

## Angels in our Midst

It was a Sunday before Christmas... not too warm and not too cold, but winter time none the less. He came early this Sunday. Normally, he would show up during the lunch a couple of grocery carts in tow, piled high with the many things he gathered on his journey through the inner city streets. This Sunday, however, he was early enough to attend the worship service which preceded the lunch. He sat down in a chair behind a table where some women were sitting. Because he didn't usually come to the worship service, I went over to welcome him. He looked up and smiled, revealing the familiar gaps in his mouth where teeth used to be. His sky blue eyes twinkled with recognition.

The man, whom I will refer to as R, is not known to speak much at all, and when he does utter a few words, it is in German. He communicates mainly through gesture and by spelling out words with his finger tip on the table top, on a window or in the snow; and it requires a certain amount of patience to understand his message. About a year ago, I decided to make a special effort to keep a watchful eye on R when he came to the Sunday lunch because some of his behaviours irritated others and, on some occasions, disrupted the flow of the lunch line-up which made it difficult to accomplish the mission of feeding 300 people in 45 minutes. I would be alerted when R entered the building and I would ensure that he got a plate of food. I would gather up scraps for him in a plastic bag... scraps that he would otherwise have accumulated by pulling them from the garbage cans around the room. He used these scraps to feed the birds. When the time came to leave the building, I would be sure that R got all his stuff together and would leave in a timely fashion.

Back to the story...

On this occasion, as already mentioned, R had come early. He had parked his buggy in the entry to the building and had shuffled slowly to the far side of the room. He slowly sat down in a chair at a table which, at this point, had no other people sitting around it. It was just behind a table where a group of women were sitting. As I approached him to say "hello", I could tell that his clothing was soiled and the odor around him was pretty potent. As I took his hand and looked into his blue, sparkling eyes, there was a request in them. He pointed to his boots and seemed to want to say something. The boots themselves were oversized yet they were waterproof and should be warm, so I asked him what he needed. He placed his index finger on the table top and began putting invisible letters to the table top... s o c.... "Socks?" I asked, and he nodded slightly. I probed further pulling up a chair beside him "Are your feet sore? Do you need clean socks?" He nodded his head more assertively this time, a grin moving across his chapped lips. Clean, dry socks are a basic need for many of the folks who make their life on the street and we don't normally have a supply of socks to give away. However, I had seen a box of socks in the back room which had been donated to the Bissell for distribution and I was sure that they wouldn't mind if I gave him a pair. I indicated to R to stay where he was and I would see if I could find some socks.

After finding the socks, I returned to where R was sitting. I had decided to help him change his socks in spite of the smell, so I moved my chair around so that I was facing him. As I began to take off his boots and remove his socks, I was keenly aware of how soiled his clothing was and how strong the smell of urine and feces that surrounded him. His socks were wet and the skin on his feet resembled the skin of someone who had been sitting in the tub for a long, long time. His toe nails needed attending and there were some blisters. All I could do was put on the dry socks and hope that this would provide a small bit of comfort. I wanted to throw away the old, wet, soiled socks but he took them from me and put them in a plastic bag and into his pocket. As I helped him on with his boots, I noticed that the felt liners were also damp and soiled and very, smelly. What could I do? I simply looked into his eyes, clasped his extended hand and smiled. And he smiled back. I returned to the sink area and scrubbed my hands with soap and returned to the door to continue to greet people.

Just before the service was to start, it was brought to my attention that the women sitting at the table in front of where R. was sitting, were saying that they were going to leave the service if this man was not made to move. They could not tolerate the odor coming from his soiled clothing. My initial reaction was one of anger. "Why didn't they move? Why was I being asked to have **him** move instead? And even more important "Why was **I** being asked to tell him to move? (It was suggested that it was because I had a good relationship with the man.) Since this was neither the time or place to discuss these questions, I got R to move closer to the wall using the excuse that he could then put his feet up on another chair and he wouldn't be obstructing traffic. Immediate problem solved.... but all through the service I was fuming because it seemed to me that Jesus would not have shunned him? This man gets shunned, marginalized and isolated all the time and is refused

entrance to so many places, agencies included, because he smells and is not clean. How is he to wash his clothes or have a shower to get clean if no one will let him in?! I truly felt helpless.

The service ended and the lunch began. I made sure that R. got a plate of sandwiches and some fruit, veggies and desert. I filled up his empty bottle with juice and I hoped that he would know that we cared and that he was deserving of as much dignity and respect as anyone else in the room and that he was precious in God's sight.

Then it happened . . .

One of the volunteers approached me and said that there was a young man looking for an older gentleman who was often seen with shopping carts piled high with assorted things and who seemed to be wearing multiple layers of clothes. I went over to speak with the young man and it was almost immediately obvious that he was looking for R and had already spotted him sitting by the far wall eating. He told me that he and his wife had met R at the Mustard Seed the night before. His wife, having experience as a Personal Care Attendant, had noticed that his clothes were soiled and dirty and the image of him leaving the Mustard Seed church in that condition the evening before, haunted her all through the night. She had made her husband promise that they would try to find him the next day, take him home and clean him up and then try to find shelter for him.

They really had no idea where to start looking and thought that the inner city was a good place to start. As they drove the streets that Sunday morning, they noticed the line up coming into the building where our ministry was providing lunch. The husband came in to check if the man they were seeking was among the crowd. He was. It was R. What to do now?

I suggested that we wait until most of the crowd of 250 had left and then we could discuss how to proceed. R. probably would not want to leave all his possessions unguarded to go with them to have a shower and clean up elsewhere. What other options were there? The building we were in has two shower stalls which are accessible to the street folk on weekdays only as the agency itself is closed on the weekend. If we decided to use them in response to this wonderful offer to show compassion and care for R then we were at risk of setting a precedent. Yet, this opportunity to get R cleaned up might make him welcome at one of the shelters for overnight!

So... when most of the community members had left the building, the young couple and myself approached R and asked him if he would like to have a shower and put on the clean clothes that the couple had brought for him. Surprisingly, he agreed, and for the next hour and a half, the young woman got R into the shower stall, undressed him, put his soiled clothing in a bag, helped him shower and get into clean clothes and get ready to hit the streets again. What angels they were and all I could think was "It took 2 strangers to come in and show us how to live God's love".

I was embarrassed, ashamed and very humbled by what this couple did. I was also exceptionally thankful... because I learned during the week that because R was clean and presentable, he was able to get into the one of the overnight shelters. They put him on the nursing unit because of the sores on his legs and feet and they tended to his needs for a week or so before he returned to the street. I haven't seen R since, but I heard that he went to Vancouver for a while and that someone had said he was back. I hope to see him again soon. As for the young couple... I haven't seen them again either... but I certainly believe in angels come to show us how to do God's will.

- by Linda Winski  
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