

August 17, 2005

A Moment of Grace

In an age whose crabbed sense of justice finds expression in dismal phrases like "zero tolerance" and "three strikes and you're out," the events in a Long Island courtroom on Monday came as an undeserved gift, something startling and luminous.

It happened when Ryan Cushing, a 19-year-old charged with assault for tossing a turkey through a car windshield last fall, approached the driver he nearly killed, Victoria Ruvolo. Ms. Ruvolo, 44, suffered severe injuries and needed many hours of surgery to rebuild her shattered facial bones.

When Mr. Cushing left the courtroom after pleading guilty, he came face to face with his victim for the first time. He said he was sorry and begged her to forgive him.

She did. She cradled his head as he sobbed. She stroked his face and patted his back. "It's O.K.; it's O.K.," she said. "I just want you to make your life the best it can be."

Mr. Cushing was one of six teenagers out for a night of joy riding and crime, which often happens when childish aggression and stupidity merge with the ability to drive and steal credit cards. The five others have pleaded guilty to various acts like forgery and larceny, but Mr. Cushing, who threw the turkey, could have faced 25 years in prison. At Ms. Ruvolo's insistence, prosecutors granted him a plea bargain instead: six months in jail and five years' probation.

The prosecutor, Thomas Spota, had been ready to seek harsh punishment for a crime he rightly denounced as heedless and brutal. "This is not an act of mere stupidity," Mr. Spota said. "They're not 9- or 7-year-old children."

That is true. But Ms. Ruvolo's resolute compassion, coming seemingly out of nowhere, disarmed Mr. Spota and led to a far more satisfying result.

Many have assumed that Ms. Ruvolo's motivation is religious. But while we can estimate the size of her heart, we can't peer into it. Her impulse may have been entirely secular.

Court testimony by crime victims is often pitched as a sort of retributive therapy, a way for angry, injured people to force criminals to confront their shame. But while some convicts grovel, others smirk. Many are impassive. It's hard to imagine that those hurt by crime reliably find healing in the courtroom. Given the opportunity for retribution, Ms. Ruvolo gave and got something better: the dissipation of anger and the restoration of hope, in a gesture as cleansing as the tears washing down her damaged face, and the face of the foolish, miserable boy whose life she single-handedly restored.