of everything for her." And I pointed to her and said, "And there you are!" And she stopped, she said, "I guess so!" And I loved that.

I love this job. Oh, yes! Oh, yes."

[Background sounds, "Bye!" "Bye!" and of post office continue; music begins.]

Tony Kahn:

That was today's Morning Story from the lovely Tess DeCosta, of my local zip code. *A Kindred Spirit*, we called it. I was also thinking of calling it, Gary (Gary Mott is here in the studio with me, as always), *A Passion Junkie*. But somehow I thought that –

Gary Mott:

Yeah, that's –

Tony Kahn:

– might give the wrong connotation, you know, she's . . .

Gary Mott:

Yeah, that's not totally accurate. Right.

Tony Kahn:

She is an artist in encounters. There are people who will not forget their one time in line with Tess DeCosta, and it's just because she lets them feel like themselves!

Gary Mott:

What a gift that she has. And, you know, that can make someone's day.

Tony Kahn:

Well you know, not just your day! I think it can make your life, in some ways. In a sense that you might find that it's a moment that you really don't forget. Heaven knows, you never know the moments that you have an impact on somebody that may be lifelong, unless they tell you. But it could be from a very simple thing! That just as the years go by becomes a touchstone for a moment where you unexpectedly had that little moment of grace where you got to be with an absolute stranger, and that stranger felt to you like somebody who was very close. Tess told me that she hasn't traveled much. She did go on one vacation, she said, to Memphis, Tennessee to go to Graceland. And she said, "You know, it's not that I'm an Elvis fan. I'm an Elvis fan fan! I went to see people experience that closeness with each other, in that sense of being part of something bigger. Who happened to experience it through Elvis!" She is remarkable! [laughs] I just think, such a gem and so glad to find her. Although I expect if you look around, you find these people wherever you are."

Gary Mott:

You know, speaking of traveling, I was for three years a customer service agent for a major airline at O'Hare Airport in Chicago.

Tony Kahn:

Mm Hmm. An airline that still exists, to this day?

Gary Mott:

It does.

Tony Kahn:

No doubt, [no?] in small measure to you, probably.

Gary Mott:

Well, I can count on maybe one hand, the rewarding experiences that I had.

Tony Kahn:

Hmmm.

Gary Mott:

It was a constant barrage of dealing with delayed flights.

Tony Kahn:

For which you're held personally responsible.

Gary Mott:

Of course! A hundred people in front of me, and the flight is fifteen minutes from departure, and I'm in the middle of some complex ticketing transaction. I just – it was a hateful job!

Tony Kahn:

Did anybody ever do you a favor, recognize you as a person there?

Gary Mott:

The favors that people did for me were to simply be pleasant. Something that made me feel like I was more than just a guy checking them in and, you know, slinging their bags on the belt.

Tony Kahn:

Who practice that kind of – you know, I think about all these X-ray machines. You know, X-ray machines are always looking for something bad. What if we had the capability of having a kind of X-ray that allowed us to look just past the uniform, to see the person? You know – just practice that kind of X-ray vision. Which you don't have to be Superman to have, you know. You do everybody a favor, if you can, if you can realize that every situation you're in can be a person-to-person situation. Granted, if it's a speeding truck coming at you, get out of the way! But otherwise, you know, if you can establish eye contact across the counter, boy – it's amazing the kinds of things that can happen.

Gary Mott:

Sure.

Tony Kahn:

[To listeners] As you know, we asked you a couple of weeks ago to let us know where in your pocket you put *Morning Stories* in the course of the day. Gives us a good picture of the relationship we have with you and what we can do to make it better. And we've been hearing wonderful things! Be sure to keep in touch and let us know where you are getting us, and send us pictures, if you'd like, of where, where we end up, too. We'd like to know what kind of trip we're being taken on as well. In fact, if you're in someplace that you are even surprised you ended up in! I'd love to know about that too. So make sure to get in touch with us!

Gary Mott:

<morningstories@wgbh.org> is the most direct way to contact us.

Tony Kahn:

And before saying goodbye, a deep "hello," as always, to the people at Ipswitch, a leader in file transfer software. The organization – dare I call them the

benevolent society – that has kept us going as a podcast. Thanks a lot, guys. Check them out at their website, <ipswitch.com>. I-P-S-W-I-T-C-H

Gary Mott:

And we'll see you next week.

Tony Kahn:

Save that Friday, and keep your ears clear. We'll talk to you soon. Bye!

[End of Recording]

Transcribed by Liz Cooksey <transcripts_liz@bellsouth.net>

Note from Liz:

I chose this show because it is one of the most memorable to me. I think that is because I identify with it in several ways:

1) I've had several mail carriers who became "friends" – I knew them by their names, looked forward to seeing them not just for the mail they brought, but because they became members of our neighborhood during the time their routes took them through it, and because they often went "above and beyond" to care about certain neighbors. You know, they'd express concern if the elderly woman living alone across the street hadn't picked up her mail for a couple of days, that sort of thing. One of them exchanged "pass-along plants" with me. (When he admired something in my garden, I offered him starts for such plants, and we carried on that sort of exchange for years.) During a time when our mailbox so often would have overflowed with that day's mail, one of our mailmen frequently came all the way up to our door with it. When I'd apologize that he'd had to go to that trouble, he never failed to reassure me that he was pleased to do so, because such heavy amounts of mail represented "full employment" for him.

2) Most of my years in the workforce were spent as a reference librarian in university libraries, so I have been on the other side of the counter, too, and I found much to agree with in Gary's comments. When the computers would go down, for instance, some people reacted as if we librarians had plotted for weeks to make life hard on them by having computer problems just when they wanted to use the machines. On the other hand, we had "favorite patrons," those people with whom one interacted on such a friendly basis that they became the sorts of "friends" – temporary members of one's work neighborhood – that Tess describes in her heartwarming piece.

3) Tess' description of how we are really all interconnected struck me when I first heard it (and has struck me again on my second, third, and now fourth hearings)

as the perfect metaphor for how the listeners to *Morning Stories* are connected. The same “something” must draw us together to your proverbial hearth, to sit and listen to the stories, and to you two discussing them. And now, with the transcribers’ community that has developed, I feel this even more!