

Homelessness

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In a group of teenage friends going to a basketball game on the west side in Chicago, it was always me that the homeless guy came up to, to ask for money. I still remember gentleman showing me the length of his fingernails and telling me how long it had been since he had a bath or a good meal.

When I first worked in mid-town Manhattan in 1981, I began to regularly see my first homeless people. Of course, there were no homeless people in our middle-class White Jewish neighborhood in West Rogers Park in the north park of Chicago. But on the corner of 42nd& 6th in New York, there was a homeless woman standing on top of the subway heating grate who only said one word, albeit over and over—that word was “coins.” When I returned several years later, I was wholly surprised that she was no longer there.

I have been working in downtown Chicago for the past six years. I commute downtown on the train and walk about half a mile to work. Through these six years, I have come to identify several of the regular homeless folks that I pass every day.

There is the 35-year-old woman whose sign reads, “Homeless-I’m just a good girl who made some wrong choices-please help” However, she looks like she burned out on drugs some time ago. Another is a pregnant homeless girl in her early twenties. She told me that her mom used to beat her, so living out on the street was a step up. One gentleman just moves around on the bridge and shakes his cup so everyone can hear him. Another brings his buckets and plays the drums on the other side of the bridge. Sometimes other musicians join him and he is quite good. He will shout out requests as you walk by such as , “Go Cubs, or Go Bears or go Trump” (whatever you ask for. ”The politically correct way to panhandle these days seems to be to sit on the ground holding up a cup with a cardboard sign asking for help.



I used to always want to ask the homeless people how they got there, but I have stopped expecting them to justify themselves. I have learned that many who seemingly are young enough and strong enough to work, have some mental problems. It’s funny because, after six years, many have not missed “a day of work,” which is more than I can say for many of my fellow government employees, or even myself.

One middle-aged healthy looking “handsome” woman sits in her chair with all her bags and a very meticulously hand printed sign asking for help. She is very carefully made up and well dressed. When I talked to her, I suggested several options for her to apply for work from school bus driver on up, but she always had an excuse for each one. When I asked to take her picture because I was writing this article, she asked me what the article was about. I

told her “homelessness,” and she announced emphatically and very proudly, that she was not homeless. Once I even gave her a copy of Father’s autobiography (which I have given to several others since). Six years later she still sits on the same spot, facing one way in the morning and the other way at evening rush hour. I often see others stopping to talk with her, but nothing seems to have changed.

Right outside of the train station sits a guy in a wheelchair with one arm cut off at the elbow so that one can just barely see the tattoo under his rolled-up sleeve. He looks like a crusty old sailor. Once I copied his cardboard sign and make him a computer printed sign to replace it. He grunted when I gave it to him, but used it for a short period of time. He moves around quite well in his wheelchair and is always counting his money (something I have rarely seen anyone else do).

A good friend once told me that he never gives people money, but if they are selling something (chocolate, the local Homeless “Streetwise” paper, or something else), that he will always buy it. On my route from work to the train, there is a young (35-ish) man who sells pencils. I would usually buy one or

two and give them to my school teacher daughters. Over time he shared a lot with me and when I asked him if there was anything that he really needed he said, a winter coat.



The challenge for me was that I had 2 winter coats—my beautiful green Eddie Bauer that got me through the Chung Pyung Winter in 1997 and my dad’s coat that he wore for years when he was a docent (guide) at Lincoln Park Zoo. The funny thing is that my dad is a lot smaller than me, but for some reason this coat fit me perfectly. Finally, after much internal struggle I gave him the coat—but it was not a pure offering. Especially, when I never saw him wearing it. Maybe he sold it or traded it for something. I even thought of trading him something else for it or asking for it back, but I resisted over and over. Finally last week, I saw him—and there it was—the beautiful coat with Lincoln Park Zoo Document on the back! I’m not sure exactly why Mark is homeless, but he is always very warm and friendly to me.

Finally, there is Cara. She is always sitting on the Chicago River Bridge reading a book and holding her completely filthy cup out for donations. One day I decided to give her Father’s autobiography. A few weeks later I asked her how she liked it and she said, not only did she like it, but she gave it to her husband to read. Cara is 29-32 but has only a few front teeth. She is married (sometimes her husband sits in for her) and she said that she is not completely homeless. Sometimes, she can stay with her sister-in-law as she did this past Easter. She looks for work in the mornings and has even had a few part time jobs from here to there. She is also talking about going back to school.



I know that sometimes when one tries to change a relationship, it can prove difficult. Sometimes I didn’t want to see my homeless pencil seller because I didn’t understand why he wasn’t wearing my Father’s coat. Likewise, when I offered to take Cara out for a hot meal, I knew that it could possibly destroy the existing relationship. And when the anointed day came, she was there, but said that she couldn’t leave, because a friend was bringing her resume over.

Then one day I met her somewhere else. She was just going home because she was tired as I was going to the train station. We talked for several minutes and she told me that she had been diagnosed with MS. She said that when she was in high school she used to pass out and bleed from her nose. But the doctors just said that it was normal female teenage happenings. When she was eventually diagnosed with MS, she could not deal with the side effects from the medication, so she stopped taking any. Thus, I called my one friend who had been cured of his bout with MS and found out that the cure came through our dear Sister Beatriz and cost about \$35. When I talked to

Beatriz, she told me that I could pay for it, but that Cara had to fill out the application form herself. Cara got so excited—she always told me that it was the high point of her day when she would see me—now I was offering her the opportunity to see if she could overcome her MS. That was 3 weeks ago. Again, I have been hesitant to push her to fill out the form, but she told me that the form was fine, but that it was folded up inside a book that her husband was now reading.

Several years ago I had a conversation with a minister who pastored at one of Chicago’s low-income housing units. He said to me that he knew that both he and I had been on the edge at times in our life and pointed out what a thin line it really was between them (the homeless) and us. One flick the other way and we could be the ones on the street begging. Fate? Chance? Accident? Ancestry? All of the above?

My point here is how grateful each of us must feel. We were born of a certain lineage. We were blessed to meet the True Parents and we have been blessed ever since. Thus, we must be grateful every moment of our lives and we must use our blessings to bring our world back to God.