



## Meeting Papa Smurf! A Lesson in Seeing



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In September of 2016, I found myself in Detroit with a group of colleagues, presenting at a conference. By day, we worked and learned. By night, we searched for the quintessentially “Detroit” experience. We found that (or I did) on our last evening in the city, in the form of what was, for me, the most unforgettable encounter with a man who called himself Papa Smurf. No, he wasn’t dressed in a costume, wearing blue body paint, or trying to imitate one of the cartoon characters of my childhood. He wasn’t playing up some kind of absurdity or novelty act for attention. Papa Smurf was just a man, and right away he seemed like a supremely kind one, with a weathered face, and a deeply lived-in expression. One that invited me to lean in.

That night on the street, an unhoused Papa Smurf handed me a couple of plastic necklaces with visible cigarette burns. They were quirky, and instantly, they were treasures. He had hoped for a couple of dollars in return when he pressed them into my hand. I didn’t have cash on me and said so. He said that was no problem. That they suited me. And they did suit a girl who grew up in the shiny-and-neon 1980s. Something about the necklaces seemed to carry his essence with them. I liked them, and I liked him. Immediately.

To my colleagues, the necklaces looked like pieces of discarded trash. I was ashamed that they turned their noses up, uninterested in both the necklaces and the conversation Papa Smurf so clearly wanted to engage in, but I stopped to talk with him, and they were forced to stop with me, to their agitation. Some (most?) might say it was silly (or worse) to engage with a stranger on a dark street in an unfamiliar city. I’m sure those people are wise. But for inexplicable reasons, I could feel the universe working in the way the universe feels like it does. By winks and nudges. Willing to reveal more of itself to me, more of humanity to me, and more of myself to me, if I would let it.



Papa Smurf, he was proud to tell me, was something of a celebrity. He had been onstage with huge acts at Saint Andrew's Hall. He had been in a Sports Illustrated article. He had been in a commercial. The list went on. He didn't tell me that because he needed approval or wanted validation. It was clear he wasn't looking to impress anyone. He just wanted connection—a fleeting-but-real moment of knowing and being known.

When I accepted the necklaces and engaged with him, something unexpected happened. He looked at me, his eyes a little worn but soft, and simply said, "I see you." Such a strange thing to say to a stranger—an intimate thing, somewhat of a familiar thing. And somehow, to a girl who grew up in poverty on a remote island in Maine who from a small place had made for herself a big life, and was out in the wide world in a place she had never explored, it seemed so appropriate. For me it felt like a fated encounter. A recognition on the level of the soul. It seemed to me that Papa Smurf wanted us to be more for that brief moment than just passing strangers in the street. Because even in a brief encounter, we could be more. We could be authentically connected for those few minutes. That feeling was both a revelation and a gift.



### The Lesson: Making People Feel Seen

Papa Smurf was offering a moment of connection. His handmade necklaces, burned and imperfect, weren't mere objects—they were tokens of recognition. Shared moments. He didn't care that I didn't have two bucks.

That interaction stuck with me. In our fast-paced, judgmental world, how often do we take the time to really see the people around us? To acknowledge them, even for a brief moment, as beings deserving of attention and respect simply for their being? Most of us move through our days, distracted by our smartphones or our to-do lists, barely noticing the people who cross our paths. But what if we stopped to truly engage with them? What if we stopped to see them, just like Papa Smurf saw me?



Here are some thoughts on how to make others feel seen in a way that honors their humanity:

### ***Look Beyond the Surface***

When we encounter someone who seems unusual, different, or out of place, it's easy to make assumptions based on their appearance or behavior. But like Papa Smurf and me, everyone has a deeper story that isn't immediately visible. The next time we encounter someone we might otherwise dismiss, we can take a second to wonder about the depth of their story. We can try to see them for who they truly are, not just for what they appear to be.

### ***Slow Down and Be Present***

It's easy to brush past people—whether it's someone in need, a stranger on the street, or even a colleague at work. But the simple act of slowing down and being present can change the dynamic of a conversation or an interaction. Papa Smurf and I shared a moment of attention that changed me forever. In our fast-paced world, we often don't realize how much we miss by rushing. We can be more deliberate, slow down, make eye contact, and genuinely listen to those around us.



### ***Practice***

Listening is one of the most powerful ways to make someone feel seen. It's not just about hearing their words; it's about engaging with them, reflecting on what they're saying, and responding thoughtfully. When I spoke with Papa Smurf, I took the time to listen to him—not just about the trinkets he made, but about his life in Detroit. He took the time to listen to me, too, and to tell me that he saw. We all want that. Especially when it feels like the world with its shortening attention span is ignoring us. We can take the time to listen deeply, honing that skill with every conversation. By listening, we begin to see.

### ***Active***

### ***Listening***

### ***Give Without Expectation***

Papa Smurf might have hoped for a little money when he offered the necklaces to me, but it didn't bother him when he realized he'd get nothing in return. It seemed enough to share a piece of himself. A piece that mapped onto me. Sometimes, the smallest gestures can have the greatest impact, especially when there's no agenda attached to them. Whether it's a compliment, a small act of kindness, or just offering our time, giving with an open heart can be transformational for the giver and the receiver both.

### ***Challenge Your Prejudices***

It's easy to judge others based on appearances, accents, quirks, or lifestyles. To my colleagues, Papa Smurf didn't seem worthy of notice, and they missed out on a vibrant, earnest conversation with someone who was part of the absolute fabric of his city. The next time we find ourselves forming an opinion about someone based on how they look or act, we should challenge ourselves to suspend that judgment and not let appearances blind us to what there is to truly see.

### ***Final Thoughts: The Power of Being Seen***

My encounter with Papa Smurf was a powerful reminder that we all long to be known. In a society too quick to judge and overlook, we all want to be recognized—remarkable simply for being ourselves. Little moments of connection can impact us for a lifetime. My conversation with Papa Smurf was illustrative of that quiet desire we all have: the desire to be seen, to be acknowledged, to know that, in this vast, busy world, we matter. As this platform reminds us, we are worthy.

Was it a coincidence that, going away with a full heart, I spent the rest of that night on Woodward Avenue and that my maiden name is Woodward? I'd like to think not. I remember it as one of those universe-winks that shows us that even when we find ourselves a world away from what we have known, a part of us is home.



**[Click Here to Watch Our Bonus Resource: #DetroitJuice - Detroit Papa Smurf:](#)**

