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Column: Grocery Carts and Community

It began as a joke. Each time we went grocery shopping I was annoyed to find shopping carts all over the lot and blocking so many parking spaces. I started to refer to them as “abandoned” and joked about “rescuing” them. I’d always returned my own cart because it was fun; it was a leftover from childhood when taking the cart back was a treat. My brothers and I always fought to see who’d get to ride the cart—like a scooter—back to the store’s curb.

Over time, I began to notice how many people were not willing to walk even the few steps to the “corral”, that chute in the middle of the lot to place their cart out of harm’s way. Now, this may offend some, but it needs to be asked: What kind of person leaves a grocery cart in the middle of the parking lot? Is it about trying to save time?

I do know how busy we all are so I went to the store parking lot one day and I timed it. From every part of the lot—from the “good” parking spaces to the ones in the outfield-- it never took me more than 45 seconds to get the cart back to the curb. The average consumer makes 94 supermarket trips each year—so that’s less than two minutes out of your week.

OK, I know that if you have an infant and a toddler and two bags of groceries maybe you can’t take the cart back. But some of us who don’t have our hands quite that full could offer to help. That would be a truly radical act. But generally, as I’ve learned in my cart-stalking mode, it’s not the parents who are skipping the cart return. It’s the rest of us who could handle it just fine.

One day as I was loading my groceries into my car a woman arriving to shop asked, “Want me to take that cart back for you?” That day I got it. Her gesture was more than an act of kindness; it was an act of community.

I know that a cart is just a cart, but shopping carts are also a critical—and consuming--symbol of our culture. What we do with our shopping cart is symptomatic of how we participate in society. The grocery store, perhaps even more than the church, is the place we ultimately come to for sustenance. We say we want more real neighborhoods. Well, returning the cart is a tiny measure of our true intentions. When we don’t take the cart back we are leaving the creation of our community to someone else.

There are added benefits in this simple act. Who isn’t talking about getting more exercise? So walk the cart back for selfish reasons. Or consider it a form of meditation. In the brief span of time it takes to roll the cart you can reflect on what it means to be in partnership with other human beings.

There is no bargain way of life, no coupons to get a free taste of community. In this time of speeches and sound bites about democracy it’s the small things that make us true citizens. Community is created in simple daily acts: Saying good morning, tossing the neighbor’s paper closer to their door and picking up litter—yeah, someone else’s--and returning the grocery cart, are tiny ways of taking responsibility. That one gesture contains it all: connection, responsibility, participation.

Faith grows from willingness the size of a mustard seed, and character can grow from a tiny act like returning a shopping cart: Sixty seconds to citizenship.

It’s not somebody else’s community. It’s ours. We create it and claim it and enjoy its privileges one lonely cart at a time.