Sympathy tax â€¦ so it goes

by Jason_Love

I donâ€™t know how to feel about bums. When I was young, my dad steered me away from them, saying, â€œIâ€™m sorry, heâ€™s allergic to poverty.â€• Today I am the primary beggar in my fatherâ€™s life.

You can see my friction, then: part of me wants to sneeze at the homeless, while another part is haunted by Phil Collins: â€œDonâ€™t think twice / Itâ€™s just another day for you and me in paradiseâ€¦â€•

Last week I went to a hockey game. Getting out of the car, I beheld the neon stadium beyond. As I got that giggly first-day-of-school feeling, someone tapped my shoulder. I looked down and found a man extending his Styrofoam cup. I had almost forgotten: I still have to run the bum gauntlet.

â€œSpare change?â€• he grumbled.

I wanted to say, â€œNo, thanks,â€• but couldnâ€™t do it (Iâ€™d have so much fun but for my conscience).

I just paid $15 to park my car; how could I grudge this guy a quarter? I dropped fifty cents into his cup and smiled. Moments later, the homeless fell on me from all sides. They crawled out of cracks in the sidewalk. It was horrible. Night of the Living Poor.

Each one had his own shtick:

â€œI havenâ€™t eaten since Februaryâ€¦â€•

â€œMy wifeâ€™s having her 16th babyâ€¦â€•

â€œBush did this to meâ€¦â€•

Everywhere I turned was more violin. I held my wifeâ€™s arm for fear of losing her. It was worse than LSD.

It wasnâ€™t that I didnâ€™t care; itâ€™s just that I donâ€™t like to donate on cue. I oppose Valentineâ€™s Day for the same reason: the last thing the world needs is Hallmark guilt. I give presents to my wife all year long. Just last week I bought her a sewing machine to hem my pants.

A hobo stepped in front of me like Jack Ruby and poked his cup into my chest. Were they allowed to touch? I thought they got ejected for that. I told him that I was out of change, and he narrowly resisted the impulse to bite me.

The Times did an article on a tramp who has been gainfully unemployed for 22 years. He earns enough money to rent an apartment and buy health insurance. He pushes the best carts from the market, pays nothing in taxes, and even provides a Panhandler Express Machine should you care to swipe your Mastercard. So it goes.

Last night, walking into Ralphâ€™s, I noticed a shadow by the carts. It noticed me too and approached, Styrofoam in hand. My spasm acted up. If I give a dollar to everyone who sticks out his hand, am I a saint or a fool? Is it any different than tipping a valet for doing a job that heâ€™s already paid to do? Can a conscience be surgically removed?

The Ralphâ€™s bum, whom weâ€™ll call Ralph, didnâ€™t have a monologue. He just grunted in vodka-ese. Instead of giving him money, I said â€œGod blessâ€• and vanished through the automatic doors.

Inside, I shopped beneath a cloud. What did I know about God bless? If God were in fact to bless this man, would He really go through me? Five ex-girlfriends laughed in the distance.

Leaving the market, Ralph confronted me in reverse. He didnâ€™t remember me, blesser of the poor. As I reached for my wallet, his stench hit me anew. I couldnâ€™t do it: I couldnâ€™t fund his addiction. What this bloke needed was medication, the pretense of hope, and a little tree in the mirror so the car donâ€™t smell.

I foraged through my bag for the biggest piece of fruit I could find, an artificially farmed naval orange. The bum extended his hand and, receiving the fruit, stamped his foot and shouted, â€œDamn!â€•

I looked over my shoulder, startled. It was hard not to laugh. I thought he was going to hold his breath till I changed my mind. As I walked away, the man growled something that probably wasnâ€™t â€œGod bless.â€•

Loading my car, I felt good about the situation: I had given, he had received, and Phil Collins could be quiet. Then a woman noticed the poor man sitting beside that filthy orange and handed him a dollar. Ralph stuffed it into his pocket. A few more like her, and heâ€™d be having screwdrivers before the night was over.

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