

Lessons in Sharing

by Jesse Husk

Sitting in a bus station, I watch a man dismiss a woman who is asking for spare change. “If you’re going to beg, at least wear something shabbier.... they make a lot begging, some of these people”, he mutters to his neighbour. I am torn between righteous indignation and guilty relief that I was not approached. I consider making a point of giving something to this woman, but she has already left the station and is making her way out to the street again.

Once, homelessness seemed a simple thing to me: people lived on the street if they didn’t have the money to do anything else. Later, I perceived a somewhat more complex world of possibilities: maybe the homeless were abused kids who ran away. Maybe they were people with mental illness who chose not to medicate and lived too erratically to hold down jobs with regularity or to pay rent;. Maybe they were beholden to life on the street in some way, through addiction or sex trade work. Now I think even these views are limited. I still don’t understand, but I know the stories are far more varied than I originally believed, and that the need to be there doesn’t always boil down to a lack of other options.

When my brother disappeared one morning, leaving a cryptic note, our family was thrown into a state of anxious waiting. For a long time we knew only that he was making his own way, sometimes on the streets, sometimes not. Years later, much of that period remains unknown to me. I may never know exactly why he left or why he returned.

Over time I have met some of the friends who drift, perhaps similarly, through his life. Sometimes they are wanderers and hitchhikers, taking a couch for a while. Sometimes they are musicians, busking or panhandling, depending on weather and inclination. They live on what they can easily carry, and no more.

I think back to a conversation I had recently with a friend who told me that he makes an extra effort to give regularly to particular panhandlers,

but only to those he is convinced are making a concerted effort to find themselves employment. The others, he seemed to consider a nuisance. I found myself thinking back to my brother and later, his drifting friends, some of whom presumably could have held jobs, but were instead panhandling. And I am left wondering: should our willingness to give really be dictated only by extreme necessity? Should I be more reluctant to give to someone who consciously chooses to panhandle rather than work a conventional job? Are some on the street more “deserving” than others? Are the others shams or manipulators? Instinctively, I think not. But I found myself tongue-tied when trying to argue this deeply felt but not yet deeply thought through belief.

Peace Pilgrim could have held down a day job had she chosen to. Instead, she chose to walk. And through her walking, she touched lives. She lived off the mercy of others, not so differently from any other panhandler. She gave witness through her simple living, and through her interactions with those she met along the way. Part of the gift she returned was the opportunity to give, itself. This I deeply believe is true of all who live on the street, be it by choice or not. As much as it is often easier to avoid eye contact, it is a gift to be asked for help. It is a gift to be reminded that I can survive on much less than I sometimes think I need. It is a gift to be repeatedly given chances to do better this time than the last. It is a gift to really look this time, to smile and speak and exchange a real greeting, to remember that if I can afford my own breakfast, I can afford someone else’s too. These gifts are just as deeply received from those who might sleep the night on a friend’s floor, as from those who might sleep under a roof overhang. Lessons in sharing can come in many guises.

Myself, I am not brave enough to suffer the discomfort of sitting in cold, in dampness, pleading for generosity over and over and over again from the fast-paced anonymity of strangers. But I am awed by the strength of those who are.

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