NEWS LESSON

What One Small Kindness Keeps Paying For



BEFORE YOU READ

1 Warm up

Talk about these questions with a partner.

1. Why are we so moved by help from people with nothing to gain?
2. Can a debt of gratitude ever really be repaid?
3. How much should we trust a memory recalled nearly forty years later?

2 Key words

These words are in the article. Write the letter of the meaning (A to H) in each box.

1	**punishing**	☐	A	not knowing about something
2	**affection**	☐	B	extremely tiring or severe
3	**comprehension**	☐	C	a feeling of warm liking
4	**unaware**	☐	D	a person or bank that gives money and expects it back
5	**compounding**	☐	E	the ability to understand
6	**illustrate**	☐	F	growing bigger because it builds on itself
7	**pretend**	☐	G	to show clearly by giving an example
8	**lender**	☐	H	to act as if something is true when it is not

3 Read

Read the article and underline the key words from task 2. The paragraphs are numbered.

Two strangers in Darwin knocked on four hostel doors to return a wallet. Nearly forty years later, the man who lost it is still settling the debt.

1 There is a particular arithmetic to a lost wallet. You calculate what was in it, what cannot be replaced, and how long it will take to recover. In Darwin in 1989, Simon Kelsey never had to do the sum, because the answer arrived at his door at half past one in the morning, carried by two people he had never met and would never see again.

2 The circumstances are ordinary enough. Kelsey had finished university in the UK and spent a year in Australia, most of it working long hours on east coast building sites in punishing heat, which he remembers with unmistakable affection. Ten months of that had bought him the means to travel slowly home. He was in Darwin for a final night out with the friends he would fly to Timor with the next morning, intending to island-hop to Singapore. Cash was king then, as he says, and the $1,000 in his wallet was about a month of freedom.

3 He lost it without noticing and went to bed unaware. The knocking woke him at 1.30am: the hostel manager, an elderly couple, and his wallet with every dollar inside.

4 The effort behind that moment is the thing the story turns on. There was no phone number to call. There was a student ID card with a name, which in a town full of backpacker hostels narrows nothing very much. So the couple went looking, hostel by hostel, in the middle of the night, and his was the fourth they tried. They could have left the wallet with a police station or a bar. They could, of course, have kept it. Instead they chose the most laborious route available and then, having completed it, went home.

5 Kelsey's own account is honest about his response, which is part of why it reads truthfully. Bleary and the worse for the evening, he thanked them and went back to sleep. Comprehension arrived with the morning, by which time they were gone and unthankable. Thirty-seven years later he still describes wishing he could have done it properly.

6 What he did instead is the quietly interesting part. Unable to repay the couple, he converted the debt into a standing policy: go further than strictly necessary when someone needs help, and ask the person to pay it forward rather than back. It is a sentimental idea that happens also to be a practical one, since a debt that cannot be settled with the lender can only be settled with everyone else.

7 A single recollection, published nearly four decades after the event, is not evidence about human nature, and nobody should pretend otherwise. It is one man's memory, offered to a newspaper series collecting such things. But it does illustrate something that is easy to lose sight of: the cost of the kindness fell entirely on the couple, and the benefit has been compounding ever since, in places they never heard about and to people they never met.

Sources: The Guardian, The kindness of strangers: In 1989 I lost a wallet with $1,000 in it. Picture: .

4 True, false or not given

Circle **T** (true), **F** (false) or **NG** (the article does not say).

1. The writer implies that the couple could have chosen easier ways of returning the wallet. T F NG
2. Kelsey grasped the full extent of the couple's effort as soon as he saw them. T F NG
3. Kelsey has repeated this story in public talks. T F NG
4. The writer sees Kelsey's policy as both emotionally appealing and useful. T F NG
5. The writer believes the story shows that most people are generous. T F NG

5 Vocabulary

Complete the sentences with words from the box. Two words are not needed.

bolstered **circumstances** **converted** **inclination** **narrows** **recollection** **settled** **standing**

1. Given the _____ of the case, the judge decided that a lighter sentence was justified.
2. The disused warehouse was _____ into a community centre.
3. She struggled to give a clear _____ of events that had happened thirty years earlier.
4. A single photograph rarely _____ down the list of suspects.
5. Both parties finally _____ the dispute out of court.
6. The committee has a _____ rule against accepting gifts from suppliers.

6 Word forms

Use the word in brackets to make a word that fits the gap.

1. The judge praised the witness for her _____ to speak openly under pressure. (WILLING)
2. There was an _____ note of relief in his voice when the wallet was returned. (MISTAKE)
3. He never lost his _____ to the strangers who had helped him. (GRATEFUL)
4. Memory is notoriously _____ after nearly forty years. (RELY)
5. The couple's _____ was all the more remarkable because nobody was watching. (GENEROUS)

7 Language focus: phrasal verbs

Complete the sentences with words from the box. Two words are not needed. Some phrasal verbs take an object after the particle (shrug off the guilt) and others do not (turn out well). Check the form and the particle before you choose.

back	fell	passed	shrug	turned	wear	went

1. Kelsey could not simply _____ off the guilt of never having thanked them.
2. The couple _____ about their search methodically, hostel by hostel.
3. The mix-up _____ out well for Kelsey in the end.
4. The generosity he received was _____ on to strangers he later met.
5. Anecdotes alone cannot _____ up a broad claim about human nature.

SPEAK

8 Talk about it

Discuss in pairs or small groups. Give reasons for your answers.

1. The couple chose the most laborious option available. What explains that?
2. Is "pay it forward" a genuine moral principle or a comfortable one?
3. One anecdote is not evidence. So what, if anything, does a story like this prove?

9 Role-play: a wallet at one in the morning

Work in pairs. Read your card, then have the conversation. Swap roles and do it again.

Student A · the finder

You have found a wallet with cash and a student card. It is nearly midnight. You want to go and look for the owner tonight. Explain why it matters and ask your friend to come with you.

Student B · the friend

You are tired and want to go home. You think the wallet should go to the police in the morning. Give your reasons, ask questions, then agree on a plan.

Useful phrases

I've just found a wallet on the pavement.
I can't leave it until tomorrow.
Wouldn't it be easier to take it to the police?
What if we try the hostels first?
I'm tired, but I'll come for one hour.
Let's do it, and we'll feel better afterwards.

Afterwards, tell the class: what did you decide to do, and was it the right choice?

ANSWER KEY

2 Key words

1 B · 2 C · 3 E · 4 A · 5 F · 6 G · 7 H · 8 D

4 True, false or not given

1 T · 2 F · 3 NG · 4 T · 5 F

5 Vocabulary

1 circumstances · 2 converted · 3 recollection · 4 narrows · 5 settled · 6 standing

6 Word forms

1 willingness · 2 unmistakable · 3 gratitude · 4 unreliable · 5 generosity

7 Language focus

1 shrug · 2 went · 3 turned · 4 passed · 5 back

This lesson is free. If it saved you time, you can support johnplusnews at **ko-fi.com/johnplusenglish**