

Hope

“The road that is built in hope is more pleasant to the traveler than the road built in despair, even though they both lead to the same destination.”

– Marion Zimmer Bradley, American author

As I walked the five blocks from the hospital to the parking lot, I was filled with despair. I had just witnessed the passing of a friend and, as I approached my car, I barely heard the voice calling out to me. When I turned around I noticed a young man approaching me. As he drew closer I could see that he was frightfully thin and unshaven with dark circles under his eyes.

“Would you happen to have a couple bucks, sir?” he asked with his hand already extended. “I’m a diabetic and I’ve ran out of needles. I need to pick some up at the Safeway Pharmacy.”

We appeared to be the only two people in the dimly lit two-acre parking lot.

“You’re talking to the wrong man,” I replied. “I don’t have any money.”

“You’ve got a nice car,” he said, running his hand along the fender. My nice car was nearly out of gas and I was out of work. I had ten dollars in my jeans and little in my bank account.

“Did you come from the hospital,” he asked.

“What?” I responded. Had he followed from the hospital? I was becoming anxious.

“There’s not much open ’round here at night except the hospital and the Safeway – it’s open until eleven.” Right then I wished I was in the Safeway. “Were you visiting a friend?”

I was becoming panicked now. “My friend passed away this evening,” I blurted out. “And I don’t have any money.” I pulled out my keys and pressed the open button. The door clicked.

“I lost a friend once. He was into meth real bad and died in a back alley.”

“I’m sorry,” I said, reaching for the door handle. “Now you know how I feel.”

“Was your friend a meth head?”

“No,” I said too loudly. “Listen, if you’re a diabetic why don’t you go the hospital and ask them for needles?” I just wanted to go home. I heard the car’s door lock reengage.

“Would you give me five bucks for food?”

“I’ll walk with you to Safeway.”

I don't know why I offered. I guess I didn't want him getting into my car. Maybe I wanted to be with other people and the distant lights of Safeway looked like a safe haven. He pondered my offer for a moment then shrugged. On the walk he told me his name was Jonas and that he had hitchhiked from Airdrie to Edmonton after his uncle had thrown him out of the house.

At Safeway, Jonas grabbed a loaf of bread and a package of lunch meat. As we approached the check-out he darted down the soft drink aisle, grabbed a large bottle of Coke and hoisted it into the air. I nodded. He smiled and jogged back toward me. As we were leaving the store he gave me a hug. It was the last thing I had expected. Walking away, Jonas twisted the cap off the Coke bottle, took a long pull, recapped the bottle and waved to me without looking back.

People fascinate me. Sometimes, as with Jonas, they also confuse, frighten and sadden me. If we are truly the architects of our own destiny, what's the story with someone like Jonas? Was Jonas simply a poor architect? And what about self-esteem? Are the poor, the homeless and the hopeless simply the victims of a poor self-image or is there more to the story?

It seems we're all in the business of judging others even when we try to avoid doing so. We all like to make statements from on high about how life should be lived. Right now I'm learning to unlearn a lot of things I once thought were fundamental truths. I remember reading once that lack of awareness of a better choice is the same as having no choice at all. I think an often unrealized aspect of healthy self-esteem is hope. Without hope there is nothing. No awareness. No better choices. No way out of a sad and regrettable existence. You can't help someone wake up and embrace a new tomorrow unless you can help them rekindle the flame of hope.

Elie Wiesel, Nobel Laureate and Holocaust survivor wrote, "Just as despair can come to one only from other human beings, hope, too, can be given to one only by other human beings."

I know people who devote their lives to bringing hope to the hopeless. They open their arms and their hearts – provide food, shelter and a kind word of encouragement. To them I say thank-you.

Perhaps as you become strong and healthy in your esteem – when you become truly awake and self-aware – you will choose to be a beacon of hope for others. That is my hope.

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