

An Encounter

My wife and I were out grocery shopping and, as we returned to the car with our groceries, she informed me that she wanted to go into another store in the area for some item that had been advertised at a good price. I volunteered to stow our groceries in our car while she went off on this errand.

She had no sooner left when I, still placing our grocery order in the trunk of our car, was approached by a young woman -- in her thirties, I would guess -- who asked me if I could spare any change as she hadn't eaten recently. I asked her to wait for a moment until I was done with the groceries and then I dug out my wallet and gave her what I could spare. She graciously accepted, thanking me sincerely, and commented on how she could now have a hot meal. I wished her a good day and she left.

End of story? Not quite! I wondered for a moment if she had been telling me the truth, or was I just an easy mark for her. I very comfortably decided that I was satisfied with my response to her:

if she were telling me the truth, I felt very good to be able to help her out;

if not, my heart was in the right place when I complied with her request.

I went off to live the rest of my day, but the event kept coming back to mind and, specifically, how else, and perhaps better, I might have dealt with the situation.

After more thought on the matter, it occurred to me that I should have asked for something in return for my help. It might sound strange to even consider asking a person in those circumstances for anything at all as she was already reduced to swallowing her pride and integrity and begging for help, but it seems to me that I could have bolstered her spirit and her self-worth by asking for something she could give me despite her apparent status.

What if I had said to her, "Yes, I am happy to help you, but I need to ask you to do something for me. I, like you, am hanging on a cross this world and this life have created for me, and although your cross and mine may be altogether different, I need you to find a moment and a quiet corner in your heart for your consideration for my circumstances, whether it be in the form of a prayer to your God or simply a kind thought for me in your remembrance of this encounter between us."

If nothing else, this might have conveyed to her the sense that she still possesses something of value that another person may need or want, and might not her recognition this truth become a basic step in her finding better fortune in her life?

December, 2021

A Second Encounter

Same store, same parking lot, about a year later.

I am sitting in our car, waiting for my wife to complete her grocery shopping for the week. We have taken to reducing our COVID-threatened exposure by halving our presence in public places by having only one of us go to do what is necessary.

As I sit in some sort of reverie in my car, I become aware of a person approaching the driver's side window, preparing to rap on it to get my attention. This person is a man in his late thirties, early forties, I would guess, well-dressed and clean-shaven. I open the window, he introduces himself and asks me if I can spare some change as he hasn't eaten for a while. While I fumble with my wallet to comply with his request, he goes on to tell me some of his life circumstances that have brought him to where he is, that he will be starting a job at the end of the week and that he has arranged for accommodations for himself other than the encampment in behind the store.

I offer him my alms; he says it is too much, but I ask him to accept my offering in the good graces with which it was intended. He thanks me profusely and begins to walk away. I suddenly remember my thinking, engendered by my earlier encounter, described above, and I call him back. I ask him to say a prayer for me and mine to his god when he has a quiet moment to do so, and I thank him for considering my request.

He appears to be quite overcome by this; his chin begins to quiver and tears appear in his eyes. His face conveys deep emotion, and when he speaks again to assure me of his prayers, his voice is broken. He thanks me again and leaves.

After a moment, I go to roll up the window, and he returns, now fully in tears, to bestow upon me whatever blessings he feels he can muster in his reduced circumstance.

He leaves, and I find myself quite moved, and I seem to be satisfied that he has done more for me than I for him.

In retrospect, I think occasionally of Carl, and I remember my encounter with him as a very special one.

And, sometimes, I wonder who he really is.