

Ross' Rave: Is this OK?

Ross LaBaugh, California State University, Fresno

“I just don’t get it,” I said turning to Karla.

“What?”

She has a diminutive voice appropriate to her face and proportion. Her skin is almost opaque.

I whisper, “What’s with the guy on the couch?”

Our Library is new. One hundred million dollars of new. New stacks, new carpets, new lights, new desks, new HVAC, new computers, new couches. Lots and lots of new couches.

Interior designers, from some non-corporeal dimension, scattered these snake-like couch-things un-strategically throughout the building. One serpentine sofa rests, coiled 10 feet from the front reference desk, where currently a supine student snores obliviously. A boa about to swallow a baby goat.

“He looks peaceful,” Karla says, for never an unkind word has crossed her lips.

“True, but with a building that’s over 8 acres, and seating for over 3,500 people, why would he choose to stretch out in the middle of the busiest floor, 3 yards away from a very public service point?”

She giggles. The silver barbell in her lip jiggles. She covers her mouth like a shy anime girl.

“I guess he was tired.”

“I’m sure he was, but why would...,” I don’t finish my sentence because I notice someone approaching the desk.

“Hi. How are you?”, I ask.

“Can you help me find a book?”, he asks with painful trepidation.

“Nope. I’m on a break,” I kiddingly say, trying to put him at ease.

“Oh, sorry.” His eyes dart over to Karla.

“I’m kidding!” So much for humor. “I’m happy to help. Tell me what you are looking for today.”

He loosens up a bit.

“Do you have books on the Battle of Britain?”

“That’s a popular topic,” I say. “We’ve had four or five people in this afternoon looking for books on that. Are you in History 4?”

“Yes.”

“We’ll let’s see what we have.” I begin the routine. Library home page, catalog.. blah blah available... blah blah. .. call number, location... blah blah.

He seems to be paying attention.

“Let’s jot down some of these numbers and then you can browse in that area to find something that piques your interest. It looks like most are in the collection level downstairs. It can be a bit confusing down there. Karla can go down there with you if you like. She knows the stacks well.”

“That’s ok. I can find it,” he says mustering a little bravado. I’m not sure whether he’s reluctant to show the need for more help, or is being shy about Karla.

“Ok, but let us know how you do. If you aren’t back in 20 minutes, we’ll send a search party.” Humor, again ignored.

Stack map in hand, he weaves around baby goat boy and out of sight.

“I don’t get that either,” I say to Karla.

“What now don’t you get?”

“It’s a library, right? Despite the fact that it looks like LAX,” nodding toward the gentlemen in repose.

“There are a whole bunch of computers by the front door that say, ‘Search for books here’ and a subject map directing people to the stacks. The guy was raised on computers, can read and follow directions, has use of his limbs and senses. Yet, for some reason, he came over here to ask for help. I mean, does he do that at the supermarket? ‘Excuse me but does this store sell food?’”

I’m beginning to rant. Karla shushes me.

“You might wake someone up,” she laughs a little. Her nose ring wiggles.

“He reminds me of my cousin,” she says.

Karla has lots of cousins. She and I often share time slots at the reference desk, and together, we've helped hundreds of students while I've heard about dozens of her cousins. Just two examples:

"I'm doing something on the long term neurologic effects of Tasers on adolescent males," one student asked. "Oh, my cousin was Tasered this weekend," she said, nary skipping a beat.

"Where can I find some articles on mobile phone use by shepherds in Lapland?" "My cousin used to work for Nokia in Helsinki," Karla said. "Let's check his blog."

No subject is too obscure for Karla, nor relative too distant.

"Which cousin is that?" I ask. "The accountant at Blackwater?"

"No," she grins. "My little cousin in Orange Cove. She's very smart, but always needs reassurance."

I hadn't thought about "reassurance seeking behavior" in a long time, but Karla's comment reminded me that it had come up occasionally when I was working on a writing project a couple of years ago. At the milder edge of the spectrum, is, "Do these jeans make my butt look big?" (There is no right answer to that question!) At the sharper edge, is excessive reassurance seeking (ERS), the constant need for approval and acceptance; a very serious and cyclical condition often linked to abuse and depression.

We all need reassurance, I suppose, but some people seem to need it more than others. A timid first-year student, a returning graduate student, a non-native speaker, all need a pat on the back and gentle encouragement. After all, libraries and research can be unfamiliar territories for most folks, especially those who are anxious and uncertain to begin with. While they may, in fact, be doing a swell job, their own shadowy voices refuse to acknowledge their success. Only from the nod of others is confidence gained.

Interestingly, the nod does not need to come from an authority figure. Michael Platow, writing in the *European Journal of Social Psychology* in 2007, reported on a study which examined people's ability to withstand pain. The "long story short" is that reassurance by members of one's own group has a greater effect than reassurance from someone outside the group. In other words, when a buddy says, "Don't worry, you are doing fine," you believe it.

Twenty minutes later, our young lad is back with several books on the Battle of Britain.

"Do you think these are good ones?" he asks.

"Let's check with Karla," I say. "She had History 4 last term."

He does.