

Sometimes a good deal is no bargain

by Sandi Dolbee

We love a good bargain. We may even love it more than the post-death stories about Anna Nicole Smith.

But what if you stumble on a bargain that's a mistake? I was listening to an audio version of "The Right Attitude to Rain," the latest installment in Alexander McCall Smith's series about a woman who edits an ethics journal and solves mysteries on the side, when I heard an intriguing conundrum.

The dilemma: A man selling a used musical instrument was oblivious of its true value. He had just come from the pub, so he was rocky in other areas, too.

In the book, the buyer purchases the instrument without saying anything. Was it the right thing to do? The heroine never quite answers the question - so I called up Sister Barbara Quinn at the University of San Diego. I don't know how much Quinn knows about musical instruments, but she's a walking symphony when it comes to ethical conduct.

Quinn begins with her own foreword. "I think of ethics as right relationship," she is saying. "The two sides of the equation, or the issue, for me are price and person - and I think person comes first for me."

She would not buy the instrument because it would mean taking advantage of someone in an impaired state.

I decide to throw her a curve ball. Besides being a Catholic nun, Quinn directs the Center for Christian Spirituality and helps coordinate a program for business leaders seeking to integrate their spiritual values in the workplace. I figured she could handle it.

What if the seller is stone-cold sober? Would you scarf up the bargain then?

"I'm probably not the best test on this because I have a sensitive conscience," she answers. "I probably would say, 'You know, I have a feeling this is worth a whole lot more than you are asking.'"

But even she has her limits.

If the person didn't care after that, "I might go ahead and buy it."

Remember the queen character in "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs," the one who looks into the mirror and asks who's the fairest? When Quinn was explaining her reasoning, this mirror test came to mind - in a good way.

"I think my kind of rule of thumb is, can I look myself in the eye and know that I've been who I say I want to be?" she told me.

Readers might be wondering if it makes a difference if the "bargain" turns out to be a mismarked item from a big department store. Faceless corporations aren't the same as the lady with her wares at a garage sale or a man selling off the stuff in his attic, right?

I didn't ask Quinn about this one. But I have a feeling I know what her answer would be.

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