

An Unexpected Polar Bear

"It is astonishing really how many thoroughly mature, well-adjusted grownups harbour a teddy bear, which is perhaps why they are thoroughly mature and well-adjusted."

Joseph Lempa - American writer

I found myself feeling somewhat upset the other day when I discovered that, after re-decorating, my son's father had taken all of his stuffed toys out of his bedroom and put them in a bag in a cupboard somewhere. Granted, my son is nine and it could be argued he is old enough to no longer want these things, but I knew that if it had been me at the same age I would have been devastated.

Eventually my son did ask for one of two favourites to come back and a compromise was agreed, but it set me thinking about the different types of people we are. Those who still feel that soft toys have a place in our lives however old we are, and those who dismiss them at a 'certain age' and can quite happily place them in a bag in a cupboard, never wondering for a moment if they might be sad, or worse, suffocating!

This train of thought reminded me of an incident during a Christmas shopping trip in Leeds last year. I was with my sister, who is definitely of the same mould as me and does in fact collect teddy bears, when we decided it was time for a mid-shop interval at a Nescafe coffee shop. I sat down to ensure we got a table and my sister went up to the counter to order the coffee, and whilst looking around me I saw a notice advertising that all customers who spent £5 or more would receive a free polar bear toy.

I then realised that I was surrounded by an interesting mix of emotions and reactions from people who quite simply had been forced into a situation where they had to deal with being given a totally unexpected, and quite possibly unwanted, stuffed animal. I have to say the polar bear was incredibly cute and I was quite upset when my sister returned with two coffees, costing less than £5, and no polar bear. We were both on a diet at the time, but it did lead to a conversation about whether she should have bought other items to make it up to the £5, or whether in fact we should go back and buy more things just to get the polar bear anyway. A marketing man's dream!

We then spent the next few minutes happily looking around us at the different reactions which these unexpected polar bears had brought out in people, and what this told us about how we would probably relate to them. The people who we knew we would instantly get on with were the ones who sat the polar bear on the table where it had a good view of its surroundings, and then proceeded to feed it bits of cake. But then there were the people at the other end of the spectrum who looked faintly embarrassed, eyed the stuffed white creature suspiciously and then placed it unceremoniously, and often upside down, into a bag of shopping.

But I am happy to say that there were a group of people for whom the polar bear had maybe awakened some childhood memory of teddy bears, or stuffed rabbits and the like, that are now long lost. We saw one woman, who was shopping with a friend and not a child in sight, put the polar bear into a bag of shopping, and then moments later, thoughtfully turn it over and place it with its head sticking out of the bag so it could see out. I then saw her smiling at it occasionally, and I like to think that when she got home, it maybe ended up on a shelf somewhere or in a child's room at least, but hopefully not in a dustbin buried under a heap of potato peelings and empty wine bottles.

So then, going back to the quote at the start of this piece, as an adult, is it really so bad to still hold a place in our lives for one or more stuffed toys? I found another quote whilst researching this, by Richard Allen, which I think really sums it up:

"A bear is the only one that knows that, deep down inside, you are still only five years old."

Maybe our lack of willingness to accept a stuffed toy or two in our lives for hugs and comfort comes from our unwillingness to admit that from time to time, this is how we all feel. And that maybe, just maybe, a small hug from a trusted friend, be they real or stuffed, might be just what we need.

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