New York mugging takes a surprising turn

What would you do if someone pulled a knife on you, demanding your wallet?

Police advice is that, rather than attempting any form of self-defence, you should accede to any demands and avoid being antagonistic. The situation can very quickly turn ugly, particularly if a weapon is involved. Research shows that one in three victims of mugging experiences some sort of physical injury.

So, if you were mugged, once you’d complied with a demand for your wallet, would you offer anything else? Your ring? Your watch? Or perhaps your nice warm coat?
Julio Diaz, a thirty-one-year-old social worker, did just that. Preoccupied with thoughts of what he would order for dinner at his favourite diner that evening, Julio stepped off the New York subway to be confronted by an aggressive teenage boy, holding a knife and demanding his wallet. Julio silently handed over his wallet, but then called after the boy, who was rapidly making away with it. ‘Hey, wait a minute. You forgot something. If you’re gonna be robbing people for the rest of the night, you might as well take my coat to keep you warm.’ The boy simply gaped at him. He looked even more bewildered when Julio offered to treat him to dinner.

It was a risky response. The teenager might have thought he was being ridiculed, lost his temper and stabbed him. And even if he didn’t, why on earth would Julio want to have dinner with someone who had just robbed him at knifepoint?

Julio’s offer was in response to a gut feeling that the boy needed some kind of help. And the boy seemed willing to take it, following Julio to his usual booth in the diner. Over their meal, the boy was uncommunicative and guarded, but he closely observed how the manager, the waiters and even the dishwashers all stopped by to chat to Julio. Bemused, he wondered if Julio owned the restaurant. Why was he so nice to everyone?

Julio’s behaviour embodied the principles of the ‘Golden Rule’, which says we should behave towards others as we would like them to behave towards us – a principle which has its roots in almost every culture and religion and plays a vital role in building a cohesive society. However, following the Golden Rule is not purely altruistic, as ultimately we, like Julio, are likely to reap the rewards of people being friendly and happy to see us. We also gain improved psychological welfare simply through the satisfaction of knowing that we behaved well.
When the time came to pay the bill, Julio asked for his wallet back so he could pay, and the boy handed it to him without a murmur. Julio then gave him a twenty dollar bill, and asked for the knife in exchange. The boy handed it over. His cooperation gave Julio hope for the boy’s future. Perhaps it signified that Julio’s interest and kindness to him made him feel valued, increased his sense of self-worth and allowed him to feel that he could have a different type of life?

Of course, it could all have ended very differently. The mugger might have just taken Julio’s coat and raced off. Or Julio might have found himself the victim of a vicious assault. Even if Julio hadn’t been hurt, one might argue that by letting the boy off the hook, Julio was not actually doing the boy, or society, any favours. Perhaps Julio should have gone straight to the police, let the boy learn his lesson and helped protect others from being assaulted.

However, perhaps it’s possible that by treating him with kindness and compassion, Julio may have enabled the teenager to see that life can be lived in a very different way, and perhaps even changed the course of his future.

As Julio said, ‘If you treat people right, you can only hope that they treat you right. It’s as simple as it gets in this complicated world.’