

Homeless, Don't Just Stop and Stare -- Say 'Hello'

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I grew up in a nice, middle-class Jewish neighborhood on the north side of Chicago. The only poor people I ever met were the boys who would ask for a dollar to “watch our car” when we went to basketball games at the Chicago Stadium located in the rough, west side of the city. The only homeless people I ever saw were when I went downtown for a weekend excursion. In those days, people used to come to your door soliciting money for various charities. My parents did give to charity, but usually through the mail, by check, not to the solicitor at the door. When I began teaching school in the inner city, I worked with a guy who always gave those kids \$1 to “watch our car.”

In 1981, I came to New York City to work at the church Headquarters. Every day when I walked from 43rd street to the Hotel New Yorker there was a woman standing over the subway grate (where the warm air came out). All she ever said was, “coins.” She was still there many times when I would return to Manhattan.

Three years ago, I began working in downtown Chicago. As I walk from the train to my office, I walk past many a homeless person. Right outside the station there was an older gentleman who was half blind and would sit in a beach chair with an umbrella. We talked a few times, and I found him to be quite intelligent and religious as well. He always wore sunglasses, and I asked him if he was able to read. He said, “Yes,” so I gave him Father’s book, and he said he would give it to his pastor and have the pastor tell him about it.

I met a homeless woman with a beautifully scripted sign asking for donations. She stood on the street well made up, and she dressed quite professionally. She told me that she was out of work and needed to support herself and her family. I made several suggestions, but she had an excuse for each one. Weeks later, her nice sign gave way to a hand-written one. Many people would stop and talk with her, and I got a little resentful. I felt that she was now just another homeless person with a nice sign. Finally, I overcame my resentment and gave her one of Father’s books. I said, “reading this book changed my life, I hope that it can help you.” That was almost three years ago, and she is still standing at the same place — even during construction, with lots of obstacles on the sidewalk, she is still there and still looks the same.

These experiences are causing me to question the entire issue of homelessness. Yesterday, I walked past a guy with a sign: “Lost my job, have 2 kids to support and I’m scared.” This was a 30 or 40 something, white guy who looked scared. I walked past him but turned around and walked back and gave him \$5 (something I may never have done before). I used to think that all the homeless wanted was money for liquor or drugs, which may very well be true many times. Recently, I have given money to a couple of younger guys and especially to guys with “disabled veteran” signs.

The guy I walk to the train with (a Franciscan Catholic) will sometimes give money to certain people. I often will give my leftover lunch, still not eaten and in the bag that my wife packed for me. The other thing that I have been aware of is, “Can I just give without expecting anything in return?” Even feeling like, “What a good boy am I?” Unconditional giving!

One of our closest pastors, the Rev. A.I. Dunlap, who was arrested in 1987 defending Father’s good name, used to tell us that the government wants poverty to exist. He said that if there was no poverty, there would be no crime, and our society can’t exist in that state. He always said that the crazy decisions we read about every day are all about: Money! Likewise, several articles have appeared lately dealing with the issue of the disappearing middle class.

I am sure that everyone reading this article has had to deal with homeless people in some way, shape or form. Is it just something that we have to live with, or is there something we can actually do about it? I know in the winter when the homeless in Chicago are offered a warming center, they often decline because they don’t want to have to submit to any rules. Likewise, sometimes when I talk to one, I quickly discover that they have had some sort of trauma, even if they look healthy, and that they just can’t deal with the world as it is (not so different than the way we Unificationists often feel from time to time). The psychotropic drug industry is a \$5 billion-a-year industry. So, even when we walk past people who look “normal,” one has to wonder, “might they be homeless and begging on the street if they didn’t have access to the drugs?” I remember a pastor who ministered to those in public housing. He was a former police officer, and he once mentioned to me, “there’s not a whole heck of a difference between them and us.” Maybe just one unfortunate accident one way or another.

So, as the singer-songwriter John Prine once lamented, “the next time you see someone, don’t just stop and stare, ‘say hello in there, say hello.’”