

How I Found True Christmas Spirit In the Aisles of Trader Joe's (Seriously)

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It was unexpected and miraculous.

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Last Christmas season, at the height of holiday mayhem, a stranger in a crowded grocery store gave me the strangest of gifts: A reminder of the true spirit of Christmas.

It was the last day of school before Christmas break. My 5-year-old twins, Max and Brian, were coming down from a holiday cookie swap sugar rush, while my almost 3-year-old, Jack, had just awoken from a nap. We were primed for disaster.

Decked out in Christmas T-shirts and festive knit beanies, my three boys were duking it out over shopping cart seats in the Trader Joe's parking lot. When I reached the automatic doors with my two carts (two kids in one, the third in the other), Max knocked the cart carrying

Brian and Jack and a fight ensued with kicking legs, flailing arms, and verbal taunts.

To make matters worse, I was trying at that time to practice “positive parenting.” The basic tenet: Ignore behavior you want to extinguish. Trouble is, the poor behavior escalates, as it did that day, before it dissipates.

The boys’ Grinch-like chorus reached an earsplitting crescendo as soon as I hit the meat aisle. Between Max’s piercing screams, Brian’s feisty jabs, and Jack’s tears, I felt all eyes in the store fixate on me—the ill-equipped mother who couldn’t control her children.

I’m sure I looked frazzled as I tried to ignore the stares (and my children), gather my groceries, and exit the store. But as I rounded the corner of the pasta aisle, a petite woman with long brown hair, kind eyes, and a tan pea coat approached me. She came close, looked at me—really looked at me—and said, “I don’t want to intrude, but can we help you?”

I was confused. What was she offering? How could she help? And yet, her arrival was a welcome distraction from my unruly offspring.

“I have six children,” she continued. “One or two of them can take one of your carts and follow you through the store so you can shop.”

Just a foot beyond her, I saw six boys and girls, ranging in age from about 4 to 12. They lined up in a perfect row right in front of her shopping cart, almost like the Von Trapp children, each smiling in our direction.

I felt my jaw drop. “Six? They’re so well behaved,” I said. “I’m inspired.” Somehow, she was shopping effectively with twice as many children as me, and not one of them was strapped in a cart.

Miraculously, my personal three-ring circus quieted. Her mere presence seemed to calm all of us.

Taking her offer should have been a no brainer, but it wasn’t. I have always shied away from help, particularly when it comes to managing my children. I even jump in to settle an argument when my husband is technically “on duty” with the kids. So, I thanked her and scurried through the store to collect the remaining items on my list. She disappeared into the aisles as quickly as she appeared.

I gushed about her kindness to my boys, who had transformed from wild animals to wide-eyed tykes. And when I saw her in the checkout line as we exited the store, I waved to her and thanked her again, touching my heart for emphasis.

Within minutes of securing the boys in their car seats, Max fell asleep, Brian’s lids drooped as he fought to stay awake, and Jack sang “Jingle Bells” all the way home.

As I looked at my three little angels, it hit me: Grasping the woman's helping hand would have helped all four of us—and perhaps her family, too. The recipients of St. Nicholas's selfless gifts weren't hell-bent on returning them. Mary never said to the kings, "Oh, how kind, but no, I don't need the myrrh or the gold, but thanks for stopping by." Somewhere on my quest to become super mom, I adopted a stubborn "I-can-do-it-all-myself" mentality that was robbing me of the true magic of the season.

That night as I tucked my children into bed, I asked them what they thought was the Spirit of Christmas.

Max piped up right away. "Loving," he said.

"That's what I think, too, buddy," I replied, though a few nights before I might have said giving. "Do you remember what happened today at Trader Joe's?"

"That nice lady tried to help you," they all replied in a wave.

"And you know what? That's loving," I said. "In a few years, when you're a little older, I hope that together, we will show that same kindness to another family who is struggling."

Now, a year later, I still shop at the same Trader Joe's, but my perspective on accepting help has dramatically shifted. In January, when my dad suffered complications after surgery and I wanted to be by his side, I accepted meals for my family from a friend. I left my mom duties behind for an entire weekend to attend a writer's retreat. And, when I hit Trader Joe's with all three kids, and the clerk offers to help me to the car, I always say "Yes!"

In less than a minute, that mysterious woman's quiet willingness to help reminded me that miracles of kindness are all around us. We just have to be open to receiving them. And that, too, is part of the magic of the season.