

Walking with Arnold

Reminded of the words about
blessings for the poor in spirit

S. THOMAS BERG

I was three blocks away from the Future Shop when over my right shoulder and off to my side I caught sight of a man attempting to catch up to me. He must have rounded the corner behind me because he obviously spotted me before I saw him. For my part, I was intent to get to the store, purchase my item and walk back to work. Careful to make no gesture to indicate I noticed him, I quickened my pace without being too obvious. It made no difference. He was determined to catch me and did.



THE CANADIAN PRESS, FILE

Passersby are uncomfortable about spending any time with panhandlers and homeless people.

He was my height, in his thirties I guessed. His clothes were grimy and he had the sticky sour smell of decaying vegetation. The skin around both eyes was puffy and purple and there was a black line of dried blood under an ear.

I looked over at him without slowing down. He took this as an opening and motioning to himself he blurted out that he had been in a fight. He said he had been jumped by a “street gang” and beaten up. There was no question he had been in a fight. I wasn’t sure about the gang part but I secretly gave him credit for the heightened drama.

We walked on shoulder to shoulder as he filled in some details. I slowed my pace a bit but not so much that said I welcomed the company. He finished his story but showed no sign of breaking off. I didn't say anything. We walked together in silence. Of course he wanted some money. But he didn't come out and ask me and seemed content to just walk beside me.

I wondered about the picture we posed to people as they passed us by, or walked behind us, or drove by. I wanted to explain that he really wasn't accompanying me, wasn't with me. Even though I work for a Mission that cares for street people, I was uncomfortable. I thought about my discomfort and then I noted my underlying shame for feeling uncomfortable. But I kept the barrier.

After a block and a half, caving into something like the inevitability of the thing and maybe, strangely, just getting used to him, I relaxed and slowed my pace considerably. I asked him his name. He said it was Arnold. I sensed that he relaxed as well. He said that he had been on the street for a few years now and other than the occasional fight he got in he didn't mind it too much. He stayed at Hope Mission occasionally but preferred outside. He supported himself panhandling and bottle picking. By all signs, he wasn't going to be hired by anyone soon.

We stopped and waited for the light to change. He kept talking, telling me that the bottle picking hadn't been too good lately. As we waited together, a rather athletic inline skater sailed by us. I told Arnold that he should get a pair of roller-blades so he could collect bottles faster. He laughed at my joke and I laughed with him.

We crossed the street. The Future Shop was just across a parking lot. I told Arnold I was going to go in to buy a computer part. He nodded but made no motion to leave. So we stood there, chatting, looking at each other, watching people as they walked by. I noticed it was a sunny day.

He finally said he should probably get going but wondered if I could help him out with a few dollars. I apologized and told him I didn't have any money, only a credit card. He didn't seem to mind. Then I added rather lamely, "You don't take plastic do you?" He laughed, not taking it as lame, and he seemed not to mind. It came to me as I said this that he had probably heard that line often enough, but directed at him with derision.

We shook hands and wished each other good luck.

I have read somewhere that to give without first experiencing personal poverty and need is to give condescendingly, invulnerably. I don't know if this is true. I do know that as I walked with Arnold he became a person to me. As I was let into his world, momentarily, I was, somehow, able to lay my eyes on him in a true way. If only for a moment, he called me into being.

And it seems to me, that this “call into being”, experienced in just such a moment—a “call” that the mystical dimensions of all religions speak of, a “call”, I believe, we have all experienced in some unique way—is the call that invites us to learn a certain “poverty of spirit” where we become dispossessed and therefore mindful of who we were meant to become.

For my part, I pray my experience of walking with Arnold will help me to be more vulnerable and give, more often, without any trace of resentment or condescension.

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