

During the first weeks commuting to my new job in town, after emerging from the Park Street subway station in the heart of Boston, I would cross Tremont Street and walk down Winter to Downtown Crossing; then I'd take a left on Washington Street and walk a few more blocks. I didn't really know the area very well and hadn't ventured out much during my lunch [half-]hour to explore. Downtown Crossing at 7:30 a.m. is a messy brick-paved slalom course of over-stuffed blue plastic trash bins. But, after meeting my sister for supper in town after work one evening at the Parker House Hotel on the corner of Tremont and School Streets (which connected with Washington), I found a new route. The walk up School Street, passing by the site of the first public school and King's Chapel on the right, and left down Tremont Street, past the old Granery Burial ground, wherein *Mother Goose* and Paul Revere lie, and the Park Street Church along Boston's historical *Freedom Trail*, was a lot more pleasant. I used this more inspiring trail to and from work each day.

One day on [new] route to work, I noticed a man sitting in front of the Park Street Church. I passed him there every day for a few days, noticing him out of the corner of my eye to avoid becoming "engaged." He had white-grey hair, a beard and glasses which made him look kind of like a Dickensian St. Nicholas. But he was dressed in a T-shirt, jeans and a baseball cap like any contemporary of mine [OK, an old "hippie"]. From a short distance, I could read one of the hand-written signs that sat next to him on the sidewalk. It demanded: "SMILE: It's the Law." I obeyed the law, but kept walking.

After a few days of this, he caught me peeking and our eyes connected. I was afraid – I don't know why, because he was smiling – but, it's probably because I got caught. I glanced away quickly and kept on walking. Then I looked back over my shoulder and saw him still watching me through the wrought iron railing of the church steps. Ice blue and smiling, his eyes connected with mine again. But I kept walking.

There was something about his eyes that stayed with me all that day. Then I wondered if they were trying to tell me something, and then I felt somewhat foolish. I imagined he might be some kind of angel – the kind that only some people could see, or one who is dressed like "any man" who crosses your path and has some kind of message or challenge for you. Anyway, I didn't stop as I didn't have any change handy, and I didn't want to take the time to take off my backpack, which had now become part of my daily wardrobe, to search for my purse and rummage around for spare change. I kept walking; tomorrow I would be better prepared.

Next morning at 7 a.m., as I sat on the black vinyl-upholstered bench on the train, I fished around in my purse inside my backpack and found a few quarters. I put my premeditated donation in my pocket and hoped that I would make good my intention; I hoped that I wouldn't get cold feet and walk on by if I saw the fellow at Park Street again. It's not as if you could just walk by and flip a few coins into a paper cup and keep walking; he was situated so that you had to *intentionally* walk over a few yards out of your way to get to him.

He didn't jingle coins "aggressively" in a paper cup like other folks on the street did. He had an old cigar box that sat in front of him on the sidewalk; a cane leaned on the church wall behind him. He never asked outright,

“Can you spare any change?” He always just smiled and waved at folks, especially the children on their way to day care a few buildings away.

I made good my intention. After crossing Park Street, I walked over to him and handed him the quarters. He took them while gently, briefly holding on to the tips of my fingers; then he let them go. Maybe it was a way of requiring a connection. With a warm smile he said, “Thank you, Ma’am.” I was a little nervous and muttered something like, “You’re welcome ... take care.” But what kind of *care* could be purchased for 75 cents? I was rather embarrassed. And during that transaction, I saw another sign next to him that said, “Homeless by Fire.” That, too, stayed with me the whole day.

Well, this was the beginning of an unintended, unconventional friendship. I would look forward to emerging from the subway each day on my way to work and speak with him about the events that shaped his life. I found myself investing in him as “a neighbor.”

As I thought about this fellow, I remembered an assignment in a class that I had taken some years ago, entitled, “Race and Class in Human Services” at the College of Public and Community Service at UMASS Boston. We had to assume the identity of someone who was completely unlike ourselves and keep a diary for two weeks living [in our imagination] as that person. I chose to be a homeless woman living on the streets of Boston in November – dreary, damp, bone-chilling-cold November in Boston. In my/her diary, I/she was half-dazed with cold, trying to figure out how to take care of my/her personal needs, let alone find food to eat or some place for shelter. It did, indeed, make me think about things differently – an important lesson, not only for folks working in human services, but for *anyone* living in “Life 101.”

Walking in Boston each day, I encounter so many of these seemingly invisible souls. But, they’re everywhere – people like this fellow who are disabled and out of work or just down on their luck. Others are suffering from addictions and still others are mentally or emotionally disabled, but left to fend for themselves on the streets and in shelters. They’re not only on the streets, but they’re overpopulating the state’s correctional facilities as I learned in the world of AIDS and corrections. These most vulnerable souls remain unseen. We all walk by and don’t see them sleeping on the steps of the church or on the sidewalk below. No matter what the season, there are souls lying there on or under thick grey wool blankets, the kind that we purchase for needy folks on “Blanket Sunday” in our church in suburban Boston in honor or in memory of our mothers on Mother’s Day. These fragile blanketed souls are strewn across Boston Common near the Park Street “T” each morning.

I am, at the same time, grateful but not just a little frustrated and angry that I am beginning to see them. I’m angry because we as a society haven’t figured out how to care “for the least of these.” I remember one older, disabled woman who was parked at the top of the stairs of the Park Street “T” exit in her wheelchair. Her legs were covered with a blanket. She didn’t have a paper cup and wasn’t asking for money. She just sat there with her eyes cast downward and a vacant look on her face. When I finished climbing the stairs, I saw her and

thought to myself that she must be one of the Park Street Angels. She didn't look up at me, but, then she smiled as I passed by as if to acknowledge that I had learned, and that she would trust me with her secret.

I wondered if this was her "work." Just to *be*, to be *there* in the midst of life's routines and daily chaos to make people like me consider the question, "Who is my neighbor?" Then I thought how cruel that would be and how dare I "romanticize" such a life. I recalled my pastor's words from a recent sermon that challenged: "In order to get into heaven, you need a note from the poor."

How can I be *her* neighbor?

I wished that I were a better conversationalist. I've never been good at starting conversations. I'm intolerant of small talk; it's too superficial and a waste of words. I prefer to discuss things that really matter. But getting to what really matters is not easy; it takes time establishing a relationship, and most times I'm too guarded anyway.

As the days went on, I wondered about how to begin a conversation with this curious fellow. I kept thinking about it and stayed open to any suggestions that might come to mind. I kept "listening" and came up with the words, "I'm sorry for your trouble." Next day, I would be prepared with words. And I found a couple of dollars to "spare."

When I saw him, I handed him the money and said, "I'm sorry for your trouble." He appreciated my acknowledgment and said, "Thank you." I walked on. Next day more words for questions came. I asked him about what he did for a living before the fire and all. He told me he worked as a roofer, with copper and slate on church roofs and steeples, when he was younger with his father and "his people." He'd eat "a man's breakfast" of eggs and bacon each day. He said that now he was the only one in his family left; everyone else was gone. He lost everything in the fire, including tools and templates that he and his dad would use for making and selling copper lanterns. I asked him what he'd rather be doing than sitting on a plastic milk crate each day outside the church. He said, "I'd *work*." But with badly controlled diabetes, which created other health problems, he was on disability. He said, "This is all that I can do now."

Not wanting to pry, but because I'm becoming more interested in knowing about his life, I asked him, "Where did you stay at night when you first became homeless?"

He didn't mind that I asked, saying that, "Many times I'd stay in the subway. It was safer than in being in the shelters as most of the guys there would be drunk or they'd be doing drugs or they'd steal from each other." He said, "I'd rather take my chances in the subway."

“Do the ‘T’ police give you any trouble?” I asked

“Oh, no, not me,” he answered. “It’s all about my attitude. I don’t drink and become belligerent like the others, so they leave me alone.”

Thinking I might be helpful, I asked, “Where do you get your care for the diabetes?”

He answered, “I know some friendly doctors over at MGH.” He told me that they took care of him especially one time when he had a serious problem with it. He remarked that while he was a patient there, they had a tough time controlling his sugar levels and gave him insulin four times a day. He also noted that when he ate the right foods, to which he had access while he was in the hospital, it had the [remarkable] result of helping keep it under better control. But, for him, *that he had access to food at all* after he left the hospital was a continuing problem. He said it was hard to test his blood and many of his meals consisted of others’ discarded table scraps that he fished out of garbage cans. He said he once grew potatoes near where he and some other folks sheltered under one of the bridges in town.

I wondered about faith and what does this kind of life circumstance do to a person’s faith. But I didn’t ask him about it. What strange juxtaposition, I thought, for me to be working with an obesity prevention program to help people *stop eating so much* while every day encountering a human being who subsists on garbage and who knows that he can control his diabetes by eating good food. If he had access to good food, perhaps then he wouldn’t have to depend on the health care system to pay for so much treatment. Irony – sheer irony.

On Friday, “SMILE: It’s the Law” changed to “SMILE: It’s *Friday.*” As I approached, and before I could say good morning to him, he said: “One rattle snake was talking to another one and asked, ‘Are we poisonous?’ The other rattler said, ‘Yes, we are.’ The first snake said, ‘Uh, oh!’ and the second, ‘What’s the matter?’ to which the first one replied, ‘I just bit my tongue!’” A smile spread across my face and I didn’t feel nervous around him any longer.

Another day as I approached, before we could exchange greetings, he pointed to a red-tailed hawk perched atop a tall building across the street. He had also placed a large white clamshell filled with birdseed for the sparrows in front of him on the sidewalk. “They have to eat, too.” He was frustrated as he alternately shooed away a pigeon and then a squirrel who were both trying to steal some seed. He grumbled that doing so took away from the time he had to spend “doing whatever it is I’m supposed to be doing here.”

Each day I would try to ask more questions. In one of my lunchtime walks, I came across a veterans’ shelter, just a few blocks away from the Park Street Church near Government Center. Was he a veteran I asked? Yes, he was, but he would have no part of the services they offered. The [Vietnam] war was responsible for killing his brother, Richard. He was still angry and I sense he was still grieving. He told me about how as children he

and Richard were “routinely” escorted by a social worker – each with one hand holding on to a small black suitcase and the other holding on to one of the social worker’s hands – from foster home to foster home. He said they never knew why they had to leave each time, but it taught him not to trust or depend on anyone. He said he never was able to get close to a family because it never lasted anyway. His mother was not in his life as a child and I’m still not clear about his father’s role in his life – only that they ended up working together.

Once, after several weeks of meeting there in the morning, he said, partly kidding but partly serious, “I’m afraid of people like you. You’re here one day and then gone the next.” I told him that this is the way I go to work each day – one day at a time. I told him that in a difficult and needy time in my life, some friends and family members had helped me out – some without my asking because they knew how hard it was to ask. Some had been “there” before themselves. I said I wanted to do the same, as I knew only half an *inkling* about living through hardship. (To help out, a friend and I had taken up the routine of providing him with supermarket gift cards each week.) I knew also that sometimes their kindness in just being with me and letting me talk things out was all I needed to keep moving forward, inch by little inch.

I remembered a time when I was newly separated, working full-time and taking care of my toddler son. While we had a roof over our heads, I remember a wintry Saturday when it was time to go food shopping. Because “ends” didn’t meet then either, I broke open my son’s piggy bank and counted out twelve dollars in pennies, dimes and nickels to buy some food until next payday. I didn’t know how to ask for what I needed then. I’m still learning.

Our almost-daily meetings continued. Even if it was raining and I could take a stop closer to work, I would go to the Park Street stop. For me it was more important to be consistent, to show up one day at a time.

Mr. Margolis often sports a different hat every time I see him. He had known my Park Street Church friend for some time now. My new friend was always very formal with names – Mr. This or Mrs. That. I would later learn that we both came from the same era; that’s what we were taught. We were also, as I recall, taught to “be seen and not heard.” Anyway, while it was hard for him to do so, he would also usually stand up, leaning against the church wall for balance, out of respect when Mr. Margolis approached. Sometimes he would do that for me, too, but he said his feet often hurt too much. I always told him not to get up when he made the attempt.

“Hi, Bob,” said Mr. Margolis as he greeted him. I never thought to ask Bob’s name, and I never introduced myself to him either for that matter. But I was glad now to know it and to also let him know mine. Bob said, “This is Mr. Margolis,” and I introduced myself as Chris. So now we all knew each other’s names.

Mr. Margolis had known and had been helping Bob for a couple of years, sometimes with significant essentials. Sometimes he coached Bob on how to approach “the system” to advocate for himself. He shared some cash and clever conversation with Bob each time he’d stop by. I really like clever words, and enjoyed being part of their conversations. Bob told me that Mr. Margolis was a lawyer and he worked down the street in Government Center.

One memorable morning I approached him with my usual greeting. He said, “Hello, Sunshine.” (I’m glad I can brighten *someone’s* day!) He fished around in his backpack and produced and presented a “coupon” that he had hand-designed. On all four corners was written: “*Free Pass.*” Then he had written the following:

Retail Value 0.00 – Void Where Prohibited

NOTICE TO BEARER

*Should I, Homeless Bob, arrive at Heaven’s gate before you,
you may cut in front of me.*

NOTICE TO ST. PETE (A.K.A. GATE KEEPER)

*The bearer of this pass has excelled in treating the
homeless with respect.*

Homeless Bob, Homeless by Fire

I got my “note”!